War

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Kawkab al-Sharq, 25 November 1933

We are not yet done laughing, for the two formidable chiefs do not wish us any rest from laughter, or from drowning ourselves in it. Both are tender of heart and generous of soul; both are gentle with us and full of pity for us; both grieve for us over these endless misfortunes and unceasing trials, over these pains we suffer and groan beneath the weight of; and both wish — and they have our thanks for wishing it — to distract us from our worry, and lift our sorrow, not content merely to send a smile to our lips, but insisting on filling our mouths with continuous laughter and endless peals of it.

And both carry their kindness, their wit, and their generosity so far that they refrain from making us laugh at anyone else, but make us laugh instead at themselves, in what they do and what they say; each of the two gives freely of himself to make his nation laugh, and giving of oneself is the utmost limit of generosity, as the ancient poet said. So let us laugh, then, since the two formidable chiefs insist on nothing less; and let us drown ourselves in laughter, since the minister of traditions insists on sharing in this wit with them, and taking his portion with them of this generosity; and let us know, then, that God has been kinder to Egypt and to Egyptians than to leave them beneath the darkness of trial without sending, from time to time, a bright and shining ray through that very darkness.

And the first thing to laugh at, in this bright farce staged in the midst of the ongoing tragedy, is this fierce war that has broken out, and goes on blazing, between two men who are neither capable of war nor cut out for it in the least; for Sidqi Pasha is a sick and deserted man, and Abdel Fattah Yehia Pasha is a weak and kindhearted one, and each of them ought by nature to prefer peace, and give himself over to rest and quiet, and to the enjoyment of life's good things; and yet, despite all this, they fight and struggle, each spreading snares and traps around the other, then each drawing his weapon, each raising his voice, each stirring up around himself a cloud of dust thick enough to blot out night and day, then each charging upon the other, until, when they clash and grapple, when they collide and lock together, they part again, and neither has met with any real scheme, nor come to any real harm; for neither of them is

capable of scheming, and neither of them is capable of coming to harm — these are merely scenes being staged, and a people laughing at them.

Sidqi Pasha insisted on controlling his rival, and Abdel Fattah Pasha insisted on controlling his enemy, and it turned out that neither controlled the other at all, but that the circumstances of politics control them both together, driving them forward so that they advance, and driving them back so that they retreat; no sooner is Sidqi Pasha driven from power than he announces in Al-Ahram that he is the leader of the parliamentary majority, and that consulting him on forming the ministry is an absolute, binding duty; then scarcely does the morning rise before political circumstance moves to force him back, and he denies what Al-Ahram reported, and swears he never said any such thing; then he advances once more, claiming the ministry is not truly of the people, because it was not formed under the eyes of the People's Party; then circumstance moves toward him again, and he comes to believe the ministry is of the people after all, because its chief has returned to the fold, after having rebelled against it and broken from it.

Then the prime minister announces that he is a man of peace, and no sooner has he done so than he announces that he is a man at war; then Sidqi Pasha dismisses two ministers, and no sooner has he done so than he takes his ease at their return; then the prime minister advances, and pays the party a visit; then the prime minister retreats, and avoids the party. Then Sidqi Pasha is defeated, and resigns the party's presidency; then Sidqi Pasha triumphs, and returns to the party's presidency; then the interior minister appears, charging and raging, and the provincial governors are found charging and raging too, and petitions are found in preparation, and deputies are found being pressed in secret to nominate a Union Party man as speaker of their chamber.

At this the People's Party grows angry, and its leader grows angry with it; there is reproach first, then complaint, then attack, and the prime minister — a kindhearted, upright man — is driven back, and summons the governors, and orders them to desist, and it seems to people that the disputants have inclined toward peace and settled into it; but what the governor holds back from, the minister may go and do himself, so petitions are prepared, and deputies are summoned to the interior minister's office or his home, and the minister asks them to proceed, and the reproach grows sharper, the complaint rises louder, the anger swells, the war resumes, questions are put forward, dust is stirred up, weapons are drawn; and scandals demolish one another, and disgraces foul the air

and fill it with evil, and the sky rains questions down upon the ministers, and the papers raise a cloud of dust in the face of the People's Party's leader, and Egyptians watch it all; their souls grieve, their lips smile despite themselves, and their faces turn away, in disdain and disgust — until, at last, both warring armies are utterly spent; wounds have multiplied in their ranks, and exhaustion has crept through their lines.

And the commanders sensed that peace was better, and so they inclined toward reconciliation once more, and pressed for it earnestly, and mediators went between the two chiefs, people who would gladly draw a curtain over this whole disgrace. And here the minister of traditions appears — and who can tell you what the minister of traditions is? Plain-spoken and bold, upright and guileless, he knows nothing of dodging, and cares nothing for evasion; he simply plunges ahead, leaving the reckoning to God, and does what he wishes and that is the end of it, just as he says what he wishes and that is the end of it. So when he met the peacemakers and the seekers of reconciliation, he laid the matter flat on the table, as the common phrase goes, and told the mediators: there will be no peace until you secure the speakership of the Chamber for Rifaat Pasha, and content yourselves, on Sidqi Pasha's behalf, with the presidency of the People's Party; for Rifaat Pasha sacrificed his ministerial post for the sake of the speakership, and to take it from him now would be an injustice to him, and to lift it from him would be an assault upon him, and the truth deserves to be followed, and God's justice must be established on earth; and it is written in the law of sale that whoever buys a thing and pays its price is entitled to take possession of it, and whoever turns him away from it, or seizes it from him, is a usurper; and Rifaat Pasha has purchased the speakership of the Chamber, paying the ministry of war as its price, and so his right to the speakership stands firm and clear, upheld by the law of sale composed years and years ago, and supported in this by statute; the law of sale stands between us and you, and statute is the judge of this dispute.

No sooner had the minister of traditions laid the matter flat on the table, defying the People's Party men, and making the application of the law of sale a condition for peace, than the People's Party men despaired of peace, and their leader ordered the negotiations broken off.

And in the midst of this, reinforcement arrived from London in support of the prime minister; and the leader of the People's Party met it with an answer that embarrassed both rivals equally — for the Daily Telegraph had written it, and Al-Ahram had translated it — and Sidqi

Pasha said: the message was cooked in Egypt, and served up to the people on the Daily Telegraph's table.

Then the day had scarcely advanced yesterday before the prime minister launched his attack — though the prime minister never attacks without first sending scouts ahead of him to spread word and sound the alarm; so Al-Muqattam and others reported that the prime minister would issue a statement, and the People's Party men's hearts pounded at the news of this statement; and then morning came, and the People's Party men had perhaps not slept all night, and Al-Ahram carried the bomb, and hurled it into the ranks of the People's Party men, and it was indeed a large and imposing bomb, and its blast was fierce and comical, frightening some people and making others laugh. And this bomb was truly significant, indicating a great deal, yet amounting to nothing in the end; it showed that the prime minister is no good at war, and that it is dangerous for him to enter the battlefield and take up weapons of combat, for he is liable to strike his own hand with his own blade, and wound himself with his own weapon. The prime minister said nothing of substance in his statement, except that this statement was merely a prelude to other statements still to come — so he has, in effect, declared open, unambiguous war; and war is better than waiting for war, and slaking one's thirst for blood is better than merely thirsting for it; but the prime minister, for all this, did say a great deal; he meant to wound Sidqi Pasha, and wounded himself instead, without a doubt, and the days will show whether he achieved anything against Sidqi Pasha or achieved nothing at all. The prime minister declared, as the minister of traditions had declared, and as the interior minister had whispered, that the ministry makes the law of sale the arbiter between itself and the People's Party, and wishes the speakership of the Chamber to belong to Rifaat Pasha alone, and not to Sidqi Pasha.

And it is only fair to note that the prime minister mentioned neither sale nor purchase, nor any sacrifice of a ministry for the sake of a speakership, but spoke instead of competence, integrity, and fairness toward the deputies; and who could possibly doubt Dr. Rifaat Pasha's competence, his integrity, his skill? Everyone still remembers his gentleness toward the parliamentary opposition, his fairness toward it despite the majority, his precision in counting votes and enforcing the law. But the strange thing is that the prime minister declared, in an official statement, that the ministry has a designated candidate for the speakership of the Chamber — and who ever claimed that ministries

nominate candidates for the speakership, and impose their candidates upon the deputies by force? In what article of the new constitution is any such thing to be found? In what branch of tradition is any such thing to be found? What business have ministers with the speakership of the deputies? What right have ministers to interfere in the deputies' affairs? And where is respect for the constitution, and recognition of the legislature's authority, if the executive authority allows itself to choose the speaker of the Chamber, and impose him upon the parliamentary majority by force, leaving that majority to choose between submission and a war that spares nothing and leaves nothing standing?

Do you see that the prime minister, meaning to strike down Sidqi Pasha, struck down himself instead, and meaning to defend tradition, violated tradition's own sanctity? Do you see that I was not mistaken when I said, at the start of this piece, that we are not yet done laughing, because the two formidable chiefs mean for us to go on laughing without pause? There is no doubt that the leader of parliament will defend parliament, that the founder of the present order will defend that order, that Sidqi Pasha will meet Abdel Fattah Pasha's bomb with a bomb worse than it, or at least its equal, that we will laugh at the second just as we laughed at the first, and that we are not done, and will not be done, laughing, until God permits us rest from the ministry and from the People's Party alike, and until God permits our affairs to return to a ministry that does not impose speakers upon the chambers of deputies, and that parliament does not allow to trespass against it to this degree, and to parties that respect themselves more than they respect the ministry, and are more jealous of the right than they are of power.