Promises

Al-Balagh, 30 August 1945.

Egyptians must acknowledge that God has granted them, in these days, noble masters who rule them with gentleness, great leaders who lead them toward glory, and skillful physicians who treat their souls and hearts for these grave maladies that beset peoples in times of danger, fear, and turmoil. A brief glance at what is happening around them in the near and distant lands of the world shows them this plainly, and makes it clear to them.

For the whole world is afraid, while they are secure; the whole world is in turmoil, while they are calm; the whole world wavers between dread and despair, while they are at ease, their hearts filled with confidence, doors of bright, shining hope opened before them. And this all has no source but that their masters are noble, ruling them with gentleness, that their leaders are great, leading them toward glory, and that their physicians are skillful, warding off from them every malady of soul and body alike.

These masters, who govern us in the finest manner by which peoples can be governed, have recognized that martial law is a grave malady that wastes the body, corrupts the heart, and weakens the soul, and that its cure cannot come through violent remedies, and that its reduction ought not to come suddenly, nor descend without sustained preparation and long waiting beforehand, and that the greatest good lies in treating this grave malady little by little — its medicine administered with gentleness and care, its pursuit undertaken with patience and deliberation. That is far more likely to make the remedy effective, the cure decisive, and the restoration of health and strength assured; and that is far more likely to spare the patient a relapse, and to see him through these dangerous complications that threaten to return him to a worse state than before.

Our masters, our leaders, and our physicians sensed, from the beginning of this year, that the fever of war had begun to subside little by little, and that the malady of martial law ought to subside little by little as well, and so they applied to our treatment a gentleness unmatched by any gentleness, and a caution unequaled by any caution. At first they consoled us with promises — and they are truthful when they speak, prompt when they promise, faithful when they pledge; so we believed them, and found reassurance in their promises and their pledges. And

hopes began to appear to us from afar, smiling at us with lips like strung pearls, gazing at us with eyes like piercing arrows — though arrows of love, mercy, security, and peace. And our hearts began to flutter with contentment and joy at this, and we found ourselves gazing, enraptured and eager, at these hopes that appeared and receded.

And our masters, our leaders, and our physicians would look upon us from afar, smiling when they saw what life these hopes stirred in our souls, and laughing when they saw what vanity this confidence spread among us, saying to one another: Do you not see this frail, feeble, sickly people?! Life has begun to creep back into them, little by little, but they are too weak to bear it except if it comes to them by measured degree; so let us be excessive in our gentleness toward them, and in our caution for their sake, and let us grant them freedom drop by drop, two drops at a time, drops upon drops, until we accustom them once more to freedom, after so long an estrangement from it, and train them once more to strength, after so long a separation from it. And so we lived on promises for days and days, and weeks and weeks.

Then our leaders and physicians sensed that we had become capable of bearing the first drop of freedom's drops, and so they relaxed the censorship on the newspapers, slightly and visibly, and stood watching us, observing what we would do and what we would leave undone. Then some of them said to others: It appears the patient is still too weak to bear this drop that has been administered to him; let us return him to hope, treat him with expectation, and console him with promises, lest he suffer a relapse. And lo, censorship returned as fierce as it had ever been in the days of hardship, and lo, hopes returned, appearing to the patient smiling, then receding from him, turning away — and the patient content with hope, satisfied with promises, trusting in the spirit of God and the mercy of the physicians.

Then the war laid down its burdens in Europe, and the peoples recovered their freedoms in full, and vanity toyed with the soul of the sickly Egyptian people, who imagined their freedom would be restored to them as it was restored to others. But their masters know of their condition what they themselves do not know, and gauge their capacity to endure better than they gauge it themselves. So they hold freedom back by force, and keep it from approaching this sickly people, lest it kill them; and they hold the people back by force as well, lest they rush toward freedom and kill themselves. They content themselves with permitting the people and freedom some exchange of distant glances, some trading

of signals, undertaken with patience, caution, and reserve — until, when a month and another month had passed, and it became clear to our noble masters, our great leaders, and our skillful physicians that this exchange of glances, this drawing near of signals, this longing of one lover for the other, caused no harm and posed no danger, some of them said to others: We can now restore to the patient that drop of freedom we had withheld from him — that is more likely to satisfy and distract him, and more likely to grant both him and us relief from this long and troublesome clamor.

And the Prime Minister came before Parliament one day, just as a physician comes one day to his patient, affecting a radiant countenance, graceful movement, and fluent speech. And the Prime Minister said to Parliament, in jest resembling earnestness, and in earnestness resembling jest: We have decided to restore freedoms to the people, so that they may speak and write, give speeches, assemble, and move about — but it would be well for them to be, in all of this, moderate, restrained, gentle with themselves, and solicitous of their own welfare. Just as a physician says to his patient: Today I bring you great news; I will permit you a little broth, and a little movement, and to sit up in your bed, or near it, for an hour of the day — but beware of exceeding the limit I have set for you, lest you overtax yourself, and are forced into a relapse, and then into the long illness, the heavy pain, and the hateful medicine you so dislike.

And the people rejoiced at the dose of freedom the Prime Minister permitted them, just as a patient rejoices at the cup of broth his physician permits him. But the Prime Minister had been jesting while feigning earnestness, or had been earnest while concealing jest, for scarcely had the people tasted freedom when they spoke out and made as if to move. And the Prime Minister grew afraid for the people, over their slight freedom and their trifling movement, and looked upon them with pity, tenderness, and mercy, then ordered them returned to where they ought to have remained settled — for it had become clear that they had not yet attained the strength that would allow them to speak without oversight, so the public prosecution took the place of censorship. It matters little that censorship remains lodged in the Ministry of the Interior, where it still resides, nor that the censors still frequent the newspaper offices, as they still do; what matters is that the speaker is punished if he exceeds the prescribed limit — and he is, praise God, punished at length, and harassed in comfort, if comfort and hardship can be combined at once. So there is investigation in the morning, and imprisonment in the evening,

release from prison today, and a return to prison tomorrow, and freedom granted only on condition that some sum of money, little or much, be held as surety for it, and searches of newspaper offices, and searches of journalists' homes. All of this, because the people are still sick, not yet having recovered the strength to enjoy freedom as peoples enjoy it who have been cured of their malady and attained full recovery.

And the Egyptian region, as people say, is temperate, its inhabitants enjoying clear skies, a serene heaven, this night that tempers its heat, and this sea, or these two seas, that make life in it a lasting paradise — so people say when they speak of the Egyptian region, and so they write in books; but they are entirely mistaken, there is no doubt of it, and the proof of this is the wretchedness Egyptians swallow in this deadly heat, this scorching summer.

And so it is, too, with regard to the Egyptian people: it is said that they are healthy, strong, intelligent, and energetic, but the actual facts say that their share of sickness is greater than their share of health, that their portion of weakness is larger than their portion of strength, that their allotment of heedlessness exceeds their allotment of intelligence, and that the lethargy forced upon them is more than the vigor granted to them. They are a listless, inert people, languid and withered, unable to bear great trials when they befall, unable to see their way through tangled problems — merely staring at them, stupefied and bewildered, as though stricken by a demon's touch. And our masters, our leaders, and our physicians have recognized the characteristics of the Egyptian region, and the characteristics of those who enjoy life in this region, and so they have governed them as they ought to be governed, with much gentleness, and led them as they ought to be led, with much deliberation, and treated them as they ought to be treated, with much caution.

We ought not, then, to be astonished to see martial law abolished throughout every land on earth, yet remaining in Egypt — for Egypt is not skilled at hastening her recovery from the malady of martial law, and recovery, for its part, is loath to hasten toward Egypt; Egypt is temperate, preferring mastery over speed, and detesting haste, for haste is of the devil. Nor ought we to be astonished to see the English grow impatient with our dawdling and delay, and negotiate with our government to end martial law, at least as it concerns their own subjects, if we ourselves love martial law and cling to it! We ought not to be astonished at this; for the English dwell in a cold region, untouched by desert from east or west, upon which the sun does not pour down a heat like molten lead. Nor,

indeed, ought we to be astonished to see the Sudan precede us in abolishing press censorship, then precede us in abolishing postal censorship, then precede us in resuming the life it lived before the war! For those who oversee the affairs of the Sudan know its circumstances, its capacity, and its readiness for freedom better than we, its Egyptian brothers, do. And our British allies, who manage the affairs of the Sudan whether we like it or not, manage it by their own reasoning, and by their English disposition, which is unaffected by the African climate, but affected by the British climate, and which treats illnesses according to the principles of English medicine, not the principles of Egyptian medicine.

Be that as it may, the war has laid down its burdens in the East, just as it laid them down in the West, and freedom has been restored to the peoples, and the peoples have hastened toward freedom. And the Egyptian people remained sick, looking to their masters, their leaders, and their physicians, while some of them said to others: Do you think they can bear another dose of freedom?! And others answered: Patience is better than haste, and caution is better than recklessness. And the ancient poet was not mistaken when he said:

"*Measure your foot's placement before you step, for he who climbs a slippery slope through carelessness will slip.*"

One of their number says: But the English demand that their own subjects be exempted from martial law, and it would not be proper for us to exempt them without also exempting Egyptians. And another replies: We shall exempt them all, but only after we have made our preparations and readied our means. And the strange thing is that they made no preparations and readied no means during these ten months they have spent in office, but it occurred to them that preparations and means could now be arranged, only after the war had laid down its burdens in both East and West alike, and after the Sudan had been exempted from martial law.

And the sickly Egyptian people cry out and cry out, filling the air with their clamor, nearly keeping our masters, our leaders, and our physicians awake at night. But our masters, our leaders, and our physicians must at least rest at night, for they toil by day at their great labors.

Some consolation, then, must be offered to the people, that their clamor might cease, and that the masters might rest. And how easy it is to console the people!

One more glance of freedom is granted to them, with much caution, and the Council of Ministers has indeed graciously done so — our thanks to it in full, our praise to it in full — by suspending postal censorship. We do not say "abolished," for it has not been abolished, any more than press censorship has been abolished; it has merely been suspended, in a manner that can be reversed, until martial law is abolished in the month of September, after the feast of al-Fitr, God willing. And September may well tolerate the abolition of martial law at its end, or its beginning, or its middle — or it may not tolerate this abolition at all, and may cast its heavy burden onto October instead, so that preparations must be made, and means readied, and caution taken against the emergencies of provisioning, and emergencies other than provisioning — and it is quite possible that the patient will resume his clamor, and keep the masters, the leaders, and the physicians awake once more, who must, after so long a vigil, sleep, and after so long a toil, rest.

And so, the remedy is close and simple: a single word spoken, and all things are set right, proceeding in the best manner that both rulers and ruled could wish.

Do you recall the ode al-Mutanabbi composed a thousand years ago, whose opening line I borrowed in last Sunday's piece? You would do well to read that ode in full, for you will find in it a line in which al-Mutanabbi described himself — and I assure you that contemporary Egyptians have never been described more truly, nor more strikingly, nor more fit to provoke sorrow and grief, than in this line:

"*I pass my evenings imagining myself rich, a man of hoarded wealth and open hand — I, the wealthy one, whose fortune is but promises.*"