

Corruption

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1 Corruption is a subject the soul recoils from dwelling on, the tongue is pained to speak of, and the ear is disgusted to hear. Yet I am nonetheless compelled to speak of it to my readers, and to speak of it, after them or before them, to two men of rank who dislike the kind of talk the soul abhors, the tongue despises, and the ear detests: the good man, the Prime Minister, and the great man, the Minister of Finance. It may well be a kindness, and a preference for one's own comfort, for a man to keep his distance from corruption, and to shrink from thinking of it, speaking of it, or hearing of it; but those who occupy themselves with public life ought not to keep their distance from mentioning the corruption that touches the people's affairs, so long as they hope that mentioning it will bring reform and erase its traces. I detest this kind of talk, in which nothing is mentioned but the squandering of the state's funds, the waste of the people's amenities, and the loss of their rights; yet I am nonetheless compelled to take up such talk from time to time, in the hope that God may soften the hearts of our masters who have the power to set things right, so that they deal gently with this people and turn away from it, even a little, of the evils and sins that beset and press upon it. It is certain that ministers did not take up their posts to hear unbroken, unqualified praise and unceasing, sweet commendation, nor to sit at their desks giving orders and prohibitions and receiving the obedience of the obedient and the submission of the submissive; they took up their posts, rather, to oversee the people's affairs with justice and equity, to set right what is crooked and punish the wrongdoer. It is fitting for them, then, not to turn away from corruption when its images are set before them or its accounts brought to them, but rather to attack this corruption and wrestle with it, that they might throw it down and lift its harm from the people.

2 The corruption I wish to speak of today to the Minister of Finance and to the Prime Minister is truly a grave embarrassment, for it hangs uncertain between truth and falsehood, and is corruption either way: if true, it is a grave corruption, showing that the affairs of the state and the instruments of government are no longer merely exposed to danger, but are sunk in danger, overtaken by evil on every side; and if untrue, it is proof that morals in certain government circles have reached the furthest

point to which baseness and wrongdoing can reach. A man wrote to me — and many like him write to me — some days ago, unsigned, relating to me reports concerning one of the government's departments, one of those departments that has the honor of being headed by the great man, the Minister of Finance; and this correspondent claimed to me that his reports were accurate beyond dispute and beyond doubt. These reports accuse certain officials of exploiting their posts to profit from the rights of the state and of the people placed in their hands: land bought without right, at paltry, worthless prices, and improved without right, and improved at the state's expense; and collusion among certain officials in such sins, each serving and favoring the other, and each, by this favor, doing harm to the government, to the nation, and above all to his own character. It is plain enough that such unsigned letters, whose authors cannot bring themselves to sign them or to bear the responsibility for what they report, deserve no attention from a journalist, who need not trouble himself with their contents, let alone pass them on to his readers. But these reports, which reached me in unsigned, anonymous letters, were also being published in other newspapers, in versions identical or close to what these letters contained, and questions were being put to ministers about them, and people were discussing them, and discussing them a great deal. I, for my part, had disregarded them, and ordered them torn up or burned. But yesterday one of these letters reached me, whose author claimed to have written to me clarifying what he had written two weeks, or ten days, before; he went on to name one official, and to add to his name matters that can be described, at the very least, as crimes against the rights of the state and the rights of the people, and as corrupting of character — not only the character of the man who commits them, but the character of those who assist him in them and share in them, and indeed the character of all those who surround this official, who deal with him, and who work with him, near or far, if what is attributed to him of these sins is true. The correspondent sets out these sins in detail, and speaks of them as one speaks who knows them well, who is privy to their secrets and particulars, as though he saw them every day, and is troubled by what he sees of them, and wishes he could wipe them out entirely and visit the severest punishment on those who commit them. He names an official who bought land without right, at a paltry price — land that had long lain neglected, being a matter of dispute between the government and certain individuals. When this official bought it, if indeed he bought it, he ordered it improved at the state's expense, with the state's funds and the state's instruments, and even — so this anonymous correspondent says — had it planted at the state's

expense. The correspondent names a strange art among the arts of corruption: he claims that this official — if he exists — used to test the workers, to make sure they would not inform on him, and would not speak of what they did for him should anyone question them about it. The correspondent claims that this official — if he exists — spent the summer months, or some of them, on the seacoast in a district of the Delta, sheltered by state tents, with his family sheltered beside him, served by state servants, his family served along with him. And this official — if what the anonymous correspondent says is true, and I hope it is not — would come up to Cairo for a day or two each month, going and returning in a state motorcar, and this did not prevent him — if what the anonymous correspondent says is true, and I always hope it is not — from authorizing himself, on his own authority, to collect travel allowances and travel pay, as though he had traveled on some matter of state business, and as though he had stayed these long days on some work of state.

3 The anonymous correspondent does not stop there, but names another senior official by name, just as he named the first, and attributes to him matters no less grave than those he attributed to his colleague, and claims — and I hope he is not telling the truth — that these two officials cooperated, though not in righteousness and piety, but in sin and transgression. The anonymous correspondent asks that these incidents he relates be made the subject of a vigorous campaign to fight this corruption and fight those who commit it, and he believes that if the ministry were to form a committee of inquiry, that committee would find no difficulty whatever in uncovering the truth of this evil and its traces, provided that a number of the officials implicated in these sins, who bear a heavy share of their burden, are first suspended from their posts.

4 It is as though this anonymous correspondent sensed that I could not take his words seriously so long as I did not know him, and so long as he neither named himself nor showed any readiness to bear the consequences of what he says; for at the end of the letter he asks me to forward his letter to the Ministry of Finance, should I see any benefit in doing so, so that the minister might read it and form his own opinion of it. I am answering his request, and am sending his letter today to the Minister of Finance, that he may read it and form his own opinion; and I believe that a great many letters of this kind reach the Minister of Finance, and other ministers besides, and many senior officials. But what concerns me, and what I have written this chapter for, is what I pointed to above: that such reports, written by unknown hands, admit of only one

of two possibilities. Either they are true, in which case the affairs of the state have reached a far extreme of corruption; or they are false, in which case the character of a certain class of officials has reached a far extreme of corruption. The matter of these reports, written by unknown hands, is thus corruption through and through — corruption if they are true, corruption if they are false — and it is this corruption itself that we ought to think about. For if the business of government among us were upright and sound, founded on candor, truthfulness, and sincerity, such sins would not be committed, if indeed they have been committed, nor would there be found among officials men who deal in falsehood and live by informing, who make of slander a method of vengeance and a kind of cunning; and if the business of government among us were upright and sound, founded on candor, truthfulness, and sincerity, no sinning official would feel safe from punishment, if such a sinning official existed, nor would the government remain unaware of those who slander people, speak untruths of them, and do harm through denunciation and slander to their country and to themselves without caution or care. But the business of government among us is in the extreme of disorder, in the extreme of crookedness. The ministers are occupied with politics, with party politics that carries no danger and brings no benefit; Parliament, alongside the ministers, is occupied with politics, with the very politics the ministers occupy themselves with; and the business of government is left to officials, who conduct it as they wish or as they are able, subject to no strict and careful oversight compelling them to precision, caution, and care. The Egyptians suffer for this and reap its bitter fruit every day; foreigners look on and mock; and the English watch and wait for the day they can declare that they left the Egyptians to their own affairs and the Egyptians managed them poorly, so that the English must return to monopolizing these affairs themselves.

5 Do not the Prime Minister, the Minister of Finance, and their colleagues see with us that this state of affairs is graver in its danger, and farther-reaching in its effect on our life, and more deserving of their attention and of Parliament's attention, than banishing Sidqi Pasha from politics, or waging war on the lawyers' syndicate?