Two Millions ...

Taha Hussein

Kawkab al-Sharq, 10 October 1933

One of the two millions was granted by our great dictator to the wretched subjects before he left Egypt last spring to seek treatment and rest, and to prepare himself for resignation or dismissal; the other is what the new finance minister wishes to grant the wretched subjects, to serve as a good omen and a means of publicity for the new ministry.

There is no doubt that the departed dictator did not forget publicity, and keeping a good name alive in the minds of his wretched subjects, when his great soul deigned to spare the small subjects this one million; and there is equally no doubt that our great finance minister does not forget publicity, and the winning of supporters and partisans, when his wealthy soul deigns to spare this deprived population this other million.

It is certain that Sidqi Pasha gained no publicity, wide or narrow, from the million he relinquished, and it is certain, too, that Sabry Bey will gain no publicity, wide or narrow, from this million he is relinquishing. The people met Sidqi Pasha's million with indifference, and will meet Sabry Bey's million with indifference; God alone knows how Sidqi Pasha's million was distributed, and God alone knows how Sabry Bey's million will be distributed.

But the matter that deserves thought and reflection, that calls for deliberation and consideration, is that these two great men find millions with such ease, millions many ministers of the great and wealthy states would envy. Sidqi Pasha found a million in the wake of the last budget, and Sabry Bey has, it is said, saved a million from the heart of the current budget, and neither man reduced, or thought of reducing, officials' salaries, and neither man abandoned, or thought of abandoning, the great projects the state pours money into, whether or not those projects serve any purpose.

And everyone knows that however great these two men's competence, breadth of experience, and capacity for invention may be, God almighty did not grant them the power to create something from nothing, nor to say to millions, "Be," and have them be.

So these two great men must have had, on hand, a sum of money the state had no need of last year, which Sidqi Pasha then bestowed upon the people — and what people! — and had no need of this year, which Sabry Bey now bestows upon the people — and we shall see what people.

This sum must have been taken from the subjects, for God has not accustomed our ministry, or any other ministry, to rain gold, silver, or paper down upon it; and if this sum was taken from the subjects, and the subjects are wretched, despairing, destitute, deprived, many of them seeking their sons' and daughters' daily bread and finding none after toil and hardship, after exertion and prolonged suffering, then it may well be plain, as I see it, that the state is harsh, excessively harsh, that it goes too far, exceeds all bounds, in requiring the hungry and deprived, the destitute and wretched, to hand over money the state does not need, and money it does need, and money he himself needs a small part of merely to live.

This means the state does not collect taxes — or rather, does not collect from taxes what meets its need to look after people's interests and affairs, but instead extracts their money outright, drains their blood outright, and squeezes their flesh dry, leaving them nothing but skin clinging to bone, no more than that. And had it been able to leave them less than that, it would have. This means the whips that fell on the backs of those unable to pay what the state demanded of them in money were not the whips of a right that compels resolve and firmness, nor the whips of a justice that resorts to severity and force, but the whips of blatant injustice, of oppression that was not ashamed to show its ugly, hideous face to people in broad daylight.

This means that these poor and rich alike, these people of little and much means alike, whose agricultural produce is seized without right to satisfy what the state demands in money, bear the consequences of that seizure and endure its material and moral weight without any compelling need on the state's part, without any pressing necessity for the state, but simply because the state wants to collect money, wants only to collect money, and wants to collect money whatever the cost of collecting it in oppressing people and treating them harshly, in overstepping the law and departing from customary practice in enforcing it.

This means, too, that the previous ministry understood the government's role wrongly, and judged, it seems, that government is merely one of the state's instruments for collecting money by any means,

bringing money in by any path, rather than an instrument of the state for serving the people and easing their burdens, for securing people's interests and facilitating their affairs.

And if this was the previous ministry's understanding of governance, and its estimation of the relationship between the state and the people, it is hardly strange that this policy should have led the people to the wretched state they are in, and led the previous ministry to the wretched end it met, and that it should have corrupted people's opinion of the ministry — indeed, their opinion of the principles on which the ministry stood — and erased from people's minds what governance ought to rest on, not I say love and affection, but trust and good faith, which keep people safe from oppression and injustice, and fill their hearts with the assurance that the government serves them and does not wrong them, and that it does not collect money from them beyond the necessity their interests and affairs require.

Nor is it strange, then, that the previous ministry went to such excess in spending money without account on what serves no purpose and brings no benefit, or on what could be postponed and deferred for long years.

Yes, and it is not strange that conferences should be held in Egypt while delegates are sent abroad to attend conferences elsewhere; that the opera should stage its elegant, entertaining season on winter nights; that towering buildings should rise where there is no need for them; that foreigners should be invited to give lectures, or for no lecture at all; that our money should cross the sea to settle in the coffers of European newspapers, and to lavish bright colors of extravagance upon our legations.

None of this is strange, so long as the state collects money the way it collected it, and spends money to excess the way it spent it, until, when the fiscal year turned, Sidqi Pasha, after all this extravagance and waste, found a million to bestow as a gift on whomever he wished to favor before traveling for treatment; and no sooner had the fiscal year reached its midpoint, with the government spending as freely as it pleased, right and left, than the new minister managed to find a million he wishes to give to the people without touching officials' salaries, without touching the great projects. Perhaps he economized this million from expenditure on ink, paper, and pencils!

And the clear, evident result of all this is truly grievous — it wrings hearts and tears at the soul, and shows the life of this wretched people in a state of misery and hardship no civilized man's conscience can rest easy with, no refined person's soul can find peace in. For a state that comes by millions after all this extravagance we live under must indeed be wealthy, and we said months ago, and we say again today, that a state's extravagant wealth alongside a people's extravagant poverty and misery is no sign of upright governance resting on justice, fairness, mercy, and kindness toward people, but a sign of something else we would rather not call by its ugly name. And if the state's expenditures are estimated at these millions every year, and if a million can then be taken from them with the ease that astonished the English financial adviser, as Al-Ahram said yesterday, there is no doubt that sound economy and honest management would end in a very substantial reduction of these expenditures, sparing the taxpayer many of these heavy burdens weighing on him and driving him to hardship.

Egyptians must therefore wake up, and think about this heavy affliction that spoils their life and ruins their affairs, and ask themselves how parliament used to oversee the ministry's handling of the budget, how parliament could let this budget pass as it did, and how it was told that the ministry had endured great hardship and effort to balance this budget and achieve an exact equilibrium between income and expenditure. Had this claim been true, it would not have been possible for Sidqi Pasha to secure his million at the end of the year, nor for Sabry Bey to secure his million midway through it.

Yes, and Egyptians must wake up and ask themselves how the new finance minister managed to find this million, given that the official communiqué informs us of how he managed it. We are faced with one of two things: either Sabry Bey saved it from expenditures that could not be avoided, in which case he is gravely mistaken and exposes the state's interests to danger; or he saved it from expenditures the need did not call for and necessity did not require, in which case Sidqi Pasha was wasteful with the nation's money, poorly judging the balance between income and expenditure.

And how much we would like to hear Sidqi Pasha's opinion on this new million that Sabry Bey has saved in less than a week; for at the outset of this ministry's rule, Sidqi Pasha instructed his newspaper to warn the new finance minister against promising economy, since economy was impossible. We would like to know how the finance minister

economized this million, and what Sidqi Pasha thinks of that economy.

And we would like, before all else and after all else, Egyptians to become alert to the dangerous kinds of folly surrounding them and their affairs: here are people being squeezed hard, pressed hard, made to pay in money more than they can bear, and then extravagant in spending what they collect, spending it as freely as they please; then, when they need publicity and to win over hearts, they turn back to this deprived people with a certain haughtiness and pride, showing them favor and kindness with some of what was taken from them by force, violence, and imposed suffering.

No; Sidqi Pasha did not give away that million of his to anyone — he merely returned what ought never to have been taken; nor will Sabry Bey give away this million of his to anyone — he merely returns some of what ought never to have been taken.

And had people's affairs in this wretched country been set right, more would have been returned to them than is now given them as a gift, and the ministers would have been asked about this suffering inflicted on people to collect money that proof shows, day after day, to be far more than the government needs.

But how can people's affairs be set right, when they have no say whatsoever in managing them?