An Evening's Talk

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Violent it was on Monday, and calm it was on Thursday; and the source of that violence and this calm was perhaps that the ministers were its subject on Monday, while the interests of the state were its subject on Thursday. For when the evening talk and its discourse touch upon persons and their doings, it grows fierce and heated, and argument and strife multiply within it, until violence and excess in quarrel all but spoil it. But when the evening talk touches upon public affairs, its matter is light and its course easy: words are spoken, words are heard, and then the company of talkers disperses in good order. And so it was that violence overran the deputies' evening talk on Monday night, when a group of them questioned the good man and his two colleagues about what Sidqi Pasha and his associates had alleged against them, and what certain newspapers had reported of their threatening the deputies with the dissolution of their chamber should they not accept the great dictator's resignation. Violence overran it, and there was uproar and clamor, there was the clapping of hands and the stamping of feet, there was struggle and defense, there was the loss of composure even among the even-tempered, and there were difficulties and questions which the finance minister resolved with an interpretation of the executive authority, declaring that it was the ministry, that the ministry was the king, and that the king was the ministry. Then the war minister made this still clearer and plainer, when he declared that the finance minister tends to blunder into talk. As for the deputies' evening talk on Thursday night, it was sweet and mild and pleasant, limpid, shaded by calm and adorned with harmony. A number of deputies spoke in criticism of the government; the government listened to them smiling, and the government's supporters listened to them rejoicing. Then the good man rose to answer his opponents; the opponents listened to him smiling, and his supporters listened to him with conviction and applause. And the ministers and deputies departed, every one of them content with himself, at ease with his work, certain that he had discharged his duty with competence and skill, with mastery and finesse, with sincerity and devotion. And Egypt rose and read the news of this calm evening talk just as it had read the news of that violent one; it smiled at this as it had smiled at that, and passed by this as it had passed by that, preoccupied

from one no less than the other by a pain none shares with it, and weighed down by cares none lightens for it.

And the deputies and senators will gather, talking by day and conversing by night, and in their talk and their evening gatherings there will be violence, and there will be gentleness, and Egypt will look upon these conversations and these evening gatherings smiling at them, turning away from them, despairing of them, until God brings to pass a matter that was destined to be.

And though people agreed that Monday's evening talk was violent because it touched upon the persons of the ministers, and Thursday's was calm because it touched upon the people's interests, some noticed that the advice the good man had been pleased to offer the deputies on Monday had borne fruit by Thursday. For the good man had alerted his supporters and his opponents alike to the fact that foreigners were watching them and taking note of everything; so the deputies took heed of this, and were careful yesterday to let nothing be held against them by foreigners. And it was as though the good man had been reading from some page of the unseen when he offered the deputies this advice; for two English members of parliament attended yesterday's session, and who knows? Perhaps their pure blessing and their potent secret had some effect on the calm that settled over the chamber. There is no doubt that these two members compared, yesterday, the chamber of deputies that holds its evening talk in Cairo with the one that holds its evening talk in London.

And there is no doubt that they became certain, yesterday, that our chamber is the wittiest of chambers and our deputies the wittiest of deputies; for yesterday's session was truly a witty one, in which contention appeared only in measure, as salt appears in food, or as grammar appears in the finance minister's speech. Our prime minister was calm and composed, tactful and graceful, more accomplished and more skillful in all of this than the prime minister of the English. He made his way to the podium deliberately, climbed its steps deliberately, and delivered his statement deliberately, saying everything and saying nothing; and the deputies were satisfied with everything, and satisfied with nothing, for they had heard nothing. But the two English members did not understand, alas, much or little of what the supporters and opponents had said; and had they understood, they would not have hesitated to apply for Egyptian nationality, that they might enjoy the sweet life in this sweet country, where the speech from the throne speaks

of bees' honey, and the opposition speaks of bees' honey, and the sweetness of honey mingles there with the talk of deputies and ministers, until all this talk turns to honey. And they say the English love honey; and had these two English members understood yesterday's talk of honey, in the speech from the throne and in the opposition's reply to it, they would not have traded life in Egypt for life in any other country. And the English, just as they love honey, love the eloquence and rhetoric of orators, and are especially fond of that mocking banter which none can carry off so well as they, and none can master so perfectly as they, above all in a chamber of deputies. Had the two members understood our orators yesterday, they would have known that in banter the English have a fierce and formidable rival in Egypt, and that the leader of the Egyptian opposition is a thousand times more accomplished than the leaders of the opposition in England; for he can deliver an entire long speech as banter and jest, while making people believe it to be bitter earnest, and then pursue this pretense until he himself becomes convinced that he has spoken nothing but earnest. And that the head of the Egyptian ministry is a thousand times more accomplished than all the heads of English ministries; he delivers a decisive, weighty statement while settling nothing and saying nothing of consequence, yet he has such tact that it persuades people, and persuades himself before the people, that he has delivered a decisive and weighty statement; and so he resolves difficulties, unravels predicaments, and restores to the deputies, who had been anxious and fearful for the people's life and interests, the security and reassurance they deserved. They had been anxious about the question of the debt and how it was to be settled, so he informed them that it was before the courts, that it was the subject of negotiations, and that it would be settled with justice, God willing; and so they were reassured and set at ease. They had been anxious about the question of the mortgage debts, and about the fate of landowners and farmers, so he informed them that the government was studying this question with the utmost care, and wished to arrive at lasting solutions, better than those solutions that cost the state money without easing anything for the people; and so they were reassured, set at ease, and applauded. Sidqi Pasha was not present; and had he been present, he would have received this arrow the good man loosed at him as securely as the secure, as reassured as the reassured, applauding along with those who applauded — for is Sidqi Pasha anything but one deputy among the deputies, one man among the men of that happy age?

They had been anxious about Egypt's full independence in all judicial matters, wishing the Mixed Courts abolished, and Egypt to take a resolute stand before the states protesting against it; so the prime minister declared to them that the ministry wished, along with them, to see the Mixed Courts abolished, and that it would be no less resolute than they before the states protesting the chief justice's speech; and so they were reassured, set at ease, and applauded, and the prime minister convinced himself, and convinced the deputies, that the good man had delivered them a decisive and weighty statement. And had the two English members understood everything yesterday, they would have mocked their finance minister, and proposed to their government that it recruit its finance ministers from Egypt. For the minister of finance in Egypt is a man with no match, truly; he speaks when silence would serve better, and says what it is not well to say, because he loves to blunder into talk; so that when speech is called for and words are needed, and the deputies require something to quench their thirst on matters of money, the finance minister is not content with silence alone, but vanishes from the chamber as the sun vanishes, and dissolves into the chamber as salt dissolves, so that the deputies seek him and do not find him. But these two English members understood nothing of all this; they saw only some people departing with wit, and others arriving with tact; and so they were set at ease, and will return to their country delighted that Egyptian parliamentary life, under the shadow of British neutrality, is a wonder beyond all doubting or impatience. Have you seen, then, that the deputies' evening talk yesterday was not merely calm, but fertile and productive, winning for this happy age two champions from among the members of the English parliament?