Absence …

Taha Hussein

Kawkab al-Sharq, 20 January 1934

Its radiant suns and its glittering stars absented themselves from Cairo in the days of the feast; so its sky grew dark, though it had every right to shine, and its ground lay barren, though it had every right to flourish, and the feast grew listless in it, though it had every right to be lively and vigorous and fill people with vigor and life. And these radiant suns and glittering stars are not the men of the Wafd and its leaders; for these are people who may go and may come, and no sky darkens at their going, and no sky brightens at their coming; these are people no one knows and who know no one, whom no one hastens to see off when they leave, and whom no one stirs to welcome when they arrive. They are people like you and me, whom no one notices, and the likeliest guess is that they do not notice themselves; their moving about and their staying put come to the same thing. No — the radiant suns, the glittering stars, the luminous planets, and the shining lamps are our extraordinary ministers, over whom the cities of Egypt compete and the villages of the countryside contend; they touch no city but it is distinguished above other cities, they alight in no village but it rises above other villages; ease accompanies them wherever they go, and good tidings race ahead of them to wherever they are bound, so that their coming is the best of all good things, one fit to sharpen rivalry and swell contention.

They absented themselves from Cairo in the days of the feast, and so the feast absented itself from it; they scattered through the cities and the villages, and so the feast scattered with them through the cities and the villages, each taking with him a portion to distribute among the people, and to divide up amongst them. The prime minister, the good man, had the largest share of the feast; he took with him half of it, or two-thirds, as a gift to the people of Upper Egypt; and scarcely had he reached Aswan when it turned wholly into a feast. Aswan was loyal and mindful of kindness shown it, grateful for its blessing and acknowledging what was due; it received the prime minister with the finest reception, and held for him the most splendid celebration; and scarcely had he reached its hotel when the foreigners there stood for him, raising their hats, shouting until their cheering reached the vault of heaven.

Meanwhile the leader of the Wafd was moving between Samannoud, Mansoura, and Cairo; and no one took notice of him, no one celebrated him, no foreigners raised their hats to him, and no cheering filled the air around him; for the leader of the Wafd carried with him to the people neither a feast nor any part of one, but was merely an ordinary man discharging ordinary duties, so people left him to his duties. And the ministry sensed the danger of this journey the good man had undertaken into the far reaches of Upper Egypt, and the administration grew alarmed at the people's rush toward the prime minister, and their cheering for him; so the ministry took precautions, and the administration made ready, and protected the people from infatuation with the prime minister, and protected the prime minister from the people's devotion to him and their throwing themselves upon him.

Aswan and Luxor witnessed days no city of Egypt had witnessed on any of its great days; soldiers were massed in Aswan by the thousand, trenches were dug in Aswan, long and wide and deep, and the prime minister resolved to perform the Friday prayer in a mosque he had chosen; so many were the people who resolved to pray in that mosque that the ministry was compelled to order it closed and turn the worshippers away from it, to guard against disturbance and to head off disaster and incident.

And though the ministry expended an effort no ministry had ever expended, and massed troops as had never been massed before; and though the troops were vigorous and bold, wielding sticks and whips without restraint; and though the trenches were fearsome, and though precaution had never, on any day or in any place, reached what it reached in Aswan — still the multitudes of people managed to storm the city outright, to drive the troops back, to celebrate the prime minister in defiance of the ministry, to win the prime minister a victory over the ministry, to set down against the ministry a day it would remember against itself, and to prove to everyone that the ministry may triumph over the ministry, that the government may be routed before the government, and that the people are stronger, greater, mightier, and more vigorous than the minister of the interior can hold back, however great his strength and force, from showing the love he harbors, and the esteem and reverence he conceals, for the prime minister.

And thus the people of Aswan gave the ministry yesterday an eloquent lesson in humility toward power as it stands; they taught it that humility is a virtue on the condition that it not exceed its bounds, for

exceeding them turns it into a failing, bringing nothing to those who possess it but disappointment and defeat; and they taught it that it was bound not to overindulge in boasting of its strength, nor to go to excess in scorning the strength of the people; for the ministry knows full well that the people love it and are enamored of it, and it wishes to turn the people back from this love and this infatuation, and to make them economize in both; but peoples are not turned away from love by force, nor made to economize their admiration and esteem against their will. And what harm is it to the ministry that the people's love for it, and their infatuation with it, should be made plain, and that clear proof should stand that the men of the Wafd are a people who dream?

The newspapers published the news of the good man's visit to Aswan, and the news of the Wafd leader's visit to Mansoura — and what news it was! The prime minister is celebrated by the people in defiance of the ministry, while the Wafd leader turns right and left, looks ahead and looks behind, and finds no one to welcome him when he arrives, and no one to see him off when he returns. And the strange thing is that there are those among the people who doubt that the good man spoke the truth and said what was right, when he announced to the People's Party on the feast day that his ministry, like Sidqi Pasha's ministry, had never on any day been stronger than it is these days. They doubt this and refuse to believe it, and the Wafd leader takes pains to cast the prime minister's statement into doubt and suspicion.

And the Wafd leader's affair is strange; for he imagined that what befell the prime minister in Aswan had befallen him in Mansoura; he believed that the troops massed had been massed in Mansoura to hold the people back from him and hold him back from the people, that the trenches dug had been dug in Mansoura to block the road before him and before those who sought to greet him, that the bridges raised had been raised in Mansoura to make the river a barrier between him and those who sought him and were devoted to him, and that these sticks and whips that rained down upon heads and bodies, shattering bones and scorching skin, had rained down only upon the people of Mansoura, to scatter them away from him and to stand between them and gathering around him.

The Wafd leader believed this, and spoke of it to three or four of the men he met, in a speech published in the morning and republished in the evening; but had the Wafd leader thought, weighed the matter, and taken heed, he would have known that none of this had happened to him or to his companions, and that none of it had been arranged for him or for his

companions, but that all of it had happened to the prime minister and the prime minister's admirers, and all of it had been arranged for the good man and those infatuated with the good man.

The Wafd leader returned to Cairo yesterday, and found no one at its station, and no one took notice of him in its streets; then he went to his house, telling people that the people of Cairo had hastened to welcome him and had celebrated meeting him; but what the Wafd leader had in fact seen was what will happen tomorrow, when the prime minister returns to Cairo, and the people of Cairo hasten to welcome him, and celebrate him in a celebration that will compel the police to wield sticks and whips upon heads and bodies.

I do not know where the people's celebration of the prime minister would have ended, had the general assembly of the People's Party met on the feast day and elected him president of the People's Party in Sidqi Pasha's place; the earth would then have shaken with its full shaking, and the people would have celebrated the good man with unending celebrations: some because he is a good man, and Egypt loves good men; some because he is the prime minister, and Egypt holds the heads of ministries in high esteem; and some because he is the president of the People's Party, and Egypt melts with love for the presidents of the People's Party. But the good man was gentle with Egyptians and tender toward Egypt; so he postponed the meeting of the general assembly, and postponed his own election as president of the People's Party, lest Egypt be carried beyond itself, and exceed, in celebrating him, the bounds of composure, reason, and wisdom.

And people ask afterward about the reason for this postponement; and since this reason has now appeared, wonder ought to cease. They ask, too, about the date the good man has fixed for the meeting of the general assembly and his election as president of the People's Party in Sidqi Pasha's place; and some, in answering, say that this may come before the High Commissioner's return to Egypt, and may come after the High Commissioner's return to Egypt; and that the good man may consider the presidency of the People's Party too great a thing for himself, out of humility before God, or that the good man may consider himself too great a thing for the People's Party, rising above what does not befit good men, so that the general assembly never meets, and the People's Party never elects itself a president. And what need has the People's Party of a president? Parties need presidents only when they expect a long survival. However this may be, the good man's absence

from the city of Cairo has grown long, and Cairo's longing for its good man has grown intense; so let the heavens hasten in their turning, and let the train hasten on its return, and let Cairo welcome its good man tomorrow, happy with him, he happy with it, and let this absence — however short it truly is — be brought to its end, long as it has felt.

And who knows? Perhaps the prime minister will reach Cairo before his time, perhaps the people will be enamored of him and become infatuated with their love for him; and the minister of the interior will fear for them, and for him, and will snatch him away from among them, and return him to us by a swift train — for the minister of the interior has his abduction every winter, and who among people more deserves to be abducted than the prime minister?!