Sabri-isms . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 10 June 1934

Yes, Sabri-isms — for the silence surrounding the Finance Minister has gone on long enough, since it was he himself who chose that silence, immersed himself in it, and grew fond of and settled into that stillness. But it seems he has grown weary of silence and stillness, and has broken free of them first into action, and will break free into speech tomorrow or the day after. And when the Finance Minister bestirs himself, people bestir themselves along with him. And when the Finance Minister speaks, people speak along with him. For I know of no man among our distinguished ministers dearer to writers, more favored by them, more capable of stirring them when they flag, of loosening their tongues when they fall silent, and of inspiring long columns, than these two consequential ministers — the Finance Minister when he deals with money and men of money, and the Minister of Tradition when he deals with education and men of education.

As for the Prime Minister, that good man, leave him aside — for he is calm and mild, modest and untroubled, seldom inspired or inspiring. His deeds and his words are all so uniformly arranged as to discourage anyone from examining, interpreting, or commenting on them. And leave aside his other colleagues too, for they are good men who resemble him in gentleness and calm, and in their inability to inspire or be inspired. Leave these good ministers aside, and stop instead at the Finance Minister and the Minister of Tradition, and linger there at length — for you will never tire of them, nor will they tire of you; you will never have your fill of them, nor will they have their fill of you, because they never speak, act, think, or dream without producing marvels, and driving you, willy-nilly, to thought, to speech, and to writing.

This Minister of Tradition has now been overtaken by a sudden spell of love for the English language: he has singled it out for affection, set it apart for tenderness, and resolved to make students study it summer and winter, and take it up in autumn and spring, and has ordered that books be circulated among them, for them to pore over and memorize during the summer, so that when they return they may prove, by examination, that their share of knowledge of the English language has broadened and extended, has risen and deepened, until they become Englishmen, or nearly so. There is no doubt that this initiative will please the High

Commissioner, and will earn his approval to a degree the more eager among his admirers could never reach. So let the Minister of Tradition take joy in this fruitful energy, and let the English take joy in this productive attentiveness, and let the Arabic language leave its fate to God — perhaps another minister will attend to it next summer.

But what business is it of ours, and of the Minister of Tradition's, when all we truly want is to speak of Sabri-isms, and to praise the Finance Minister — for he is indeed worthy of praise. People had been forming all sorts of suppositions about him, imagining that he had abandoned every form of action, cut himself off from all talk, submitted to the dictates of circumstance, and yielded to what could not be avoided yielding to. And behold, he is as far from all this as can be: people take him for calm when he is in turmoil, suppose him still when he is in motion, and reckon him silent, when his silence speaks louder than words. And here we are, taken by surprise at this fierce dispute between him and a group of Deputies numbering roughly a third of a hundred: he wants taxes collected properly, with no distinction between the rich and the poor, nor between ordinary people and Deputies, and he asks the provincial directors to pursue this seriously and without slackening; and the Deputies resent this of him, and demand that he apologize, and warn him that they will withdraw confidence in him if he does not. We had imagined that certain people were plotting against the minister to drive him out, scheming against him to be rid of him — but what do we hear from people today, and what do we read today in Al-Ahram? People say, and Al-Ahram reports, that the matter between the minister and these Deputies was not confined to this strange circular — had it stopped there, the Deputies would not have found it so hard to bear — but that they discovered another circular, or other instructions, which the minister circulated among the directors, which the directors circulated among the district officers, which the district officers circulated among the village headmen, and which the headmen circulated among the people in the countryside villages. And these instructions are truly grave, foreboding a sweeping evil. For the minister, according to what people say and Al-Ahram reports, asks for nothing more than a small thing: a tally of the taxes overdue among the Deputies, and among the Deputies' relatives, together with a clarification of the degree of kinship between those whose taxes are overdue and the Deputies. What is this? Is some secret investigation intended, and who ordered it, and who was behind it? Is it the minister — and if so, why did he order it only now, in these very days? Is it the Prime Minister — and if so, why did he never think of it since he

first took up the burdens of government? What is this? Is it not enough to have the Corniche inquiry, the property-exchange inquiry, and the municipal inquiry, that a new investigation must now begin, broad in scope, its tendrils reaching to every corner of the land, in cities and villages, in town and countryside? What is this? Is it not enough for the investigation to circle around ministers and officials, that it must now extend to Deputies and Senators too? Who ordered this investigation? Who pushed for it? And what is wanted from it? What is this? Is it a group of Deputies plotting against the minister, to drive him from the ministry? Or is it the minister plotting against the Deputies, to establish proof that the present era has not been free of favoritism, patronage, and the exploitation of influence — and which of the two sides will prevail? Will the Deputies free themselves of this minister who makes them the subject of an investigation, even as he shares in the responsibilities of government, and yet proceeds with an act calculated to damage the ministry's own standing? Or will the Deputies prove unable to deal with this minister, so that he remains in his post, conducting affairs as he wishes, and pursuing taxes from whoever has evaded them or delayed in paying them, whoever they may be, and whoever their patrons and friends may be? As for the minister, he has not overstepped his bounds, has not exceeded his right, and has not departed from the conduct proper to him — for his office charges him with the trust of attending to taxes and collecting them justly from all Egyptians alike, and of freeing this collection from favoritism and partiality. The Deputies have no legitimate claim against him for this, nor ought they to have one. And if one of the two contending sides must prevail, then the law and the Constitution both wish the minister to prevail over the Deputies in this dispute. But the Deputies, who are the mainstay and shield of the government, who stood by it when Sidqi Pasha turned against it, who sacrificed Sidqi Pasha for its sake, and who received from its hand favors and kindnesses — they support it in every difficulty, and back it in every crisis, never meeting it with suspicion, never begrudging it their trust; and if some among them evade taxes, none of them evades victory and support for the government. How, then, can the Finance Minister be permitted to stir up suspicion around them, cast doubt upon them, and fill the air around them with insinuations? A problem stirred up by our brilliant Finance Minister. And who, if not our brilliant Finance Minister, is there to stir up dust over problems and fan their flames? But stirring up problems is one thing, and solving them is quite another. The Finance Minister is skilled at stirring up problems, but his skill at solving them is a matter open to doubt. So which of the two contending sides will prevail? Will the

Deputies prevail, and bring down the minister? Or will the minister prevail, and subject the Deputies to this grave investigation? How deeply we pity this good man — for resolving this fierce problem will demand of him an effort, and cost him a toil, that even those inured to hardship could scarcely bear, in this heavy summer.

As for us, we would like to help this good man find a solution to this problem, and to others like it — to find an honorable solution, one that would bring rest to him and to others besides. And this solution is: not to attempt a reconciliation between the two contending sides, nor to postpone the problem at the expense of the public interest, but rather to support the Finance Minister in his position firmly, clearly, and unequivocally. Then either the minister's adversaries will submit to what is right and to the law, or they will refuse and the majority will abandon them, or the majority will join in solidarity with them and the ministry will resign — and the door will open to true reform. . .

[Taha Hussein]

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