

Lunch

Al-Balagh, 1 November 1945.

At last God has granted inspiration to His Excellency Mahmoud Fahmy al-Nokrashi Pasha, the Prime Minister, and he spoke words that fill hearts with delight and joy, that fill souls with light and radiance, and that set Egypt trembling with such rapture that this rapture very nearly amounts to an earthquake — one we hope God will spare Egypt its dangers and its aftershocks.

Yes, God has granted inspiration to the Prime Minister, and he spoke splendid, masterful words, that watered the minds of journalists after a long thirst, and quenched the burning thirst of Egyptians after the mere echo of rumor had nearly destroyed them and brought them to ruin. For the Council of Ministers met yesterday on a grave matter, a very grave matter indeed, and then, once the Council adjourned, the journalists were summoned into the presence of the Prime Minister, and they came forward, their hearts leaping in their breasts, their tongues dancing in their mouths, their saliva drying in their throats. Then the Prime Minister addressed them, and his words fell upon their thirsting souls and parched hearts as rain falls upon barren ground long deprived of water.

And how could journalists not rejoice, how could Egyptians not delight, now that General Gyte has graciously invited the Prime Minister to lunch with Field Marshal Alanbrooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff of the British Empire's forces? Have you seen these lofty titles the Prime Minister was invited to lunch alongside? Is there not, in this gracious invitation, an honor for the Prime Minister and a tribute to the Egyptian people in whose name the Prime Minister speaks? Is this lunch not worthy of having its news read out to the Council of Ministers, and broadcast to all Egyptians? And the matter did not stop at lunch, for the two great men continued talking after lunch — while awaiting coffee, while drinking it, and after drinking it — a long, friendly conversation on matters of concern to both countries, those two countries being Egypt, whose ministry al-Nokrashi Pasha heads, and the British Empire, whose General Staff Field Marshal Alanbrooke heads.

Then the matter suddenly stops right there, and something is better than nothing, nor should Egypt expect anything more than this; it is enough for her to know that the two great men took lunch together at one table, and afterward held a long, friendly conversation on matters

concerning both countries. But what was this conversation about? Was it about political affairs? But Field Marshal Alanbrooke is not a statesman, and discussing politics is not his business, nor do we know that the English entrust military men with political conversations! Or was it about military affairs? But His Excellency al-Nokrashi Pasha is not a man of war or combat, and has no knowledge of military affairs, little or much — so what, then, was the conversation about?! Or, to put it more precisely, what might the purpose of this conversation have been? Was it to lay groundwork for negotiations? Was it to spread reassurance in the Prime Minister's own mind? Or was it simply to unsettle the nerves?

And what would one of the great men of England wish to discuss with the head of the Egyptian ministry, upon meeting him and sitting together at the lunch table? Is it not natural that the conversation between them should turn to matters concerning both countries, whether the moment happens to be one of pressing for Egyptian rights, or one of neglecting these rights, forgetting them, and turning away from them? And is it even possible for a man like Field Marshal Alanbrooke to visit Egypt and not meet the Prime Minister, not sit with him at lunch or dinner, whatever the timing of this visit, and whatever circumstances surround it?

The Field Marshal visited Athens before visiting Cairo, and there is no doubt he met there with the Regent of the throne over lunch or dinner, and held with him a long, friendly conversation on matters concerning both countries; yet the Regent of the throne felt no need to issue a communiqué, or anything resembling a communiqué, about this meeting and this conversation — because the Regent of the throne in the land of Greece, who is also presently acting as Prime Minister, regards it as entirely natural that such a meeting should take place, and that this long, friendly conversation on matters concerning both countries should occur within it; and because the Regent of the throne is too occupied with the affairs of the Greek people to busy himself issuing communiqués over a natural, ordinary matter. And this is the whole difference between our own Prime Minister and the head of the Greek government: one of them — the Greek president — is burdened with many things he must do, many things he must say, and many conversations he must conduct; while the other, the head of the Egyptian government, has empty hands and an empty mind, with no concern to spoil his day or keep him awake at night, and nothing to say to Egyptians — and yet Egyptians still insist that he tell them something. And the Prime Minister has striven and toiled,

searched and investigated, thought and calculated, yet found nothing to say to Egyptians, because he found nothing to do for Egyptians; then God provided for him, was gentle with him, and arranged for him a convenient circumstance: he met with Field Marshal Alanbrooke, and was thereby able to broadcast to Egyptians the news of this meeting.

And the strange thing is that the Prime Minister was content to invite only his fellow ministers, without inviting the political committee to have this great news read out to it, and to consult it on its hidden depths and secrets, its premises and its consequences. Would he perhaps favor the Council of Ministers with political secrets withheld from the supreme political committee? Or does he consider the matter too trivial, too insignificant, to warrant convening the members of this supreme political committee? And what might His Excellency Sidqi Pasha's own view of this great event be? Would he accept it calmly and bear it patiently? Or would he find it so intolerable that he would resign from a body from which secrets are withheld, and from which the realities of high politics are concealed — resigning, with the news of his resignation broadcast in the newspapers, only for the Prime Minister to then invite him to a lunch, or a dinner, or a cup of coffee, around which would revolve a long, friendly conversation just like the one held between the Prime Minister and the Field Marshal, after which Sidqi Pasha would reconsider his resignation — either because al-Nokrashi Pasha convinced him he had been mistaken, or because al-Nokrashi Pasha convinced him he had been right all along — and then matters would proceed just as they proceeded after last week's resignation.

And the truth is that Egyptians are in need of such amusements, to distract themselves from this stagnant, inert, lifeless existence, which accomplishes nothing and signifies nothing, and which has been imposed upon Egyptians in these harsh days.

Sidqi Pasha must resign, and al-Nokrashi Pasha must coax him back until he reconsiders his resignation, and the humorists among the journalists must find something with which to entertain their readers. Woe to this people, afflicted with such great statesmen and such mighty leaders — they truly burden it beyond all reason, truly toy with it while it stands in need of their earnest effort; but this is how destiny has already run its course, and how fate has already decreed.

For the people must be kept occupied with this idle talk, away from their sacred rights, and must be distracted from their hopes and wishes

by Sidqi Pasha's resignation on Thursday afternoon and his reconsideration of this resignation a few hours, or many hours, after submitting it.

And after all this, had al-Nokrashi Pasha had anything more to say than his meeting with the Field Marshal, he would have said it; and had he had anything more to do than lunching with the Field Marshal, he would have done it. But the man has given all the effort he has to give, has offered the best of what he has, or all of what he has — and even the loveliest tobacconist girl can give no more than what she has, as the French say. And God does not burden people beyond what they can bear. Our Prime Minister has exerted his entire capacity: he lunched with the Field Marshal, and held with him a long, friendly conversation on matters concerning both countries, and then conveyed news of this to the Council of Ministers; and since the ministry is reproached for its silence, and criticized for falling short in publicizing the weighty works it undertakes, it was suggested to the Prime Minister, in all likelihood, that he summon the journalists into his presence and broadcast to them this momentous news — and he did so, and God burdens no soul beyond its capacity, so the Egyptian people must be content, indeed must rejoice, indeed must fill the air with cheering, applause, and whistling too. For the Prime Minister has lunched with Field Marshal Alanbrooke, and held with him a long, friendly conversation on matters concerning both countries.

Nor should the Egyptian people overlook the great significance of this lunch; for another lunch took place in London, and there is no doubt that our own ambassador likewise held a long, friendly conversation with his guest, Mr. Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary, on matters concerning both countries — a lunch in Cairo and a lunch in London, a lunch entirely consistent with the principles of diplomacy, entirely consistent with the principles of elegant statesmanship: our Prime Minister a guest in Cairo, our ambassador a host in London, and the only difference between the two lunches is that the Cairo lunch was hosted by a British military commander, not by the British Ambassador or anyone representing him.

And the explanation for this difference is quite simple: the British Foreign Secretary is a man of politics, not a man of war, and so he lunches with the Egyptian ambassador and conducts with him the long, friendly conversation; whereas our own Prime Minister is a man of military skill, adept in advance and retreat, in boldness and restraint, and so he lunches with the Field Marshal and conducts with him the long,

friendly conversation.

Is there no end to this nonsense? Has the time not come for our statesmen to return to their consciences, and to look at the statesmen around them, and to reckon that they are on the verge of squandering opportunities for Egypt that cannot be recovered if they are not seized now? Has the time not come for the Prime Minister to spend some morning, or some evening, alone with himself, and ask himself about this great and terrifying triumph he keeps winning these days? He triumphs over himself, distracting himself with the trappings of office from the realities of Egyptian life — and he was once known to be ardently patriotic, impetuous in demanding rights. Can holding office truly soften one's temperament to such a degree?! He triumphs over his own nation, a great and terrifying triumph indeed, when he distracts it with trivialities from the struggle for its rights, and diverts it with these conversations that accomplish nothing toward achieving its hopes — at this very time so supposedly suitable for achieving them.

I wish al-Nokrashi Pasha would spend an hour alone with himself, weighing his present position against his position in the aftermath of the First World War. He would then be struck with the utmost alarm, the utmost dread, and would know that holding power can change some souls, and can turn some people away from the straight path, driving them into a great deal of crookedness.

But His Excellency is too occupied to take stock of himself, to retreat into solitude, and to weigh his former self against his present one. Perhaps he wishes to remain in office to preserve the present era from collapse, and in the collapse of the present era lies danger indeed. It harbors this great danger that the English may not welcome, nor welcome the ministry's Egyptian supporters either. For the collapse of the present era would restore to the people their freedom and their vigor, their drive to demand their rights and their insistence on this demand until they attain what they want — and this is something the English may not welcome just now, and something a certain faction of Egyptians, sadly, may not welcome either.

Let the present era endure, then, and let the demand for rights be postponed, and let the Prime Minister lunch with Field Marshal Alanbrooke, and let the Egyptian people take pleasure in this great honor, which is grander and mightier than the attainment of their rights. Has their Prime Minister not lunched with the Field Marshal, and held

with him a long, friendly conversation?