

Morals

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), July 24, 1934

Leave aside those Egyptians upon whom the present political ordeal weighs so heavily that they cannot bear it, cannot hold firm against it, find every recourse closed to them and every door shut before them, and so take refuge at the residence of the High Commissioner, pouring out their grievances to him, seeking his help, and looking to him for justice. This is indeed a corruption of character and conscience — though perhaps an inevitable one, now that the political ordeal has reached what it has reached, and now that people's confidence in social justice has been so damaged, and their trust so shaken in the maintenance of that justice and in respect for whatever law is meant to embody it.

God forbid that we should make excuses for these Egyptians — for we would never make excuses for a people whose corruption of character and conscience ends in denying their own homeland, betraying its due, and sacrificing the nation's dignity for the sake of some quick advantage, or to escape some injustice, however severe. Such people are weak; they were not made for struggle, nor for steadfastness within it. No nation on earth has ever been entirely free of them, no people entirely innocent of them. But theirs is a long and heavy subject, and not the one we wish to take up now. Leave aside, too, those Egyptians upon whom the political ordeal weighs so heavily, and whom misfortune so disowns, that they carry their grievances and their demand for justice from Cairo all the way to London, laying their grievances before the English in the very land of the English. These, like the others, are a weak people who hold themselves cheap and hold their country cheap; they neither value dignity nor respect any right. Theirs, too, is a long and heavy subject we do not wish to take up now. Both sorts deserve the heaviest blame — yet they do not bear it alone, for they share it with those who have subjected them to such crushing injustice and poured upon them such unrelenting affliction, driving them to the disgrace in which they now find themselves entangled. What we wish to discuss, rather, is the particular matter raised in London, whose news reached us by telegraph only yesterday. It seems that the former director of Alexandria's municipality went to London and visited the Nile Society, as Al-Muqattam reports; a number of the Society's members took to questioning him about the Corniche affair, and he answered them freely and without reserve. The conversation, between him and them, arrived in the end at the claim that an official is

at fault whenever he obeys an order issued to him by his superiors, if that order runs contrary to the law. At this point excuses began to appear, and shades of pretext began to show themselves. Some said the official is excused for breaking the law in order to obey his superior, because he must live, and because he can hope for nothing — unless he sacrifices his fidelity to the law for the sake of pleasing his superiors — but to be dismissed from his post and driven into unemployment and the privation that follows. Others said that it is the weakness of officials, and the corruption of their character and conscience, that drives them to sacrifice the law and their fidelity to it in order to please their superiors; had their souls been stronger, had their character been sounder, had their conscience been clearer, they would never have accepted fidelity to the law and to order as something to be traded away. Still others said that the blame, all the blame, lies with a system that allows superiors to tyrannize over officials and abuse them, taking them to task for breaking the law. Had the system been sound, and had the superior who breaks the law, or orders it broken, been punished before the subordinate who carries out that order, officials would never have been exposed to this painful battle between their own needs and their conscience; the weak among them would never have been driven to sacrifice conscience in order to live, nor would the strong among them have been driven to sacrifice comfort, ease, and advantage, and to endure hardship and misfortune, merely to satisfy conscience and character. It seems most likely that the two contending camps never did reach any agreement on this question, which has been raised in Egypt every day since this blessed era we now live under first cast its shadow over us.

Nor is it possible for the two contending camps ever to agree. For officials are people with their own needs, their own interests, their own children and families, their own hopes and ambitions — and in them lies the common weakness of humankind. All of this drives them to love life, and to strive to live it in safety and peace of mind, so far as safety and peace of mind are within their reach. All of this drives them to submit to their superiors' orders even when those orders defy the law and stand outside it. All of this leads them to imagine that, being commanded, they must obey; being compelled, they must submit. And all of this fills their hearts with that phrase repeated by all who are driven to what they do not love: "Necessity permits what is forbidden." Superiors, for their part, are people who carry within them that very weakness distinctive of humankind — that same base weakness which tempts a man toward tyranny once the doors of tyranny stand open to him, which makes him

forget the law once forgetting the law becomes possible for him, and which leads him to imagine that if he has power, that power knows no limit, and if he is able, his ability knows no restraint. It leads him to imagine that strength is an opportunity to be seized wherever it presents itself, and that it would be folly to have the power to act and yet not act, even where that action defies the law.

All of this drives superiors to neglect their duty and overstep every limit, and toward that same reckless self-assurance which leads a man to imagine he has become a god, or something resembling a god. And so long as officials remain weak, bowed beneath the pains and hopes that life imposes on them, and so long as superiors remain weak, tempted by tyranny into injustice, oppression, and the breaking of the law, the story of the Corniche, and every scandal and disgrace like it, will keep repeating itself. Wise nations can guard themselves against the weakness of officials and the weakness of superiors alike, to a considerable degree, only by adopting systems that hold the guilty to account for their guilt and call the criminal to answer for his crime — whoever he may be, whatever his rank, and whatever circumstances surround him. Had those concerned with the Corniche affair questioned Sidqi Pasha as they questioned Sadiq Bey, the Corniche affair would truly have been a useful lesson, and its good would have outweighed its harm — for it would have taught the people, rulers and ruled alike, superiors and subordinates alike, that the law stands above persons, that the people's interest stands above the interest of individuals and classes, and that all Egyptians are equal before the system, none distinguished above another. But the Corniche affair, as it actually unfolded, and as the government wished its course to run once it had been uncovered and investigated, was a shameful scandal: it was an enticement to wrongdoing and an encouragement toward it; it was an incitement to tyrants to tyrannize further, and an encouragement to officials to take care of themselves by breaking the law with skill, caution, and a wary eye toward avoiding exposure.

Yes — and there is another remedy wise nations turn to, to guard against the weakness of officials that drives them to sacrifice the law for fear of their superiors, and the weakness of superiors that drives them to hold officials to breaking the law: namely, sound upbringing and proper education. Were our schools and institutes to instill in the hearts of children and young people the idea that officials are not servants of the government but servants of the people, and that government is not an

end in itself but a means to serving the people, our youth would come to know with certainty that superior and subordinate stand equal before the law, and before the people who are the true source of that law. They would come to know with certainty that superior and subordinate are partners cooperating in a shared task: neither dominates the other, neither submits to the other; neither rises above the other, neither sinks below the other; rather, both work toward a single end, which is the good of the people. Neither has authority over the other, nor is owed obedience by the other, except within the bounds of that shared good alone, as the law defines it. But what is instilled in the hearts of our own children and young people is something else entirely, at the sharpest odds with all of this: our children are taught obedience more than they are taught freedom; our children are taught submission more than they are taught respect for dignity; our children are made to comply more than they are made to respect the law out of insight, understanding, and conviction.

And the models held up before our children every day do not stir in them any feeling of confidence in themselves, of respect for their own conscience, or of regard for their own opinions — but instead stir in them feelings of obedience, flattery, appeasement, and compliance, so that they might thereby manage to earn a living and secure their daily bread.

And so long as these remain our general morals, and so long as these remain the images held up before our children and young people, there will continue to be among us officials who break the law to please their superiors and sacrifice the people's interests in order to serve the interests of those who rule — until, when questioned about it, they say just what the former director of the municipality said: "We were only following orders, and had no choice but obedience and compliance!"