

Negotiation

Taha Hussein

jaridat al-Siyasa, 7 July 1932

There were, in the palace, chambers and rooms: in this one gold, in that one silver; in this one pearl, in that one ruby; in this one silk, in that one brocade. And the young man wandered through the chambers and the rooms, passing from one wonder to the next, from one astonishment to the next bewilderment, until he had reached the ninety-ninth; and when he wished to enter the hundredth, the room that completed the set, his guide counseled him not to, but he refused, and the guide pressed his counsel upon him, and he pressed his refusal upon the guide, until, when there remained no hope of turning him from entering that room, the guide opened the door for him; and he entered, and found in the room nothing but harm.

And the three brothers came, in the end, to three roads: one the road of safety, another the road of regret, and the third the road of the man who goes forth and does not return. The first took the road of safety, and met on it great trials and terrors, but returned safe and happy in the end; the second took the road of regret, and met on it great trials and terrors, and had scarcely failed to return when his brother rescued him, so that he came back, but with griefs in his heart that never left him until he died; and the third went straight ahead, heeding nothing, though his two brothers had counseled him to think and to take his time, but he refused them both and followed his own head, until the ghoul devoured him.

The French have an old song, sweet in its melody, sorrowful in its tune, somber in its meaning, which darkens the singer's voice whenever he sings it, and in which this frightening warning recurs again and again: My friend, if you will take my advice, do not go into the Black Forest.

But the Prime Minister, it appears, is determined to go into the Black Forest, where there are fearsome, ravenous wolves, and ghouls lying in wait for their prey. Warnings flutter about the Prime Minister from every side, urging him not to enter this Black Forest, but he refuses, and insists on plunging into it. Between him and a number of the forest's wolves and ghouls there is an old friendship, a long-standing affection, and mutual benefits exchanged; and so the wolves and the ghouls counsel

their friend to hold back, and assure him that there is nothing in going forward but harm — yet he refuses to do anything but go forward, as if in despair, unable either to turn back or to stand still where he is. And yet the wolves have told the truth, and the ghouls have counseled rightly; and behind this truthful, well-meaning company there stands another company, burning with thirst for blood, writhing with hunger for flesh, having no friend and no intimate but these ravenous, hollow bellies that nothing satisfies or slakes but the prey's flesh and blood.

It appears that the Prime Minister has wearied of power, grown indifferent to it, and resolved to prove the slanderers right, to fulfill the hopes of his detractors and informers, and to gratify the Wafdists, the Liberal Constitutionalists, and the independents, by resigning — or else why this insistence on negotiation, this need for it, this eagerness toward it, when his own sincere well-wishers, both Egyptian and English, press him not to, and implore him to prefer deliberation and to practice patience?

It is said that among the Prime Minister's own colleagues there are those who view the idea of negotiation with foreboding, who shrink from it, who frown upon it, and who see it as the surest road to bankruptcy and the easiest path to resignation. Whether the reports are true or false, the English themselves press the Prime Minister not to insist on negotiation or throw himself headlong into it; they tell him gently that they are occupied with other matters; they tell him, kindly and by way of advice, that they fear his rivals and opponents, and worry for the treaty's sake on account of these rivals and opponents; they assure him, firmly and sincerely, that the majority of the English Parliament is staunchly conservative, and that the majority of the Egyptian nation is staunchly extreme, and that this conservative majority can grant only little, while this extreme majority can accept only much. Then they tell him plainly, bluntly, and somewhat coldly, that he cannot begin where Nahhas left off, and that the utmost he can hope for is what was once offered to Tharwat Pasha, God rest him. Then they return to courtesy, to gentleness and solicitude, saying to him: had we known you would remain in power, we would have negotiated and concluded a treaty with you; but your rivals still stand, and their edge is still sharp; it is better for you and for us that we set negotiation and treaty aside for now.

The English shape these forms for the Prime Minister, adopt these colors toward him, and direct these very words at him — yet he refuses to do anything but negotiate.

What is it, then, in this Black Forest, that tempts the Prime Minister to this troubling courage, this frightening boldness?

One of two things. Either — as his sincere well-wishers, privy to the hidden springs of affairs, as the men of politics say, claim — the Prime Minister is deceiving himself, believing that his position in Egypt has become settled, that the people have become loyal to him and submitted to his authority, that he has finished organizing domestic independence and secured himself against the opposition, and that he is now impatient with the English, wishing to be rid of them as he has rid himself of the Liberal Constitutionalists and the Wafdists, so as to become the sole master of affairs and the final word in both Egypt's internal and external life — and that this is why he insists on negotiation and presses so hard for it. These people say the Prime Minister thinks well of the English, believing he has some claim upon them, and that he can hope for more from them than his rivals ever achieved; and so he goes forward into negotiation, insisting and pressing. But the English, for their part, believe the Prime Minister is their friend, that they have done him great favors, and that if he has served them in Egypt, smoothing what was difficult and easing what was hard, then they for their part have backed him, supported him, and secured his position on the banks of the Nile — and they therefore hope from him only that he be pliant and yielding in the negotiations, and that he not overreach as Muhammad Mahmud and Nahhas overreached.

And these people, who love the Prime Minister and are sincerely devoted to him, expect no good from the negotiations, for they know, with certain knowledge, that the Prime Minister might well accept less than Nahhas and Muhammad Mahmud accepted, and yet be unable to face the Egyptians with it, while the English — having come to know their friend and their man, as they say — will never offer him what they offered his rivals among the Wafdists and the Liberal Constitutionalists.

For this reason these people, friends of the Prime Minister, are grieved to see him desiring negotiation, or being driven toward it.

There is, however, another group, crafty and skillful, who know the hidden springs of affairs just as well as those I have just mentioned, but who know, besides these hidden springs, something still further down, something a man cannot say to himself while awake, but only dreams of in his sleep. These people say the Prime Minister is too clever to deceive himself about his position being settled in Egypt, too skillful to imagine

himself capable of resolving the economic crisis, and too shrewd to accept for himself the fate of those ministries that power wears down and authority consumes, which die in their beds as though struck by consumption; and so he seeks a way out for himself, and wishes to find that way out in the negotiations. I do not know which of these two camps speaks the truth, but I see the negotiations as a Black Forest, and fear for the Prime Minister and for Egypt should he plunge into this forest under these circumstances; and I believe the question of the negotiations is one of those questions before which party politics ought to fall away, and on which the nation's voice ought to unite — and so I set aside every quarrel between the Prime Minister and his opponents, and look only to the negotiation between Egyptians and English. It would therefore be a sin for the Prime Minister to go forward into negotiation unless he is confident he will achieve what his rivals were unable to achieve. For should the Prime Minister go forward into negotiation and Egypt lose what Muhammad Mahmud and Nahhas had gained, that would be a squandering of the nation's efforts, a waste of the people's strength, a step backward, and a trifling with the rights Egyptians have won — and it would be better for the Prime Minister to remain where he is, and let his ministry be struck by consumption and die after months or years, than to attempt a hero's way out for himself, negotiating, then rejecting what the English offer, then resigning because he did not succeed in the negotiation.

For the nation does not expect him to triumph in his negotiation, nor rest assured at his venturing into it, and will never see him as a hero, however much negotiating he may conclude; it will instead record against him that the Liberal Constitutionalists and the Wafdists had already advanced the matter a step or two, and that he set it back several steps. It would therefore be better for the Prime Minister to remain where he is, not to plunge into this Black Forest, nor to expose his own flesh and blood to these wolves and ghouls. It would be better for the Prime Minister, having visited every chamber and every room of the palace, not to enter the hundredth room, the one that completes the set, for he will find in it nothing but harm. It would be better for the Prime Minister not to take the road of regret, nor the road of the man who goes forth and does not return, but to take the road of safety — and the road of safety is that he resign now. God forgive me, what am I saying? Am I falling into the very trap the opposition has fallen into, asking the Prime Minister to resign? No — I only wish for the Prime Minister that he not take the road of the man who goes forth and does not return, and that he then choose

between the other two roads: if he wishes, he may take the road of safety and resign now; and if he wishes, he may take the road of regret and remain in power until his ministry dies of consumption, and a national ministry rescues Egypt from the catastrophe.

I hope the Prime Minister will believe me: in the tales of the Thousand and One Nights, in the stories grandmothers tell, and in French folk songs, there are lessons and warnings from which everyone may profit — even prime ministers.