The Many-Headed One

Al-Balagh, 7 February 1946.

Our splendid, masterly ministry had three heads until yesterday, when the Security Council removed one of them to install it on the International Court of Justice, and the ministry returned to having two heads after having had three. It may remain with just these two heads, or a third head may be added in place of the one transferred to The Hague — that will depend on who is chosen as Foreign Minister, should this ministry be permitted to survive, to be reshuffled, and to have a new minister chosen for Foreign Affairs within it.

Readers, of course, know the story of that strange mythical creature that bore seven heads, no sooner had its enemy severed one than another sprouted in its place, until one of its enemies discovered the secret of its destruction and finished it off. Our ministry might well have been just such a creature, with as many heads as it has ministers, but only three of our ministers managed to be heads, while the rest were overtaken by indolence, or modesty, and so contented themselves with remaining mere members, working in the various departments of this nation, so fortunate in this fortunate era.

As for the three heads, they are well known: one is the Prime Minister, and "president" is derived from "head," so he is a head by nature, though like other heads of Egyptian ministries he functions as both head and hand — a head for the ministry when he sits in his office as president of the Council of Ministers, and a hand for the ministry when he sits in his office at the Ministry of the Interior; or rather, say he is two hands: a right hand when he goes to the Ministry of the Interior, and a left hand when he deputizes for the Foreign Minister during his absence in London. And he was, for a time, a third hand between right and left, when the Minister of Education went to the Sudan.

As for the second head of this ministry, it is the one excised from it yesterday and transferred from between its shoulders to a seat on the bench of the International Court of Justice. It was a head indeed — a head held high across three continents: in Africa, when it went daily to its office in Egypt; in America, when it headed our delegation at San Francisco; and in Europe, when it headed our delegation in London. And it very nearly became a head on a fourth continent, when it went to the Hijaz to perform the pilgrimage, had the ministry not borrowed one of its

own hands and made it, for a time, one of its heads, when the Minister of Health served as leader of the pilgrimage.

Be that as it may, our Foreign Minister was a second head of the ministry, of the utmost importance, the very seat of hope — Egypt's hope first, the Arab countries' hope second, and the Islamic countries' hope after that. For he was elected to the Security Council, while neither Turkey nor Iran was elected to it. And he fulfilled all these hopes in the best and most complete manner, nor was it fitting that he should do otherwise, for he is a jurist deeply versed in jurisprudence, a judge well-grounded in judgment, and a politician excellent in politics; and for this reason he enters houses by their doors and never by their back ways, and for this reason he opens doors well and closes doors well. And he closed the door of the Security Council in the face of Egypt and in the face of the other Arab countries.

As for Egypt, she accepted his ruling and bowed to his opinion, and stood before the closed door gazing at it submissively, looking upon it despairingly, raising her head to lower it and lowering her head to raise it — or rather, say she was raising one head and lowering another, for she had, at that time, two heads in Egypt: one rising in the premiership while the other fell in the Kutla party, one rising in the house of Makram Pasha while the other fell in the premiership.

And the Egyptian people stood watching, as spectators, marveling at these two heads, neither of which rose except as the other fell. And the important thing is that the third head of our ministry closed the doors of the Security Council, and closed them well, for Egypt and the other Arab countries are too trifling a matter to threaten the peace. And so the Security Council will not look into their affairs, and Egypt and the other Arab countries complain of nothing that followed from the war, but rather of chronic afflictions and lingering ailments that arose before the war ever broke out, and so the Security Council will not look into their affairs.

And one of the heads of the Egyptian ministry filled the earth with clamor and uproar and a protesting wail against the closing of the doors, while the other head filled the air with praise and prayer, content with the closing of the doors, and the two heads fell to quarreling, though a single body bears them both, and the limbs of this body responded to the one head at times, crying out and lamenting, and responded to the other head at other times, giving praise and thanks. As for the other Arab countries, they shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders, turning

away from the Egyptian ministry and its three heads, and smashed the locks and stormed the doors, and brought the affairs of Syria and Lebanon before the Security Council, and then decided to bring the affair of Palestine before the Security Council too, proving thereby that the community of Arab nations is bound together in the fullest solidarity, that Egypt represents it ably before the Security Council, and that matters, in this part of the Mediterranean coast, are proceeding in the very best way matters can proceed.

In any case, we have come to know two prominent heads of our ministry, each working well and speaking well. One of them fills Egypt with resolve and determination, peace and security, declaring in the Senate, for instance, that he preserves order, and preserving it well; and at the very moment he was declaring this, a gang of criminals was raiding a train near Cairo, wounding the mail guards grievously, binding them fast, taking whatever money they could lay hands on, and departing unmolested, having met no resistance at all — because one of the heads of the Egyptian ministry, or rather the first head of the Egyptian ministry, had filled Egypt with resolve and determination, peace and security, and had declared so in the Senate.

And the Egyptians came to know a second head of our ministry, who spoke well in London and acted well there, honoring Egypt among the nations so that she was elected to the Security Council, while weakening the solidarity among the Arab nations, so that he went one way and the Arab nations went another; and the whole world recognized in him this merit and this excellence, and so elected him a judge on the International Court.

As for the third head of our ministry, its affair is a wonder indeed — it is the head skilled at vexing the other two heads and the members of the ministry alike, crying out at the most unseasonable moments, until, having vexed his colleagues' day and robbed them of their night's sleep and disturbed their very beds, he suddenly falls silent, as though he had never stirred or raised his voice at all. His whole concern is to fill the earth with shouting, and it is no concern of his to accomplish anything at all; he advances only to retreat, attacks only to be routed, protests only to subside; he wants neither advance nor attack nor protest, but only vexation, sleeplessness, and disturbance. He is a restless head, unable to rest, and unwilling to let others rest.

He has a resignation every day, and every day a retraction of that resignation, and he has spoken on behalf of the ministry. Its first head was weary on Tuesday, and its other head was absent in London; so he spoke as deputy for both heads, or rather as sole authority over the affairs of both.

I do not know whether the two heads were content with what he said, willingly and by choice, or under compulsion and constraint. As for the absent head, he was neither pleased nor displeased, for he heard nothing of what was said at all. As for the present head, he would most likely have preferred to escape, through silence, from either "no" or "yes," for he favors silence and loves it; but the cunning senators questioned him and cornered him, asking him whether he endorsed what the second head had said, and he could not but answer: yes. And could he possibly have said that he was not insisting on the complete evacuation of Egypt's land, air, and sea?! And could he possibly have said that he would hold a referendum among the people of the Sudan on the question of the Sudan, when the Makram-ite head constrains the government most severely, declaring that the government will not accept anything less than complete evacuation of land, sea, and air, and will not accept a referendum in the Sudan under any circumstances whatsoever?!

Could the Prime Minister have denied any of that?! I bear witness that the Makram-ite head won a resounding victory over the other two heads in the Senate, for the Nokrashi-ite first head, the Foreign Minister, utterly denied it all, and declared that the Egyptian government regards it as her right to bring her case before the Security Council should she fail to reach agreement with the English over it, and then declared that he endorsed the Makram-ite head's demand for complete, total evacuation, and his rejection of a referendum.

And yet the Egyptian memorandum stipulated that our ministry wishes to negotiate the question of the Sudan while drawing inspiration from the wishes of the Sudanese themselves. And whence are these wishes to be drawn from the Sudanese themselves, if not through a referendum — yet the Makram-ite head spoke the untruth on behalf of people other than the Sudanese, so it draws inspiration from nothing at all, just as the Nokrashi-ite head spoke the untruth to the English.

And so the ship steered by two captains is bound to sink, and the body fitted between its shoulders with three heads can live only in a world of myth and marvel. And Egypt has been part of the world of myth

and marvel since the most ancient ages.

But our splendid modern Egyptian marvel — the three-headed ministry — is not distinguished by these triple heads alone, but by something else, which I do not know where to place upon its wondrous body: shall I place it in the position of the tail, so that it becomes a ministry at fault, or in the position of the nose, so that it becomes a ministry of superior nose?! Did not our ancient poet say:

A people who are the nose, while others are mere tails beneath them —
and who can equal the she-camel's nose with her tail?!

So where would the political committee like to place itself within this wondrous ministerial body?! As for the committee itself, it wishes to be a nose, or several noses, and I do not begrudge it this, even though Parliament may not approve, and the constitution may not approve; as for the ministry, it wishes to place the committee in the position of the tail, however much this may chafe at the committee's dignity, and however little the exalted standing of its members may accept it.

Be that as it may, let the political committee place itself wherever it pleases, and let the ministry place it wherever it pleases; and perhaps the best solution would be for it to be a nose when matters grow grave and difficult, and a tail when the porridge is being stirred and the wind blows favorably.

And the one thing I do not doubt, nor does anyone else doubt, is that Sidqi Pasha is angry. He wanted the political committee to be a nose, as it was in September and in December, but the ministry turned it into a tail once the British reply arrived, and has not summoned it to this day for a reason no one understands, as Sidqi Pasha himself puts it in Al-Ahram this morning. And Sidqi Pasha's anger is frightening at times, and not frightening at others — though he is not angry on behalf of the political committee alone, but angry on behalf of the Chamber of Deputies too, for the discussion of the negotiations has been postponed to some distant time in the Chamber of Deputies.

And Sidqi Pasha is angry at the government for accepting mere conversations, when nothing but negotiations ought to be accepted at all; and the shrewd reader understands that negotiations are something for which delegations are formed, delegations that travel to London, in which Sidqi Pasha himself might well have a place, and in which the political committee might be a nose. Conversations, however, are something the

ministry monopolizes for itself, in which Sidqi Pasha has no share, and in which the political committee can only ever be a tail. And so Sidqi Pasha is angry, and the grave question now is: does the government fear Sidqi Pasha's anger, so that it appeases him and angers the English by rejecting the conversations, or does the government mock Sidqi Pasha's anger this time, displeasing him and pleasing the English by accepting the conversations?!

There is, I believe, a splendid solution that would set everyone's mind at ease. The Security Council severed one of the heads of the ministry yesterday — so what harm is there in the ministry severing the tail, if the political committee is indeed a tail?! How many ministries live on quite well without any tails at all! Or in docking the nose, if the political committee is indeed a nose! How many ministries live on quite well with their noses docked!

Anything is possible. Our ministry has managed to live with three heads, and it is now living with two heads — so what prevents it from living without a tail?! What prevents it from living without a nose?! Indeed, what prevents it from living without either nose or tail at all?! Indeed, what prevents it from living with a great many heads, for that is an easy thing to arrange?!

It is said that a cabinet reshuffle is at hand, so let all the members of the political committee become ministers, and let our ministry live on with twenty heads rather than two — that would be far more likely to make the Egyptians laugh. And how badly the Egyptians need to laugh, in these days!