Sleep

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 25 September 1934

Isawiyyat...

Yes, sleep — and it may well be a pleasant one, even though dreams so often startle the ministry these days. But the Ministry of Education's sleep, it would seem, is deep and thick, one that dreams cannot penetrate, nor events disturb; and when summer comes, this sleep only grows thicker and deeper still, for repose pitches its tents all around the ministry, and spreads its shade over senior and junior officials alike.

This deep, thick sleep is the only reasonable explanation for the Ministry of Education's delay, to this very day, in issuing the transfer orders for secondary school teachers. Perhaps the Ministry of Education knows that the secondary school term is due to begin next Saturday — that is, in three days' time. Perhaps it knows, too, that it has not yet finalized the transfer orders among secondary school teachers, even at this very hour in which we dictate these words. And perhaps it knows that three days would be nothing to speak of, were this order issued today, so that word of the transfer might reach the teachers, and the teachers might then make whatever preparations are needed to carry it out. And yet we are not playing games here, nor exaggerating against the ministry, nor teasing the teachers, nor amusing the public, when we say that the transfer orders have not been issued to this day.

We might tire ourselves greatly searching for some reasonable excuse for this delay. The months of summer, in their entirety, allow senior officials to take from them whatever rest they please, and to give back to work whatever they please; and the rest of hundreds of teachers, and of the thousands in these teachers' families, is no less a concern to the state, no lighter a burden for Egypt, than the rest of a handful — fewer than ten — senior officials. It would be reasonable enough for these senior officials to rest for two months; then, come August, to prepare the transfer orders; then, at the very start of September, to issue them — so that secondary school teachers would have a month before them (a month is little enough) in which to prepare for moving from one city to another, from one situation to another, from one post to another, and to prepare for their sons and daughters whatever this move entails of changing one school for another, and all the toil that teachers have had to bear, year after year, simply because the Ministry of Education remains convinced

that teachers must be transferred every single year, and must behave like chess pieces, never settling anywhere except for the brief interval before being moved on to somewhere else.

We do not wish, for now, to point out how much absurdity there is in this constant shuffling of teachers, nor how much it corrupts education itself — we may return to that in another piece. What we wish, rather, is to alert the Ministry of Education that this traditional evil, which it clings to so very tightly, without ever pausing to consider its ill effects on education itself, on the lives of teachers and their families, and on the state funds spent every year on these transfers — we wish to alert the ministry that, if this evil cannot be avoided altogether, the least it can do is ease its burden upon people, and that there is no reason at all for the nation to have that burden doubled upon it. It is burden enough for teachers that they live the life of Bedouin though they are civilized men, that they are moved about as Bedouin are moved about in the desert though they live in a country whose very nature is settled, and that any one of them must arrange his whole life around the assumption that it is unsettled, with neither calm nor stability in it — around the assumption that God has decreed he must spend one year in the furthest reaches of Upper Egypt, another at the far end of the country, and other years still shuttling between the two. This is burden enough for teachers; and it serves neither necessity nor the interests of education for teachers to be left in deep, outrageous confusion — shared by their wives, their sons and daughters, and their relations — for a whole month, not knowing where they will spend the year, nor how to plan their days, until, once September has all but run its course, these firm, decisive orders are issued to them, and they are required to carry them out with both speed and precision at once — so that their affairs grow only more unsettled, their lives only more disrupted, and their hearts fill with resentment toward learning and teaching, and toward the very fortune that made them teachers in the first place.

None of this is necessary. What is necessary is exactly the opposite: that the ministry should tire itself, so that teachers might rest, and carry out their great national duty in sincerity and devotion, with willingness and contentment in their work. Nothing is more dangerous to the character of teachers and students alike than for teachers to feel that they matter less to senior officials than a little of their own comfort — that senior officials would rather sacrifice nothing of their own ease, nor bear, on the teachers' behalf, the toil of work and the fierce heat.

For teachers do their work, uncomplaining of heat or cold, and never refuse to carry out whatever order is issued to them, even one that runs against their own interests and costs them a great deal of benefit — and they receive for this no enormous wage, no lavish salary, unlike the wages and salaries drawn by ministers and senior officials, who work little and rest much, and work as they themselves please rather than as the public interest, and the demands of the work itself, most often require.

There is no need for inspectors to indulge so freely in rest, nor for the Minister of Education to busy himself with matters that have nothing to do with education, nor for the ministry's under-secretary to go off to Europe to spend the summer months there, nor for the ministry's secretary to shuttle back and forth between Cairo and Alexandria as though he were hard at work, when the fruits of his labour are scarcely to be seen at all.

None of this is necessary. What is necessary — what the public interest demands, and what honesty demands — is simply that September should never arrive without every single teacher already knowing where he is meant to spend the coming year.

Let the men of the Ministry of Education take note of this — though we doubt they will. People point this out every single year, and every year they turn away from it entirely. And if I believed the Minister of Traditions were capable of taking any advice I might offer him, I would advise him not to issue the transfer orders at all this year, since their proper time has already passed, and instead to leave teachers where they are, so as not to force upon them, should the order still be issued, this absurd and crushing ordeal that they can do without.

Taha Hussein