

# Between the Two Acts

*Al-Balagh, 6 December 1945.*

The interval between the two acts may be long, or it may be short, but one thing is certain: the audience is in need of a rest just now. The act was truly long, measured against the other acts of this splendid theatrical story being performed on our wondrous political stage.

The act was truly long, longer than it ought to have been, and truly complicated, more complicated than people are accustomed to. The ancient Greeks loved theater most intensely, and their poets satisfied this love of theirs for the theater most thoroughly, and certain days of the year were set aside for this beautiful art. The performance would begin at dawn and end with the close of day, but the actors did not spend the whole day performing a single act, nor a single story; rather, they performed many acts and various stories, some of them sad and some of them joyful!

As for us, we have outdone the Greeks in a way that will be recorded to our credit in the history of theater. And what do you make of an act whose performance began last Friday, and whose dawn then rose again on Thursday with the curtain still not lowered — the stagehands merely poised to lower it the moment the signal comes to them from the troupe's director? The curtain may fall on this act's events today, or it may fall tomorrow, or it may fall at any time, on any day, whenever the Council of Ministers meets to ratify what it has no choice but to ratify, and to approve what it cannot help but approve. There is no doubt that the audience has grown weary of this act's length and is impatient for the curtain to fall — so much so that a smooth and excellent journalist, one of those who love this art of theater, said yesterday: had the Prime Minister been fair, he would have called his colleagues to a meeting held right after the political committee adjourned, to spare the people this long ordeal.

Praise be to God that the theater in this story proceeds in the familiar Egyptian way — or rather, the way that was familiar before Egypt drew near to Europe, or before Europe drew near to Egypt — when the actors would play their parts, and the audience would eat, drink, and smoke, amusing themselves with these trifles that many of them have grown accustomed to passing the time with. So it troubles them little whether the performance runs short or long, since they complain of

neither hunger nor thirst, and go to no great effort to follow the performance. For our political actors play their parts when dawn breaks, play their parts when the forenoon climbs, play their parts as the sun inclines toward setting, and play their parts when night spreads its darkness over the length and breadth of Egypt — never tiring of the game, never succumbing to fatigue. And the audience, meanwhile, works and idles, busies itself and flags, laughs together and jests together, while matters proceed exactly as we would wish. Was it not Hafiz, God rest his soul, who said:

*And if you are asked about Egypt, tell them: she is a nation that amuses  
itself, and a people that plays.*

And what would you have the nation do, if its government has resolved to amuse it? And what would you have the people do, if its ministry has determined to perform for it, from time to time, an act or two of the theatrical play?

This act, then, began on Friday in one of the clubs of the coalition parties, when this grave party, at this grave moment, took a grave decision — to be submitted to the grave Chairman of the grave ministry on Saturday morning. And the opening of this act, when the curtain first rose on it, was truly gripping, for the audience wished to make out the truth behind these many perils that follow one upon another without pause or delay. But the actors are skillful, accomplished performers, concerned above all that matters should grow complicated and ever more complicated, that matters should grow fraught and ever more fraught, and that the audience's hearts should remain fixed, for as long as possible, on what they say and do, and on what they might say and do; and so the actors set about saying and doing, and the audience set about yearning and burning, until Saturday evening came, or rather until the night had advanced well into Saturday evening — and behold, the people had done much and said much, and the audience had understood nothing. All they knew was that a meeting had taken place at that location, and that those who had met had dispersed only to meet again; so the audience's longing grew upon longing, and their yearning upon yearning, their rising upon falling and their falling upon rising, and they remained in all this for a full night and a full day, and then another full night. Then Monday morning came, and they learned of the grave decision that the grave minister had conveyed to the grave Chairman; and they laughed, or rather they were drowned in laughter. But the grave Chairman did not laugh, nor did he even smile, nor did he even keep his face calm and

composed; rather, he scowled and bristled, turned away in disdain, and resolved to sweep everything before him like a storm.

I do not know whether you will agree with me or not, but I find it among the most beautiful and most splendid things on the stage of theater, that violent anger should appear on the actors' faces, and in their words, their actions, and their gestures, while the audience continues in its calm, unbroken laughter. This contradiction between the contrived anger on the stage and the natural contentment among the audience is truly splendid. And it is this very thing that the Egyptians were given to witness and enjoy through the daylight hours of Monday, and the daylight hours of Tuesday, and the black of the night between these two days.

And the Prime Minister was utterly, furiously angry, in a complete fury, wishing to sweep like a storm and not to relent, as Makram Pasha likes to put it. And Makram Pasha himself was calmly furious, settledly agitated, and contentedly resentful — all at once — circling about the Prime Minister without drawing near to him or moving away from him. And the audience watched and laughed, drowning in laughter at times, and drowning in sleep when the laughter grew burdensome; but they resumed their liveliness on Tuesday evening, when the political committee, drawn from the pillars of the regime, met. For it seemed to the audience that the act was about to end, and that the book was about to reach its appointed term; so they renewed their liveliness, just as a traveler renews his energy when he draws near to his destination. But the political committee met, and its meeting dragged on, and then it broke up, and its breaking-up dragged on too, and the audience learned nothing except that another meeting would have to follow this breaking-up.

And is life anything but meeting and breaking up — or, as Makram Pasha likes to put it, is life anything but convening and dispersing? For the committee convened on Tuesday, then dispersed, and the audience learned nothing whatsoever of its business; so they remained yearning and pining, wishing to reach the end of the journey, and to witness the falling of the curtain — but they were told: wait, for there will be meeting and breaking-up, convening and dispersing. And the committee convened on Wednesday evening and then dispersed — but what a dispersal this was, one that both histories will record, the history of politics and the history of literature alike: the history of politics, because the political committee had unanimously taken a grave decision, of the utmost gravity, thereby proving that the Kutla Bloc is not alone in knowing how to take

grave decisions, and that Egypt has men outside the Bloc who also know well how to take grave decisions.

As for the history of literature — now this is the question of questions, the problem of problems, the story that will raise Egypt's head high among the heads of the world, that will raise Egypt's voice high among the voices of the world, and that will carry Egypt's message to generations to come until the end of time. Have you still not understood? Have you not read what the Prime Minister said to the journalists, in this splendid, masterly brevity: "We met, we discussed, and we agreed"? Does this phrase not remind you of something? It is an exact replica of an immortal phrase in the history of world literature, so often cited as a proverb that it has itself become proverbial. And I do not claim — God forbid that I should claim — that the Prime Minister copied or imitated it; indeed, I am certain — or very nearly certain — that the Prime Minister uttered this immortal phrase of his quite spontaneously, since he did not know that other immortal phrase that Caesar sent to the Roman Senate after defeating certain armies. Do you know this phrase? It resembles the Prime Minister's phrase as though the two phrases had been cut from a single hide — the hide of excellence and genius. The Prime Minister said to the journalists: we met, we discussed, and we agreed; and Caesar wrote to the Senate: "I came, I saw, I conquered." Do you not see that our Prime Minister resembles Caesar in his skill, his eloquence, and his mastery of brevity? How much more so, then, when you add that he resembles Caesar in firmness, resolve, and triumph?! All this is well and good, but the audience learned nothing — or rather, let us say, they learned a little and remained ignorant of much, and they will learn everything when the Council of Ministers meets today, or tomorrow, or at any time at all. Do you see now that this act began its performance on Friday as evening fell, and had still not finished its performance by Thursday as morning broke?!

Do you see now that we have outdone the Greeks in prolixity and elaboration, and outdone the Romans in concision and brevity? Can you, after all this, still hold out, still dispute, or still doubt that Egypt is God's chosen quiver on this earth, the chosen land superior to all other lands, inhabited by a chosen people superior to all other peoples, ruled by a chosen ministry superior to all other ministries, and shaded by a chosen, happy era superior to all other eras?

And after all this, where do we stand with respect to the negotiations?! Are we approaching them, or are we turning away from

them? Will only one of us approach them — the Prime Minister — or two of us, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister? Will Makram Pasha take part at their beginning, or in their middle, or at their end? And where do the Liberal Constitutionals fall in all this? Do they fall in the position of the nose, or the position of the tail? All these are questions to which there is no way of answering before the curtain falls. But I myself have two answers to these questions: one of them is the line by Hafiz, God rest his soul:

*And if you are asked about Egypt, tell them: she is a nation that amuses  
itself, and a people that plays.*

And the second is this: the negotiations may happen, or they may not happen, and among the parties there will be those who occupy the position of the nose and those who fall into the position of the tail; but what matters is something else entirely, something other than the negotiations and other than the parties' position within them — it is that the happy era should endure, and that the people should remain exactly where they are meant to remain: submissive, humbled, content with the mere spoil of watching their politicians perform for them upon the stage of theater.