

Permission

Al-Balagh, 13 December 1945.

Did I not tell you that the Council of Ministers, this time, prefers earnestness and firmness, and is determined to retain its right to sovereignty, authority, and supremacy, whole, complete, and undiminished? Did I not tell you that our ministers are believers, and that the believer is not bitten twice from the same hole, and that the prudent, wise man is the one who profits from the experience of time and the lessons of days gone by? And that our ministers had responded to the political committee last September, and had endorsed its view that that time was the most suitable time of all for beginning negotiations to win Egypt's rights — thereby whetting the political committee's appetite for them and for their authority, and leading it, and the people, to imagine that it had become the supreme power, calling and being answered, commanding and being obeyed, speaking and being heeded?

And His Excellency Sidqi Pasha was the quickest of the committee's members to seize this opportunity and profit from this precedent, imagining that he could address the ministers however he pleased — like a people shunned, speaking to a government that feared him — just as the priestess of Apollo used to speak to those who sought her oracle. The ministers noticed all this and grew impatient with it, and with the political committee, as though they had said to themselves: how do we escape obedience to Parliament only to find ourselves entangled in obedience to the political committee?! Yet events nonetheless forced them to resort to this political committee, in the hope that it might ward off harm from them and shield them from misfortune.

That was when the Minister of Finance did what he did: he gathered his party, took his grave decision, and stirred up that devastating storm — mild and gentle as it nonetheless was! At that point, some of those who spoke up said to the quarreling coalition members: take the political committee as an arbiter in whatever dispute has arisen between you. The quarreling coalition members were, of all people, the most eager to see matters set right, so that Makram Pasha might return to the Ministry of Finance, and al-Nokrashi Pasha might proceed with his contacts and disconnections, and his paving of the way to hasten the negotiations or to postpone them. No sooner had the proposal of arbitration been put forward than the whole happy era clung to this proposal, as a drowning

man on the verge of perishing clings to the slightest thing. But the political committee took itself seriously, as a matter of earnest business and not jest, and granted itself an authority that neither the laws nor the decrees had granted it; so it convened, and it heard, and it ruled — just as the Prime Minister himself ought to say, or as Caesar once said.

And the Minister of Finance emerged with his head held high, his dignity intact, his voice loud, his face beaming, walking the earth in high spirits, as though he meant to split the earth open, or to rise as tall as the mountains. For the political committee had ruled in his favor against his chief, and had decided, among other things, that negotiations must begin at once. Now, the political committee's decision had been issued during the night, and nocturnal words — as the common sayings go — are made of froth, or smeared with oil: they hold firm only while the cold of night and its darkness last, and once the sun rises with its Lord's light, the words of the night melt and scatter with the wind. And such was the fate of the decision the political committee took on the night of last Wednesday: Thursday's sun rose upon it and a third of it melted; then Friday's sun rose upon it and a second third melted; then Saturday's sun rose upon it, and its last third very nearly melted away entirely, had the Council of Ministers not met at noon that day and preserved half of that last third, surrounding it with a bit of ice in the hope that it might hold firm against the winter sun. And this ice might well have preserved what remained of the political committee's decision, had the ministers' discussion in Saturday's meeting not grown hotter and more blazing than the winter sun itself; so the whole of the political committee's decision melted away, and with it melted the ice that had surrounded it, and the Minister of Finance emerged with his head bowed, his voice faint, walking the earth gently, as though walking on air. For the Council of Ministers had ruled, in favor of its chief, against him and against the political committee altogether, and Makram Pasha found himself in need of a day, or several days, of seclusion, to recover his strength and regain his vigor, so that he might resume the struggle — the great struggle, of course, for Makram Pasha's struggle could never be anything but a great and grave struggle. What matters is that the Council of Ministers did not submit to the political committee's order, and would not consent to be ruled by it, nor to be ruled by the Minister of Finance.

It had thought that the political committee would take this business with indulgence and good humor — as it had taken the matter of the "proper time" last September — but when it saw earnestness and

firmness in it, it showed its earnestness and firmness in return! And yet the Council of Ministers will meet this evening to consider the political situation, and to decide whether the time is suitable or unsuitable for requesting the start of negotiations, and to decide whether it is a good thing or a bad thing to take this bold step. So what is the meaning of this third meeting? Has the Council of Ministers become content with itself, having delivered its harsh lesson to the political committee and to the Minister of Finance, and having made plain to everyone that it issues orders rather than receives them, and is obeyed rather than obeys — so that it has decided to resume its deliberations anew, of its own accord, neither at the political committee's bidding nor out of fear of the Minister of Finance's threats? Or has the Council of Ministers simply given itself some time to kill the question with study, examination, scrutiny, and inquiry, so as to settle it this evening with deliberation and insight? Or are there things people glimpse from afar, which they can scarcely put their hands upon? For we were told that a telegram arrived from London, sent by the Foreign Secretary to the Prime Minister, and that it was the reason for postponing the grave decision and for the great struggler's retreat into seclusion. Then we were told today that our ambassador in London has called more than once upon the British Foreign Secretary — whether he met the Secretary himself or his aides, I do not know. And it was rumored in the meantime that the British Foreign Secretary might take the long route to Moscow so as to stop in Cairo for a day, or part of a day; then we learned, in the end, that he would take the short route instead, and would not visit the East at all, though he might stop in Berlin.

We were told all this — so what does it mean? Its meaning is quite simple, requiring no great cleverness, nor any better interpretation. For it is not the political committee that will negotiate with al-Nokrashi Pasha over Egypt's rights, nor is it the Minister of Finance who will negotiate with al-Nokrashi Pasha over Egypt's rights; rather, it is Mr. Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary, with whom the negotiations will actually be conducted. And so it may be a matter of good taste, of delicate and gentle manners, indeed of good form and good tact, to ask the British Foreign Secretary's leave before approaching him to request that negotiations begin, sooner or later. And the wise have said: the resolute man is the one who gauges where to place his foot before he steps, so as not to stumble or fall. It is, then, a matter of good taste and political skill that we should ask Mr. Bevin's leave to approach him with this request; and if he grants us leave, we shall submit the request, and Makram Pasha will

be satisfied, and the political committee will be satisfied, and matters will proceed to their end; and if he does not grant us leave, we shall set the political committee and the Minister of Finance before the bare, plain facts, and lay the responsibility upon them, and say to them: choose between postponing the negotiations until the English permit them, or the collapse of the happy era from its very foundations. And there is no doubt that they will then choose to postpone the negotiations until the English permit them.

I believe the matter is perfectly clear, with no ambiguity and no obscurity about it, and that this week that has passed between the political committee's decision and this evening's meeting of the Council of Ministers is nothing but a week of asking leave. The leave could have been requested and granted, or refused, within a day or two; but the British Foreign Secretary's mind is not idle, nor is he wholly given over to the problems of the Egyptians — he is occupied with other problems that may well be graver and more complicated than the problems of the Egyptians. In any case, he has been asked for leave to be approached with the request for negotiations, and he will either grant it or refuse it, as we shall see this evening or tomorrow morning — and that will be enough.

And thus the Prime Minister too has followed the path of wisdom and foresight, learning now whether to advance or to hold back, whether to negotiate or not to negotiate! Meanwhile, reports proliferate in East and West that an agreement has been reached between the British and the French to evacuate Syria and Lebanon together, soon. How fortunate our Syrian and Lebanese brothers are, and how fortunate we are too, at this great blessing that will soon be granted them, God willing! For they will win the evacuation of their country before we have even negotiated with the English over the evacuation of ours, and they will win the evacuation of two great powers from their country before we even dare to negotiate with a single great power over the evacuation of ours — because we are a wise people, who prefer patience and deliberation, and ought not to get ahead of events, nor to rush matters. For fate has already decreed what must inevitably come to pass; and if fate has written that the English shall evacuate Egypt, they will evacuate her one day, whether we negotiate with them over it or not! And if fate has written that the English shall remain in Egypt, they will remain, whether we negotiate with them over the evacuation or not!

And so we are right to take our time and proceed deliberately, and we may well be right to prefer repose, and to leave it to fate alone to bring about the evacuation of the English from Egypt, should that evacuation be written in the Preserved Tablet.

Yes, we must rejoice sincerely, and take heartfelt delight in our Syrian and Lebanese brothers' winning of the evacuation of foreign armies from their countries, and wish them still more freedom, dignity, and honor, and pray to God, Mighty and Exalted, that He touch us with a wing of His mercy, so that He may join us to our Syrian and Lebanese brothers on their path to honor, dignity, and independence.

And the strange thing is that our Prime Minister is utterly content with himself, utterly confident in his policy, convinced that he is serving Egypt in the best way she could possibly be served! Has he not preserved order within her, and compelled her to silence, and to give herself over to her own life, content with it and satisfied with it?! And what more could Egypt want than that her sons should live fed, when they find food, and clothed, when they find clothing?!

Yet the Prime Minister is not the only one content with himself, for our English allies are content with him too — have you not read the Times's praise of him?! And when the English are content, the world smiles and hopes brighten, for it is the contentment of the English that counts and commands attention, and it is the anger of the English that must be guarded against and reckoned with. As for Dr. Hamid Mahmoud and his associates resigning from the Prime Minister's own party, aggrieved at his stance on the Egyptian question — that is a matter of very little consequence indeed. What truly matters, above all else, is that the Banu Tamim should not grow angry. Did not the ancient poet say:

*If the Banu Tamim grow angry at you, you would think that all mankind
had grown angry?!*

And the Banu Tamim, of course, are our English allies.