

Scandal . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 12 June 1934

If you do not call it a scandal, then I do not know what other name you would find for it. As for myself, I swear that I speak of it in shame as deep as any man could feel, and were it not that we owe it to ourselves to make every possible effort to set right what is corrupt, to straighten what is crooked, and to show people what they ought to see of their public affairs, and of whatever touches their standing, their rights, and their dignity, I would have turned away from this disgraceful story altogether. For there is nothing in mentioning it, or speaking of it, that could please an Egyptian, or bring him honor, or enable him to hold his head high before foreigners in general, and before the English in particular.

But the profession of writing on public affairs is a heavy and painful one, costing those who practice it dearly, and driving them to what they would rather not do. Let us bear this burden, then, and come forward with what we dislike, and discharge our duty, submitting to God's decree, reckoning whatever hardship we meet along the way as a due before God Almighty, for He is the one with whom no account is ever lost. I do not know to whom I should first address myself in this shameful, painful story. Should I address the Minister of Tradition, since it was in his ministry that it was devised, in his office that it took shape, and from his office that it emerged until it reached the people? Or should I address the Prime Minister, since he is the one primarily responsible for the interests and welfare of Egyptians, for the rights and dignity of Egyptians, for the enforcement of the law and respect for the Constitution, and for making Egyptians feel that Egypt belongs to them before it belongs to anyone else, and that Egyptian posts must be filled by Egyptians, unless no qualified Egyptian can be found to bear their burdens? Or should I address the Finance Minister, since this story will end up with him in any case, if God wills that it be completed — his opinion will be sought, his approval requested, and his conscience will cry out to him: do not do it! For it is a sin to grant Egyptians' money to non-Egyptians, except when there is no other way? Or should I address Parliament, since it might be said that Parliament has the right, indeed the duty, to question the Ministry about whatever it does that departs from its purpose and oversteps the bounds of right and justice, and to nullify whatever of its acts do not serve the public interest, or do not conform to the law and the Constitution? Or should I address the British High Commissioner, since

the matter closely touches the English, and touches the relationship that ought to exist between them and us, and touches what the English profess to care about — that goodwill should prevail between us rather than discord, and that we should not feel that they are trespassing upon us in our own home, and wresting from us our rights and our livelihoods?

It is to all of these, it would seem, that I must direct this story, for it deserves the reflection of all of them, and their return to their own consciences, and their consulting of those consciences, so that they may learn from them: is this story permissible, in the reckoning of reason, of right, and of dignity — or is it not? I would have liked to address this story to the people themselves, but who troubles himself over the people, or takes them into account? And when has the people ever been able to lift an injustice from itself, or expose harm done to its sons, or secure for its sons the protection of their sanctities and the safeguarding of their rights?

Let me address this story, then, to those who are able to change it — for it seems to me that changing it is a duty, and that letting it stand is a sin, and that had it occurred in a truly democratic country, it would have brought down from his post the minister who devised and approved it, sent him back to his home, and placed him in a position before Parliament that no minister would envy — indeed, that no patriot would envy, patriots being those who acquit themselves well in shouldering the nation's trust and bearing its heavy burden.

The Royal School of Engineering has a governing board headed by one of the state's ministers, in which a group of senior Egyptian officials sit, along with another group of foreigners. Last April, at the request of the Ministry of Education, this board was asked to review the contracts of professors whose service was due to end this year, in order to propose which of them ought to be renewed, and to decline renewing those that did not need renewal. The board examined these contracts, and resolved to renew all of them, except the contract of Professor Smith, professor of physics, an Englishman: the board did not wish to renew his contract, because the school has an Egyptian assistant professor whom the board regards as qualified to fill the professorship, and the Constitution states plainly that Egyptian posts must be filled by Egyptians, unless no qualified Egyptian can be found — in which case, and only in which case, a foreigner is chosen to fill the post, until Egyptians can be prepared for it. The school's board took care to respect this constitutional provision, and to observe this explicit right belonging to the nation's citizens,

stating expressly in its decision that it had proposed renewing the contracts it asked to be renewed only because there existed no Egyptian at the school capable of filling these posts from now until the year 1937, the year in which the terms of the new contracts would expire. And the board stated expressly in its decision that it did not wish to renew Professor Smith's contract, because the school has an Egyptian assistant professor, Professor Mustafa Nazif, who is capable of carrying out the work, and that the post ought therefore to pass to him. And this board, as I have said, is composed of both Egyptians and foreigners, so its opinion carries no bias and no favoritism — it is fairness itself, the fairness that issues from people who weigh only right, duty, and benefit, and give no weight to other circumstances, least of all political circumstances.

The board's decision then made its way to the Ministry of Education, where it met with misfortune — the worst misfortune any decision could meet. It was presented to the Ministry's Secretary-General, who approved it in full, but proposed that the appointment of Professor Smith's successor be presented as a separate matter. A clever, tactful proposal, one that puts the appointment of the Egyptian professor up for negotiation, though without stating so outright. The decision was then passed up to the Ministry's Under-Secretary, Sabri Pasha, who approved the Secretary-General Osmawi Bey's proposal in a single word: "Approved." And what could be simpler than this word? And what could be fuller, more heavily laden with meaning, than this word? The decision was then passed up to the Minister, who was neither like the Under-Secretary nor like the Secretary-General, but was at once explicit and vague: he approved it, but added this remarkable sentence — "and let the reply be written according to the understanding reached." What understanding? From whom did it come? To whom did it go? What was its substance? What was its purpose? The answer to all of this is simple. You find it in the letter the Minister sent to the School of Engineering. You find it in the reply written according to that understanding — for this reply approves everything the board proposed except one single thing: the appointment of the Egyptian to the professorship. The Minister does not sanction this, does not approve of it, and gives no reason for his refusal or his aversion to it; instead, he asks the school to take the necessary steps to appoint a British professor to this post. Did you hear that? Did you understand? The Minister does not want to appoint an Egyptian, even though the school's board proposed appointing this Egyptian; rather, the Minister wants to appoint a British professor. And it is clear that the source of this is not any doubt about the Egyptian's

competence, since the specialists themselves were satisfied with this Egyptian — it is, rather, a preference for giving this post to the Briton rather than to the Egyptian. Why? Ask the Minister of Tradition about that, and ask political circumstances about that, and ask whether the Ministry needs the goodwill of the English, or has no interest in it. Then ask whether the English themselves want to fill these posts, or have no desire to fill them. Then ask the conscience of the Minister, the conscience of the Prime Minister, the conscience of all the ministers, the conscience of Parliament — and do not withhold your question from the conscience of the High Commissioner too. Ask all these consciences: do they accept this, or do they reject it? Are they angered by it, or are they content with it? Do they sanction it, or do they condemn it? If the answer is the former, then let all of these declare to Egyptians plainly, beyond any doubt or ambiguity, that they are enslaved and subjugated in their own country, possessing no right, no sanctity, and no dignity. And if the answer is the latter, then let the Egyptian be appointed to the post the school proposed him for, and let the Minister of Tradition and his aides be asked a precise and difficult question: how, and why, and to what end did they do what they did, squandering the Egyptian's right, his dignity, and his sanctity?

Yes, our masters and rulers among the Egyptians, and their friends among the English, must take a clear and explicit position on this story. Either they sanction it, in which case we will know where we stand, and what is intended for us; or they condemn it, in which case right will be restored to its rightful owner, and it will be said to the Minister of Tradition that, from this day forward, he should no longer be entrusted with the sacred trust of the Egyptians.

As for the school, headed by a Swiss foreigner, it is said that it still stands by its board's decision, insisting that the Egyptian fill the professorship, whatever the Minister's dislike of it.

The word now belongs to the Ministry; if it will not say it, then it belongs to Parliament — and how deeply the Egyptians long to hear it. . .

Taha Hussein

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