

Representation

Al-Balagh, 2 December 1945.

A sad comedy, or a comic tragedy — this is what the coalition parties are performing on the stage of Egyptian politics; for Egyptian politics has, these days, acquired a stage, a curious stage upon which scenes are displayed, amusing to whoever wishes to laugh, saddening to whoever wishes to grieve, and entertaining to the general public in any case. There is no doubt that the advancing and retreating, the approaching and withdrawing, the boldness and hesitation, the leaning now to the right and now to the left, that our coalition parties produce — all of this amuses and distracts the general public. You need no proof of any of this; it is enough to pass by the clubs, to call at the coffeehouses, and to listen to people as they carry on their conversation among themselves, to learn that the Egyptian nation amuses itself with its parties, and toys with this new breed of politicians who talk but do not act, who unite while remaining divided, who cooperate while scheming against one another in every sort of scheme — as though the Egyptians were meant to learn what idle amusement is, what mere play is, how people can display earnestness while idly amusing themselves, how people can feign work while being lazy, how people can be deceived about themselves and about their hopes and wishes, and how people can be distracted by nonsense from the truth, once no path remains to grasping that truth. And this sad comedy of ours, or this comic tragedy of ours, is as long as a winter's night, unwilling to come to an end; its beginning has grown so distant that people have forgotten it, or very nearly forgotten it, while its ending remains one of the secrets of the unseen. And what matters is not that the story should end, but rather that it should not end — for in its ending lies the ending of this happy era in which the Egyptians laugh. And how could the Egyptians live if they did not laugh?! Do not say that Egyptians can laugh at the theaters and the cinemas; for that laughter amounts to nothing, since it ends when the performance ends, and finishes when what they call the white screen folds away. But this political laughter greets the Egyptians when they rise from sleep, accompanies them as they go off to their work, walks with them as they return home to their families, and stays with them when they meet, between night and day, in the clubs and the coffeehouses. And who knows — perhaps it does not leave them even when each of them is alone with himself, perhaps it does not leave them even when each retires to

his bed, and perhaps it befalls them in the dreams of the night. And what is strange in this, when the subject of the story is the Egyptians' own life in their own country, and the Egyptians' relations with their allies and friends? And the Egyptians, these days, are wide awake, thinking of all this, asking about all this — for what could be more beautiful, more wondrous, than that a man should think of earnest matters only to be driven to laughter, and that a man should search for earnestness and find nothing but nonsense and farce?! Last August, this sad comedy, or this comic tragedy, began when the Egyptians pressed their Prime Minister to inform them of their government's position on the national rights; so the Prime Minister spoke in Parliament and said nothing, and his supporters applauded him, because they understand something out of nothing, and extract earnestness out of play, and truths out of talk devoid of substance. At that time the Prime Minister told the Egyptians that he would not let slip any opportunity that arose to demand Egypt's rights and secure them — he would not let slip an opportunity, provided that this opportunity arose. And how was this opportunity to arise? Would it create itself, or would the English create it, or would the Egyptians create it? As for the English, their Foreign Secretary said he was awaiting the proper time; and as for the Egyptians, their Prime Minister said he was awaiting the arising of the opportunity. Meanwhile, the advancing and retreating multiplied, and the admitting and denying multiplied; some said: negotiations have indeed been requested, and others said: no, negotiations have not been requested. And the committee they call the political committee convened, and said, and the Council of Ministers said after it, that the time was suitable for negotiations — and then the committee was sent off to its bed to sleep, and it slept a deep sleep, and the ministers alone remained on the stage, coming and going, dodging and maneuvering, with their parties behind them crying out and wailing, raising in the air a dust that conceals nothing, but rather exposes everything. And one day — or one night — the political committee heard a voice that woke it from its deep sleep, and it rose up startled, for it had seen — whether as something a sleeper sees or something a waking man sees — the British Foreign Secretary announcing in the British Parliament that he had received nothing whatsoever from the Egyptian government touching the negotiations. And the political committee resolved — God forgive me — or rather its leader, Sidqi Pasha, resolved to do something; but he met with the Prime Minister, and no sooner had he left the seat of government than he hurried to his bed and slept among the sleepers, and the political committee remained asleep from the end of September to the beginning of December, with the ministers alone on the

stage, coming and going, dodging and maneuvering, their parties behind them crying out and wailing, until the flood had reached the hilltops, and matters had gone beyond all bounds. And it became clear to some of the ministers that the audience was on the verge of growing weary of this lukewarm game, and of turning away from this tedious performance. Thereupon the actors grew lively, and a new vigor spread among the players: one minister resigns and departs for the far reaches of Upper Egypt, and another presents himself to the audience in the posture of the bewildered, love-struck soul, his face veiled now in a smile, now in a frown, advancing only to retreat a moment later, leaning to the right only to lean to the left a moment after that. And the audience, seeing this, laughs and makes merry, while the minister presses on with his game, and his party behind him urges him on and spurs him with shouting, wailing, applause, and whistling — until, when the minister's activity reached its peak, he took the firm, decisive step: he met with the Prime Minister. And the audience thought that a chapter of the story was about to close, but the chapter did not close, nor was there any sign that it would close; it was merely one scene followed by another scene. For the skillful minister emerged from the seat of government as cryptic as the unseen itself, hinting at a few words like a priest of Apollo, and before evening had fully set in, there was a meeting, and then the murk cleared, and the crisis dissolved — as though a murk had indeed settled over the people, and as though a crisis had indeed reached the utmost pitch of complication. But there was no murk, and there was no crisis; there was only acting, and sheer delusion. And what matters is that the political committee will awaken from its sleep, though it appears that waking it will take some time, since it is sunk in a deep sleep, a very deep sleep; it will not meet today, nor will it meet tomorrow, but it will meet the day after tomorrow, God willing. But meet to do what? It had already met in September, and said, and the Council of Ministers said with it, that that time was the most suitable of all times for negotiations. Yet no one paid it any heed, because it did not heed itself, and no one paid it any attention because it had fallen asleep and sunk deep into slumber, and the British Foreign Secretary could rouse no more than one or two of its members, who scarcely woke before returning to their snoring. So the committee will meet on Tuesday to do what?! To do two or three things, or rather to do one single thing: to carry on with the performance, and to spread some vigor and liveliness among the actors, lest the audience grow weary or be overtaken by sleep. It will meet on Tuesday to persuade the Minister of Justice to give up his resignation, because things are proceeding exactly as the Egyptians would wish; to persuade the Minister

of Finance that he is in need of some stability and calm, because things are proceeding exactly as the Egyptians would wish; to persuade the Minister of Commerce that he is in need of some patience and deliberation, because things are proceeding exactly as the Egyptians would wish; and to persuade all the coalition's members, the independents among them included, that the coalition has never on any day been as strong as it is now, and that Egypt has never on any day needed the coalition's strength as much as it needs it now — for the Wafd still stands, and its leader still goes to Alexandria and returns from it, and attends prayers at various mosques on Fridays, and so long as the Wafd's leader comes and goes, attends prayers, and receives the people, Egypt is in danger, and nothing will avert this danger except the solid coalition of the Wafd's adversaries. As for Egypt's own demands, their matter is quite simple indeed. The British Lord Chancellor declared in the House of Lords — just as the Foreign Secretary had declared a few weeks earlier in the House of Commons — that Great Britain is prepared to negotiate at the proper time, and that she does not wish to dominate Egypt, but only wishes a company with Egypt founded on fellowship and equality. And could Egypt aspire to a greater honor than to share with Great Britain in managing Egyptian affairs on a basis of fellowship and equality? And beyond all this, Great Britain is bestowing upon us a favor we shall never be able to thank her enough for: she will set our affairs right, raise the level of our living, shield our hungry from hunger and our deprived from deprivation, and protect us from misery just as she protects us from foreign attack — so what more could we want than this?! So why should the Minister of Justice not give up his resignation? Why should the Minister of Finance not return to calm and stability? Why should the Minister of Commerce not go back to patience and deliberation? Why should the political committee not return to its deep sleep? Why should the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Interior not be given the leisure for their grave task? For the Wafd's leader still comes and goes, and he must be watched as he comes and goes; the Wafd's leader still attends prayers, and the people still love him, so he must be watched as he attends prayers, and the mosques must be closed when he enters and when he leaves, and the people must be turned away from this sinful love, and disciplined if they persist in this sinful love. And the Wafd's leader still receives visitors, so his house must be watched and besieged, and the people must be kept away from this house. The Egyptians must choose between two things that cannot be reconciled: either the Wafd and its leader are fought, or the English are negotiated with over Egypt's rights. And it is perfectly clear that fighting the Wafd and its leader is the

purpose of all purposes, the end of all ends; for Egypt's independence is in the gravest danger so long as the Wafd stands, and so long as its leader attends prayers and receives the people. As for the English dragging their feet over negotiation and waiting for the proper time, establishing the new company on a basis of equality and fellowship, making Cairo a new peacetime capital for the zone of British influence in the Middle East, and setting up the British office for the Middle East in the city of Cairo alongside the British Embassy, without negotiating with Egypt over its establishment, without Egypt's agreement to its establishment, and without any regard to whether its establishment suits independence or not, or accords with sovereignty or not — all these matters are light and mild, and one ought not to feel troubled or alarmed by them; for their danger to independence is far, far smaller than this imminent danger embodied by Mustafa al-Nahhas when he attends prayers and receives the people. And thus our sad comedy and our comic tragedy continue along their course; the actors do not stop performing, and the audience does not stop laughing and amusing itself. I do not know whether the members of the political committee read what is published about Egypt abroad, or whether their deep sleep keeps them from reading. As for myself, I read in the French newspaper *Le Monde* that Egypt's lords frequent the Muhammad Ali Club, sinking into its plush chairs, drinking and gaming and, all the while, maneuvering and scheming. And *Le Monde* forgot only one thing: that Egypt's lords may, from time to time, gather around the Prime Minister to decide that the time is suitable for negotiations. The Romans used to ask their Caesars for games and bread, and the Romans went too far with their Caesars in asking them for these two grave things; but we have become wiser than the Romans, and more content than they were, for we do not ask for games and bread — that would be too much — we ask only for games alone. And our government is truly wise: it gives us all the games we want, and more than we want; as for bread, we must ask it of God, and as for independence, we must wait until the English graciously bestow it upon us.