Issa-isms . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 15 June 1934

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It could hardly be otherwise: the Minister of Tradition must have grand achievements attributed to him, stamped with his hallmark, and added to his esteemed name — just as the Finance Minister has weighty deeds and grand affairs that endure through time and take root in the memory of the age, attached to his own great name. For it would not do for the Minister of Tradition to be of lesser consequence, or of humbler standing, or of less courage and daring than the Finance Minister. The Finance Minister may indeed be permitted to outstrip all his colleagues and surpass them all — except the Minister of Tradition, whom none ought to outstrip or surpass. He excels always, whatever the circumstances, whatever the events. And perhaps the Finance Minister and all his colleagues, headed by His Excellency, the good man himself, would acknowledge without hesitation or reservation that their colleague, the Minister of Tradition, has this time outstripped them and excelled over them, and has earned the satisfaction of the English, and the esteem of the High Commissioner, and has become fit to win the complete, comprehensive, and absolute support that is indispensable for him to become Prime Minister one day, soon or far off. For I do not think the Finance Minister, or any one of his colleagues, possesses a feat like this immortal feat that the Minister of Tradition has recorded for himself, in his great historic letter, which he sent to the School of Engineering, and which we published in Al-Wadi two days ago. We do not think that any one of these ministers can claim to have recorded for himself a feat like this feat, or to have done the English a favor like this favor, or to have furnished the High Commissioner proof that he knows how to anticipate the English in answering their demands before they even ask for them — indeed, without their asking for them at all — unless there are grave secrets hidden from us, not yet revealed to us as this grave secret among the Minister of Tradition's secrets has been revealed to us. Be that as it may, we are compelled to record the Minister of Tradition's precedence in winning the satisfaction of the English, and the anger of the Egyptians, until the days unfold — and we do not expect them to unfold anything proving that he has an equal or a match among his colleagues.

It may be for good, or for ill, I do not know, that we congratulate the Minister of Tradition on this singular Issa-ism, for it may anger the

Egyptians against him — but the Egyptians are nothing, and their anger ought not to trouble great men and men of consequence; while it satisfies the English without any doubt, and the English are everything, and their satisfaction is the very best thing that competitors ought to compete for, that workers ought to labor for, and that the successful ought to win. And the proof of this is that Sidqi Pasha angered the Egyptians, and made them taste every form and color of torment, every kind and variety of deprivation, and a humiliation the like of which they had never tasted in this modern age — yet none of this prevented him from retaining the premiership and its authority for more than three years, nor did it prevent him, after he fell from his post, from remaining above the law and above the Constitution, never questioned about what he did, nor about what he said, but rather enjoying freedom and comfort, while the Egyptians had not yet recovered from the effects of the abasement and misery he had inflicted upon them. And the proof of this too is that Sidqi Pasha satisfied the English, and thereby won their support for him in power, and their assistance to him in humiliating the people, for more than three years — and he still enjoys their love for him and their affection toward him, and their standing guard against any harm or ill befalling him, even though they have grown weary of his rule, and have no wish for him to rise again to conduct affairs.

So the Egyptians' anger, however great it grows, is nothing to fear; and the English's satisfaction, however slight it seems, is not to be dismissed. We can therefore congratulate the Minister of Tradition on this immortal Issa-ism, which will be recorded to his credit among the English, and will earn him a favorable place in their hearts, and will bring him a decoration, or something better than a decoration, one of these days. And I think you will agree with me that the English are neither fools nor simpletons, neither naive nor gullible, but rather a people who know where to place their trust, and how to love their supporters — and why should they not place their fullest trust in this grave Minister, to whom the board of the School of Engineering proposes the appointment of a qualified Egyptian in place of an Englishman, and who refuses utterly, and rejects entirely, and issues from his office a letter signed with his own hand, ordering that a British professor be appointed in place of the Egyptian professor?

And the Egyptian professor is without any doubt qualified: he won the highest degrees from Egypt, then won the highest degrees from Europe. Had he not been genuinely qualified, the school's board would

never have chosen him for this post — and this board includes technical experts among the foreigners, and senior state officials among the Egyptians. But the sin of this qualified Egyptian is that he is not English — or say, that he is not British, as the Minister of Tradition puts it. Or say his sin is that he is a qualified Egyptian competing with the British, and you know the political circumstances, and the need of those who love power for the satisfaction of the English in these days. So let the Egyptian, then, be kept away from this post; let the Egyptian, then, bear the injustice patiently; let the Egyptian be content with the humiliation decreed for him; and let the foreigners record against us that we are a people offered dignity, yet who refuse it, accepting nothing but disgrace, and to whom what is right is delivered, only for us to push it away with our own hands — so that one of our ministers might win the satisfaction of the English, and one of our ministers might be favored with a smile among the High Commissioner's smiles.

Then the English will say afterward that they have done us good, and advanced us, and connected the links between us and modern civilization. And who could possibly doubt that? Do not the English speak of Lord Cromer, and of Lord Cromer's days, and of the bounty he lavished upon the Egyptians? Do not the English wish that those glorious days might return to Egypt and to them, those days in which Cromer poured out good and blessing upon Egypt, and preserved for the British state the dignity of the commanding, dominating ruler whose order none could refuse, and from whose obedience none could stray? Do not the English remind us, as a favor, that Lord Cromer restored our land to fertility after barrenness, set our administration right after corruption, and organized our finances after disorder? Indeed they do. But the English forget — God forgive us, or rather, they choose to forget — that the Cromer era utterly erased Egyptian nationhood, utterly annihilated the Egyptian personality, and produced for us ministers and officials who, when offered the appointment of a qualified Egyptian in place of an Englishman at an Egyptian school, in an age of renaissance and independence, refuse, and reject, and then temporize, and maneuver, and then, after coming to an ‘understanding,’ ask that steps be taken to appoint a British professor. They ask this of the School of Engineering, headed by a foreign man who used to think us proud and unyielding — only to find that we prefer the satisfaction of the English to pride; who used to think us jealous guardians of what is right — only to find that we are more anxious for the satisfaction of the English than we are for what is right. They ask this of this foreign professor, the director of the School of Engineering, fearing

no criticism from him, nor from his foreign colleagues, nor fearing any objection from within themselves, nor from their own countrymen — because the satisfaction of the English is dearer to them than the satisfaction of all of these together. These are the traces that remain in our souls from the era of Lord Cromer. The English forget them, and choose to forget them; but we shall never forget them, nor shall we choose to forget them — we shall instead always set them beside this material benevolence that Lord Cromer bestowed upon us, and we shall weigh, on one side, our nationhood which he killed, our dignity which he annihilated, our personality which he erased, and on the other, our land which he made fertile, our administration which he organized, our finances which he set right — and our hearts shall fill with sorrow, grief, and regret, at the thought that we prefer, a thousand times over, our nationhood, our dignity, and our personality, to fertile land, sound administration, and sound finance; and because we would wish, a thousand times over, to live as men with their due share of nationhood and dignity, upon barren land, and under a disordered administration and corrupt finances — we prefer this, and choose it over living like cattle upon fertile, grass-rich land, under the dominion of a herdsman who knows how to subdue us with the whip and the staff.

Those who praise the era of Cromer, and wish it would return, ought to look closely at this immortal Issa-ism, to see the traces of that era, and to ask themselves afterward: what is it they truly want? As for the English, they know exactly what they want. They want, in Egypt, fertile land, and cattle with which to exploit that land — and it is for this reason that they love the era of Cromer, and long for it. As for us, we want, in Egypt, honorable, independent men, living in a free and dear homeland — and it is for this reason that we despise the era of Cromer, and will never consent to its return.

Taha Hussein

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