Settlement . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 13 June 1934

It took place yesterday in one of the chambers of Parliament, but it took place between one of the two contending parties in person, and the other by proxy. For the angry Deputies witnessed it, accepted it, and were reassured by it; anger fell silent in them, and calm enveloped them, and they did not withdraw their excuses and their warnings — but they simply neglected them, and turned away from them entirely. As for the Minister of Finance, he did not witness this session of settlement, and took no part in it, neither speaking nor acting; he left it instead to the Prime Minister and two other ministers to calm the Deputies and help them swallow this bitter pill. And they did indeed help them, offering them sweet phrases and pleasant, delightful words — like those sweet syrups given to a patient, to wash from his mouth what bitterness of medicine remains. And the Deputies went away content, or appearing content, and the Prime Minister let out a long, warm breath, like one from whose shoulders a heavy burden has been lifted, and this small, slight, narrow sky — the sky of official politics — cleared of those clouds which had seemed thick and dense, though in truth they were thin and transparent, hiding nothing, clouding no clear sky, and frightening no one but those who fear illusions and phantoms.

And the Minister of Finance remained where he was, settled and calm in his published statement which he had circulated in the provinces, and in his left hand the reply he had prepared to hurl at his adversaries, should they raise the matter in the Chamber of Deputies. Most likely, news of the reconciliation had already reached him, so he put the statement back in its place, and kept the reply safely stored away, since he might yet need it. Then everything settled, and everyone grew calm, and the breeze played over the surface of the lake, caressing and gentle — yet this breeze, for all its softness, its mildness, its delicacy, blew a few sheets of paper from their place, and carried them off, playfully, teasingly, to another spot. Then morning broke, and its light shone and gleamed, and Scheherazade fell silent on permissible speech, but the Ahram spoke in Scheherazade's place. It told the people the news of the settlement, then related to them the text of the circular that had angered the Deputies, prompted the interpellation, and provoked the Minister into writing and drafting a reply. And behold, it was indeed a circular with real consequences — a circular in which heroism found embodiment,

from whose every phrase brilliance dripped, and in whose short sentences many meanings and grave political aims stood revealed. A circular of the sort truly fit to anger the Deputies, even though they announced to the Prime Minister that they had not been angered by it, but rather by what was rumored about other, secret instructions said to have preceded it, followed it, and surrounded it. Say what you like — the circular itself is enough to anger the Deputies,

especially in these circumstances in which we live. Had I been a Deputy, and had this circular been made public, I would have been angered by it: if it was truthful, I would have been angry at myself, and would have hated to remain in the Chamber of Deputies, for those who evade taxes and exploit an exemption the law does not permit, in order to delay the state's money, ought not to represent the people. And if it was not truthful, I would have been angry on my own behalf, and would have condemned the Minister for insulting the Deputies without right, and for wielding his pen and his tongue against them without cause to do so. For the Minister claims that the state is owed, by a group of major taxpayers and members of the representative bodies in particular, a sum of money amounting to four hundred thousand pounds, which its owners have been late in paying. And the Minister claims that small landowners have paid their debt to the state in the best possible manner, while it is the large landowners and a group of members of the representative bodies who have been slow and remiss. And the Minister claims that the delay in these sums, on the part of large landowners and a group of members of the representative bodies, did not arise from any deficiency in the law, nor from any deficiency in the regulations and instructions, but arose rather from an exception the law does not permit, and which the regulations and instructions do not allow. The Minister is thus recording, plainly and decisively, that major taxpayers and a group of members of the representative bodies have distinguished themselves — or been distinguished by the administration — with a measure of impermissible exception. This is enough to anger the Deputies at themselves, if it is true; and enough to anger the Deputies at the Minister, if it is not true. But the Deputies say they were not angered, and they are of course free to feel for themselves whatever anger or contentment they wish. Yet the Minister did not, in his circular, stop at this level of mere reporting, as the masters of rhetoric put it, but went beyond it into prescription: he issued orders to the provincial governors, and these orders themselves are firm and fitting to justice, though by their nature they are the kind to anger those accustomed to being hurt by the faintest breeze, and pained

by the touch of silk. For the Minister orders, in this very circular that did not anger the Deputies, that all people be made to pay their taxes without distinction among them, and that seizure be carried out against all of them without distinction either, between the small and the great, between Deputies and non-Deputies, should they fall short in payment; and that all their affairs be referred to the Public Prosecution, likewise without distinction between the small and the great, between Deputies and non-Deputies, should embezzlement occur among them. Then the Minister orders that the regulations and instructions be observed with justice, equity, and equality in the collection of taxes now due. Consider these firm, resolute orders issued by the Minister of Finance, calm and assured, orders at which the Deputies were not angered, and ought not to have been angered — they who, rather, ought to blame the Minister and bring him down had he not issued them, and had he not seen to their execution with precision, firmness, and resolve.

The Deputies were not angered, as they said, because they hold themselves too dear to evade taxes, or to flee general obligations, or to be angered by a true word when it is spoken. So nothing remains for us but to wish them dream upon dream, and contentment upon contentment; to wish the Minister firmness upon firmness, courage upon courage, and brilliance upon brilliance; to wish the Prime Minister cunning upon cunning, and tact upon tact; and to wish for these circulars that their pages remain light and gentle, glad to be carried by the breeze to the newspaper offices, so that these circulars may be broadcast among the people, and Egyptians may see how taxes are paid by the small and remain unpaid by the great, and how ministers find firmness, and how Deputies submit to what is right, and how affairs proceed between Deputies and ministers just as al-Buhturi says:

I rise each morning content, though I had spent the night in anger,
and one who was a master at evening becomes, by morning, a slave.

Taha Hussein

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