Struggle

Kawkab al-Sharq, March 25, 1933

Between life and opinion there rages, in these days that Egypt is living through, a grave struggle that stirs a searing pain in her soul and settles a deep sorrow in her heart. It is strange indeed to speak of a struggle between life and opinion — yet strange as it is, this strangeness is itself an undeniable truth. All Egyptians love freedom of opinion, guard it jealously, and long to see it won; they detest, with their whole being, that anyone among them should be denied his rightful share in it. Yet all Egyptians equally love life — love life sweet and soft — and many of them, sad to say, were never raised to a free upbringing, nor shaped by the formation that would have equipped them to understand life as it should be understood, to weigh it at its true worth, and to set it in its proper place. They fail to grasp that life without freedom is death, that life without dignity is death, and that life without honor is death.

Indeed, among Egyptians — sad to say — there is a group who imagine that life consists in motion and activity, in food and drink, in pleasure and amusement, in jest and levity, in passing the time between a round of mechanical tasks and a round of base indulgences; who cannot conceive of raising life above this level; who are content with themselves once they have discharged this mechanical labor, content with themselves once they have secured these empty pleasures; who cling to this life so fiercely that they will spend anything for its sake, sacrifice anything for its sake, forgo anything else for its sake — for they have never learned to prize anything above it! Do not tell such people that this life of theirs fails to raise them to the rank of truly civilized man, a rank distinct even from the other living creatures that surround them and share the world with them! They will not understand you, and if they do understand, they will not grant you the point — for, to their minds, these other creatures at least do not haunt government offices and bureaus as men do, do not frequent clubs and places of amusement as men do, do not play at dice and chess as men do, do not sit in judgment over one another as men do, do not indulge by turns in earnestness and levity as men do. By this reasoning, then, they consider themselves superior to these other creatures — and they are content with so crude and facile a distinction. Do not tell such people that man is not made human by these trivial marks of existence, but rather by his mind, which thinks and produces; by his will, which orders his work and his effort; by his dignity,

which lifts him above abasement and forbids him to accept humiliation; by his honor, which makes it repugnant to him ever to become a tool in the hand of another man, whoever that man may be, or in the hand of any power, however great its store of force and might. Speak to them of this, and they will not understand you, for they have never grown accustomed to such talk; and if they understand it, they will not grant you the point, for they see in it only a kind of philosophers' philosophy, mere talk out of books — achieving no immediate end, bringing them no closer to any sweet pleasure, securing for them neither a fourth-grade post nor a third, nor the prospect of a raise worth three or four more pounds a month, nor a smile from the minister's lips should they call on him, nor even the certainty of a civil word from his undersecretary should they stand before him!

And who knows — perhaps speaking so will cost you your post, turn you out of your work, drive you to privation, and demand of you a patience you have never had to practice. Whoever has grown used to fine food will find it hard to return to coarse food; whoever has grown used to elegant dress will find it hard to return to shabby dress; whoever has grown used to a beautiful home will find it hard to descend to a humble one; and whoever has grown used to returning to a family he finds content and at ease will find it hard, instead, to come home to faces marked with grief, forms marked with hardship, and voices that carry the accents of sorrow.

Set against so soft a life, then, what are freedom, honor, and dignity? A life for which your friend envies you and your enemy begrudges you; which lets you gather every varied bloom of pleasure at your ease; which lets you rest assured that your family is safe, with nothing to fear and nothing to dread.

In Egypt there are many such people — and whether we like it or not, they are the source of every crisis Egypt suffers, and of all the turmoil to which she is subjected in politics, in opinion, and in money — for no other reason than that they wish to live, or rather, for no other reason than that they are simply incapable of doing anything but live!

These people are the emissaries of abasement sent to their own nation! They are the path by which their fellow citizens are led into submission! And this submission is itself the very obstacle that stands between their country and dignity, freedom, and independence! They want only to live, and the tyrants smooth for them the paths of living,

prepare for them its means, and exact from them, in payment for this life, a price so trifling it costs them nothing, troubles them not at all, and demands of them no effort — namely, obedience. And what could be easier than obedience in exchange for a living? What indeed could be easier than offering up obedience even before it is asked of you — easier still than anticipating your master's every whim, learning it fully, satisfying it completely, and sparing your master even the trouble of putting a request or a wish to you directly? Were it not for such people, tyranny would never have found a way to seize control of any country on earth in this modern age. For the human mind has advanced far enough to distinguish right guidance from error, to draw the line between a free life and an enslaved one, between honor and abasement, between dignity and humiliation — but the morals of men have not advanced as far as the mind; and so some morals grew strong, while others remained weak. And tyranny learned well how to make war on strong morals by exploiting the weak, the dissolute ones.

Search as you might for the causes that have given tyranny its foothold on this earth, you will find nothing but weak and corrupted morals, and a certain excess among a portion of mankind in the love of self, and a preference for their own immediate interest over everything else.

Everything in these days conspires to fill men's souls with such misgivings: this restlessness of opinion from one moment to the next; this incapacity to hold to a single view for more than a day; this declaring of an opinion in the morning, followed by an apology for it come evening; this boldness that casts you in the guise of a hero, followed at once by the retreat that drags you back to the easiest refuge of acquiescence and submission. This talking, in private, to your closest friends, pouring out all the indignation and denial that fills your soul — only for that same indignation to turn, the moment it must be spoken aloud and in public, into contentment, and that same denial into endorsement. This outward cheerfulness that conceals a hatred like no other hatred; this outward disavowal that conceals a love like no other love. This avoidance of friends for fear of watchful eyes; this cultivating of enemies to please one's superiors. All of this is nothing but the many faces of this same painful struggle between freedom of opinion and love of life.

It is love of life, and its preference over truth and freedom, that drives a certain class of officials to entangle themselves in the very sins that the system itself condemns and the law itself punishes — for they

wish to please their superiors; and had they been left alone with their own consciences, they would perhaps never have committed such sins, nor even entertained them. But they are weak; they want to live, and there is no living without pleasing one's superiors!

It is love of life, and its preference over freedom of opinion, that makes scholars fall silent against their own will, and forces them to accept humiliation without complaint — unless it be in private, to you alone, where they might let down their guard and treat you as a confidant and true friend. Indeed, it is love of life, and its preference over freedom of opinion, that sometimes drives scholars to praise what they despise, even at times to profess love for what they despise! So they thank those who have wronged them for their very wrongdoing, and commend those who have assaulted them for their very assault — and even hope that the wrongdoer, the aggressor, might go still further in his wrongdoing and his aggression! It is love of life, and its preference over freedom of opinion, that turned the Ministry of Education away from the book of Professor Abd al-Rahman al-Rafi'i Bey on the age of Isma'il, and kept it from prescribing that book for school libraries.

Now, those who reviewed this book — and I do not know who they are — are without doubt learned men, without doubt cultured men, without doubt historians. They know, with the full certainty of true scholarship, that freedom is the very foundation of history. They know, beyond any doubt, that those who write history are not obliged to please their readers, be they the elite or the common people, but are obliged only to satisfy what they themselves believe to be the truth. They know, beyond doubt, that an error of scholarly opinion incurs no punishment, but only discussion and correction. They know, beyond doubt, that an error of scholarly opinion does not call for shunning the works of the one who erred, but rather for keeping those works in circulation — since they are vessels of intellectual production, which may hold either error or truth. All this they know full well — and yet, knowing it, they still refuse to let the book of Professor Abd al-Rahman Bey al-Rafi'i be placed in school libraries, simply because it criticizes some aspect of Isma'il!

Then again, they know — if they are indeed historians, and we do not imagine the Ministry of Education would entrust a work of history to a group of mathematicians or jurists — that Professor al-Rafi'i said nothing about Isma'il's financial policy that every rigorous historian has not likewise said; that he did not err, nor did he intend distortion, but spoke the truth and strove earnestly to seek out what was correct. And

yet they still refuse — or rather, for that very reason they refuse — to approve the book for school libraries. Why? Because this fortunate age does not love the truth, does not savor freedom of opinion, and finds no rest unless men's views and doctrines are dictated to them — in learning and in practice, in politics and religion, and in history as well. And so, by this same logic, Isma'il too must be held infallible, unfailingly right in everything he did, everything he thought, and everything he said. Whoever sees otherwise, or says otherwise, has written a book fit only for confiscation — perhaps even fit for burning, as is done in Germany; so why should it not be done in Egypt as well?

Everything in this country is painful just now. Here are foreigners writing books on the history of Egypt, selling each volume for tens of pounds, while our own government buys up dozens of copies; and here are other foreigners compiling an encyclopedia on ancient Egypt, and our government subscribes to hundreds of copies of it, if not thousands. And here, meanwhile, is an Egyptian who has devoted his whole life and every effort to the study of his own country's history, and who has produced a masterful book, without precedent in the Arabic language — a book the Ministry of Education has never managed, and will not manage for years to come, to equal, or even to approach. Yet when this book is offered to the Ministry for placement in school libraries, the answer comes back: forbidden, absolutely forbidden — it is sacrilege to place this book in the offices and schools of the Ministry, because you have spoken of Isma'il's policies in terms we do not care for!

God be praised — has the Ministry of Education truly satisfied itself that everything in these foreign books it purchases, spending thousands upon them, meets with its approval? And since when has the Ministry's approval or displeasure been the measure of a book's quality or worthlessness, or the standard for deciding which books should be placed within reach of professors and students?

Professor Abd al-Rahman Bey al-Rafi'i must console himself with the thought that he is an Egyptian — and that the Egyptian is now a stranger in his own land! And Professor Abd al-Rahman Bey must console himself, too, with the thought that if his book is not placed in the Ministry's offices today, it will be placed there tomorrow, just as it has been placed there before. Professors and students will read it outside the Ministry's own offices, unless the General Security Administration should choose to confiscate it. And when that day comes, I shall congratulate the professor on the martyrs' triumph. But how I long for this rising generation, how I

long for this youth not yet corrupted by excess in the love of life, to reflect on all of this, to think it through, and to strive, from this very moment, to understand life as it truly is, and duty as it truly is — so that when, in time, they rise to positions of authority and oversight over the public good, they will not bow to this same painful struggle between dignity, truth, and freedom on the one side, and love of mere living on the other.