Madness!

Al-Musawwar, 23 May 1947.

1 I spoke elsewhere of a story by a great Czechoslovak writer, Franz Kafka, called The Castle. I had thought, as other critics and scholars have thought, that the writer had taken his story as a symbol for one of the highest problems of all — the problem of the connection between man and his Creator. The castle stands upon a high mound, with a village spread out below it across the low ground, and there is no way for ordinary people to reach this castle; only a few officials descend to the village from time to time, and it is difficult for the villagers even to meet these officials, while only a handful of messengers from the village may ascend to the castle, their task being no more than to carry orders back and forth between the castle and the village. A man arrives from a distant place, having been appointed land-surveyor in this village, but he spends the whole remainder of his life without ever taking up his post, exerting endless efforts without ever managing to ascend to the castle to take up his work, or even to make contact with one of the officials who descend from time to time from the castle, in the hope of finding, through this official, some help in securing his post!

2 And I had thought, as other critics and scholars have thought, that these officials, who reside in the castle or descend to the village from time to time, were merely symbols for the intermediaries who try to connect the creature with his Creator without ever achieving anything by it. But a brief glance at certain affairs of our Egyptian life has drawn my attention to the fact that, while it may well be that the writer intended his story as a symbol, it is equally certain that he portrayed in his story certain shades of real life found in some countries where bureaucracy grows tangled, where the affairs of administration become confused, and where a small group of senior officials holds sway over a vast group of junior officials, while the two of them together hold sway over an entire people, showing it the stars at noon, and making it taste every variety and color of torment!

3 It is enough to go to any government office on an ordinary day to see the office crowded with people seeking services and pursuing their affairs, massed together at the doors of the rooms and chambers, while beyond the doors of these rooms and chambers one sees calm, untroubled officials, bantering with one another, chatting with one

another about matters bearing no relation, near or far, to these crowded masses of people.

4 And you may see them spending long moments and short speaking into the telephone and listening to it, while in the midst of all this partaking of their cold and hot drinks, and passing their time by smoking a cigarette or a cigar, while the crowds remain massed and clamoring, complaining to one another, with the doorkeepers barring their way to the doors — so that in this one office you witness two worlds utterly, utterly different from one another: the world of the officials, composed of gods and demigods, of a third and a quarter of a god, even of a fifth and a sixth of one; and the world of the subjects, composed of God's own wretched servants — those very people who pay the taxes and who provide, through the sweat of their money and the fruit of their labor, for all these officials' sustenance, without ever being able to reach them to lay before them the needs and the interests that concern them. And if you go to this office during certain special seasons when people's needs grow sharp and pressing — the season of school enrollment, for instance — you will see the gap between these two worlds as something truly alarming, truly grave!

5 This alone suffices to portray one shade of the corruption in the relationship between rulers and ruled, and to portray what we might well call an inversion of the order of things, an exchange of the values of things; for it is the subject-people who work, who toil, who produce, and who fill the state's treasury with the direct and indirect taxes they pay, thereby enabling the state to provide for its officials' sustenance at the end of every month. And it is the subject-people who founded the state in the first place, who gave it a government and officials, intending, by founding the state and establishing the government and arranging its officials, that the rulers and officials in general should be its servants, managing its affairs, seeing to its interests, realizing its benefits, listening to it when it speaks, and obeying its command when it commands, within the bounds of the laws and regulations laid down… But the order of things is inverted, and the values are exchanged, so that the officials become lords, and the subject-people become slaves, and the officials hold sway over the people with a tyranny that could only ever issue, in those ancient ages, from a lord whose system rested on the claim that the state draws its authority not from the people, but from God.

6 But there is, in all this, something stranger still, something nearer to a curiosity I do not know whether to call amusing or distressing! For the class of officials is not harsh toward the people alone, nor does it mock the people alone; rather, its members are harsh toward one another, mock one another, and neglect one another's affairs — and you look, and find that some officials are lords and others are slaves, and that the lords among the officials hold sway over the slaves among them exactly as the two of them, lords and slaves alike, hold sway over a third class enslaved to both — namely, the class of the people!

7 This body of senior directors was not placed by the law in charge of the people's affairs alone; it was placed in charge, too, of the affairs of the subordinates who assist it in serving the people — for it is this body that chooses the subordinates, assigns them their posts, entrusts them with their various duties, rewards them if they perform well, and punishes them if they perform badly. And for this very reason it holds sway over them exactly as it holds sway over the people, and it tempts them, in turn, to hold sway over whatever officials rank below themselves, exactly as it itself holds sway over whatever officials rank below it.

8 It is enough to speak with this official or that one, or to listen to officials as they converse in their offices, their clubs, and their cafés, to perceive just how much tyranny passes between the various ranks of officials, and to see that there is absolutely nothing strange in the neglect of the people's interests — the only truly strange thing would be any genuine concern for the people's interests — because senior and junior officials alike are too preoccupied with themselves to attend to the people, and because means have become ends in themselves, so that the official is no longer a servant of the people at all, but has become, first, a servant to his own superior, second, concerned chiefly with himself, and third, an employer of whoever ranks below him!

9 Senior officials curry favor with the ministers; mid-level officials curry favor with their seniors; junior officials curry favor with the mid-level ranks; and the doorkeepers and attendants curry favor with the juniors, the mid-level ranks, and the seniors, all alike.

10 And if any time is left over to these officials after all of this, they relax in it, discussing among themselves whatever concerns them personally — and some of them may, now and then, graciously condescend to attend to the people's interests!

11 And if such is the state of affairs, what is strange in the fact that there should exist, among the officials, an entire class of the forgotten? And what is strange in reading, as we did a few days ago in the newspapers, that an official in the Ministry of Agriculture has been suspended from his work for six years, and has had his salary withheld for six years as well, with no decision reached in his case to this very day, despite the succession of ministries that have come and gone, and despite the fact that this official has a family that must live, children who must be educated, and a life that must somehow be borne?!

12 And what is strange in an official returning from a mission he was carrying out abroad, and waiting ever since last October without being told where he stands or what he is to do, and without being assigned any task whatsoever, for all his persistent requests to be given some work, and for all his repeated visits to the offices of senior, mid-level, and junior officials alike?!

13 People who do no work at all, yet make their rounds to the offices and draw their salaries, too preoccupied with themselves to attend to the people's interests; and people who do no work, yet draw their salaries at the end of the month… some of them content with this, thanking God for sustenance delivered to them without effort, while others feel their hearts melt away in grief because they wish to work in proportion to what they are paid, and find no work to do at all! And still others, who neither work nor draw a salary, nor have anything to spend, nor are even left free to seek other work — because they remain suspended, hanging indefinitely between appointment and dismissal!

14 And all of this takes place, seen by eyes, heard by ears, touched by hands, pondered by minds, and spoken of by tongues — and Egypt has, in the midst of all this, a Parliament that oversees the affairs of the state, and supervises the executive authority in everything it does and everything it fails to do!

15 If all of this is not proof that Egypt has gone utterly, thoroughly mad, and stands in need of the madhouse, then I do not know what madness could possibly be!