Negotiations

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Its subject is not Egypt's independence; that era, at least for now, has passed, the era when ministries used to concern themselves, or could concern themselves, with negotiating Egypt's independence, and we have entered — thank God — a happy era in which ministries are kept busy with matters graver than independence, more consequential for Egypt's life than independence. If a ministry finds occasion to think about independence and its completion, it thinks of it only to insert it into one of those statements issued when ministries are formed, or into a speech from the throne when parliament's session opens. A ministry might feel the urge to speak to the English about independence, only to be met with a gentle refusal; if it presses, the refusal turns harsh; if it presses further, its lines are cut, its doors shut, and the path to its own resignation or dismissal is paved before it; so negotiations over independence are something ministries fear, lest they cost them their survival and shorten their lives.

Nor are these negotiations I wish to speak of about abolishing the Capitulations; the fallen dictator who tumbled from power expected England to be free of its other concerns so that he might enlist its help in abolishing them, but he fell before the English found that freedom, and no sooner had the present ministry risen than Germany hurled its bombshell at Geneva, complicating international affairs and keeping the English occupied, away from the Capitulations and from Abdel Fattah Yehia Pasha's ministry, just as they had been kept occupied, away from the Capitulations and from Sidqi Pasha's ministry. So the Capitulations will not be the subject of the negotiations I want to tell you about now.

Nor is the question of the public debt the subject of these negotiations; the debt question is before the courts, and the new finance minister prefers to wait, because he wants to know the court's ruling on one hand, and because, on the other, he cannot feel the same confidence Sidqi Pasha felt in the opinion of the Egyptian royal advisers. He must consult European men of law and finance instead. The Egyptian advisers can advise ordinary men like Sidqi Pasha and his kind; but the truly outstanding, distinguished ministers require advisers of some other substance entirely, some other, superior stock. Until the court rules, and

until these distinguished men of Europe give their advice, the debt question will not be the subject of the negotiations.

And yet there are negotiations, long, arduous, complicated, tangled, far-reaching in their effect on Egyptians' lives, that have been going on and are still going on, while the entire Egyptian people hangs suspended between hope and fear, not knowing whether these negotiations will end in success, letting them live, or in failure, bringing them to ruin.

You will not find a single Egyptian, nor speak to one, without seeing his mind wholly occupied, his heart wholly absorbed, by these negotiations on whose success or failure hangs the fate of these millions living along the Nile's banks. Do you wish to know what these negotiations are? What need is there even to ask, when you know them completely, when you track their news and follow their turns morning and evening, because you are Egyptian, and all Egyptians alike are held hostage to these negotiations.

You have now learned that these are the negotiations under way between the ministry, or between two members of the ministry, and the People's Party.

And these negotiations have qualities that set them apart from every negotiation that preceded them, and from every negotiation that may follow them. The source of these qualities lies in the circumstances that brought down one minister and installed another in his place, and stirred up in the People's Party a disturbance of which the least that can be said is that it amuses the sorrowful. The People's Party's founder and leader, the man who breathed life into it, was brought down, and in his place was set a man who had been a party member and its deputy leader, and who had been a minister; when he was removed from the ministry, he removed himself from the party, and when he was raised to the premiership, he restored himself to the party.

Sidqi Pasha did not accept his leaving the party when he left it, nor was he pleased by his return to the party when he returned; but the door of the party stands open for Abdel Fattah Yehia Pasha to leave through whenever he wishes, and to enter through whenever he chooses, and the doorman looks away from him, turning aside as he leaves, forced to welcome him and stand for him as he returns. The doorman thought he could close the door in the face of anyone else but that domineering member, who pays no heed to doormen, though he may show them kindness now and then.

For some reason, the leader of the People's Party imagined he could expel from the party two men who had worked alongside him in the ministry, and then worked alongside his rival, without submitting to their own leader's opinion. These two men resented this and rejected it, and their new leader stood with them, and the rest of the ministers, both independents and Unionists, stood with them too; and the People's Party and its leader looked on, to find the war on one side and the ministry on the other, and the leader of the People's Party, Sidqi Pasha, imagined the matter was in his hands, that he could not only dismiss these two ministers but bring down their ministry entirely — God willing — once parliament convened. But the prime minister shook his head, shrugged his shoulders, and drew upon his lips a smile no less beautiful, no less charming, than his great rival's own smile, and waited.

He incited no one among the deputies and senators; he set neither the interior minister nor the men of the administration upon them; he never thought to call any party member to support him and rally to his side; he merely shook his head, shrugged his shoulders, smiled, and said: I am the prime minister. And there they were, some coming forward, some making speeches, though no one had summoned them to come forward or to speak; some offering apologies, though no one had asked them to apologize, and no one blamed them for anything.

And there was a petition — I assure you with full confidence that no one wrote it, no one dictated it, no one prepared its pages, no one moved a pen for it, no one spilled a drop of ink over it — and yet the members of the People's Party looked, and there it was, as though it had sprung from the earth or descended from the sky, carried by the air with delicacy and lightness, with grace and skill, drifting around them. No one sees it, no one senses it, it knocks on no door, tears through no veil; a member of the People's Party simply looks, and finds a sheet of paper laid before him, and hears a hidden voice stirring in the depths of his own soul, heard by no one else, saying: sign this petition, for it is support for the prime minister. And before this member of the People's Party can even think or weigh the matter, the delicate, fine, graceful air has already brought an inkwell and a pen, dipped the pen in the ink, placed the pen in the member's hand, and guided that hand to write his honored name.

Then the petition withdraws, retreating, the pen at its right, the inkwell at its left, laughing, and they too are laughing, and it says, and they say: Sidqi Pasha will learn that the premiership commands an army of air that forces members to sign their names. And this petition keeps

leaving one house to enter another, leaving one gathering to join another, until it reaches a member of the People's Party who loves the party, loves the ministers, honors the new leader, and pities the old one. No sooner does he see this strange delegation arriving, borne on wings of air, pen on the right, inkwell on the left, a sheet of paper spread out between them, than he recites the sura of Sincerity and the two suras of Refuge, and the Verse of the Throne, and rises at once, swearing he will surely mediate, that he will surely settle, through negotiation and goodwill, what the soldiers of the air want to settle through trickery and cunning.

And from that moment the negotiations began, and the papers tell us they are proceeding satisfactorily toward reconciliation, held back only by certain formulas over which there is much talk and chatter, much changing and altering, much interpreting and reinterpreting, in which the mind of the minister of traditions plays some part, near or far. It appears that this evening will not pass before the negotiations end in the ministry's triumph, the People's Party's submission, and the return of the two dismissed ministers to the fold, just as the prime minister himself returned to it after resigning.

And it appears that this triumph is a foregone conclusion, for these hidden soldiers, these soldiers of the air, who carry the pen on the right and the inkwell on the left, and spread the petition between them, have not laid down their arms, nor rested; they remain at full strength, brimming with energy, ready to advance if Sidqi Pasha does not yield outright. And who can help Sidqi Pasha resist these airborne soldiers, whom no hand can reach, no eye can see, yet who are capable of moving hands and closing eyes?

And the conduct of these soldiers is strange, for they showed no decisive, resolute activity until just a few days ago, when a ship docked at Alexandria and then set sail again; people imagine that these soldiers of the air must have been spending the summer in some city across the sea, or across the ocean, until, once they had had their fill of summering, they returned to Egypt, and upon seeing what they saw and hearing what they heard, rose up to straighten the crooked, mend the drift, and reconcile the rivals. And they have succeeded — or will succeed — once the People's Party's administrative council meets this evening.

And so the weather will clear, the problems will dissolve, and the People's Party will take up governance in spite of itself, and the resigned leader will support his dear friend, the new prime minister, gladly,

delighted with his own support, and will bear the burdens of governing, having been kept from governing for no reason other than that he is a great man, made to bear burdens, who flees them only to have them chase him down. And so Abdel Fattah Yehia Pasha will triumph, and Sidqi Pasha will be compelled to be his supporter and backer; but the question people put to one another, waiting on an answer they seem unlikely to receive before the end of the year, is this: what is the business of these airborne soldiers? Will they remain stationed in Egypt for a long time yet, or will they depart for some other country of the East, or of the West, before the year is out?