

## **CHAPTER TWO**

**THE WORLD** saw Egypt at this time as an underdeveloped country With poorly exploited natural resources, no heavy industry and no modern army. Only by virtue of her geographical position was she involved in the war. If our interest had not been subordinate to British strategy, Egypt would have remained neutral.

For the revolutionary cause, the war meant delay. Our group had been broken up. My friends, split up among different units of the Army and posted all over Egypt, had disappeared from the scene.

The British dominated the country. They held Egypt in a net of political and military obligations from which she could not free herself. In theory, Egypt's sovereignty had been restored by the treaty of August 26th, 1936. In fact the country remained in bondage. Mixed up in a foreign conflict in which

**we had no interest Egypt .became nothing more than satellite of the British Empire.**

**Egyptian opinion was sharply conscious of our dependent status. We saw the world in desperate and cruel conflict, and our fate was in the hands of a foreign power. The effect was suddenly to wake Egypt from her torpor. The nationalist temper of public opinion grew stronger.**

**why should Egypt be made a battlefield? The people resented it. But at the same time, they saw that Egypt herself was an important stake in the tremendous struggle between the world powers. When the decisive moment arrived, might not Egypt herself play a key role? This knowledge gave Egypt a strong desire for a place in the world which would eventually emerge from the torment of war.**

**For Egypt, the war acted as a signal, setting in motion the forces of transformation which had been latent for some time. She awoke from the lethargy in which servitude had plunged her, with one of**

**those sudden surges of energy which she has many times experienced in her history.**

**England was caught off guard. She tried to fight against the patriotic mood of the Egyptian people, but instead of destroying it, she merely repressed it. It broke out again in other forms. The British embarked on systematic provocation in order to uncover revolutionary elements. These actions resulted in a state of tension in the relations between the two countries and provoked a number of incidents, which, as we shall see, almost changed the course of events.**

**As the war situation changed, so did the internal situation in Egypt. Egypt's wartime relations with Great Britain went through three stages—partial collaboration, almost complete collaboration, then total collaboration—corresponding to the successive Egyptian governments between 1939 and 1945**

**At the outbreak of hostilities, Egyptian policy had been defined by Prime Minister Aly Maher: Keep Egypt out of the war. This declaration of Egypt's intentions seemed clear enough, but in fact it was equivocal, because the idea of neutrality was precluded by Egypt's military obligations under the 1936 Treaty. How could Egypt remain neutral, when British troops occupied the whole country and controlled the bases, communications, shipping routes, ports and natural resources of the country?**

**The day Italy entered the war, Mussolini declared that his government entertained no aggressive intentions towards Egypt or the Arab world, whose friendship he held to be a fundamental axiom of his foreign policy. Aly Maher was nevertheless forced to apply the 1936 Treaty and break off relations with Italy. But he did so with doubts in his mind—doubts which grew as the tide of war turned against Britain. Egypt did not believe in an Allied victory.**

**Despite British pressure, Aly Maher refused to declare war on the Axis. His firm and uncooperative attitude caused impatience in London. In this situation the Egyptian Army found itself in a dilemma. The government's policy was to keep the country out of war, but that did not mean we must not take part in hostilities. We fought, but who were we fighting for? Surely we were intended to fight for Egypt, and for Egypt alone?**

**Britain took quite a different attitude, as is proved by the order which Mr. Neville Chamberlain dispatched to Sir Miles Lampson (later Lord Killearn), the British Ambassador in Cairo.**

**"Aly Maher must be dismissed . . ."**

**And Aly either fell. He was peremptorily invited to take himself off to his country house and meditate upon the ill fortune which befalls all those who oppose the will of Britain.**

**Aly Maher went, but he remained on our side. He was an enlightened man, receptive to modern ideas.**

**It was into his hands, twelve years later, that Farouk delivered his instrument of abdication.**

**The deposition of Aly Maher showed where we stood with the Allies. We were certainly not our own masters, and we reacted to this knowledge with anger and indignation. Memories of the First World War came back—the empty promises of the British, our fathers conscripted for forced labor on the battlefields of Africa, Asia and Europe—these sacrifices had been in vain.**

**The flame which flared up in the revolution of 1939 had been quenched by unworthy leaders. On the day they assumed power, they had forgotten their duty to Egypt and served their masters, the British.**

**Then came the revolution of 1935, inspired by students, in which Gamal Abdul Nasser, then an adolescent, played a leading role. The result of that rebellion was a fusion of the parties into a national front. The same idealism was at work in both**

**insurrections, but these heroic efforts had been in vain.**

**We had failed in the past. Our servitude and our misery still persisted. Did the future reserve a better fate for us? The war, from which we could hope for nothing, seemed as if it might drag on forever. The dawn of the Golden Age seemed far away.**

**'With Italy's entry into the war, hostilities spread to North Africa, where the opposing armies exhausted themselves fighting back and forth across the desert. Egypt looked on and bided her time.**

**By September, 1940 Britain's fortunes were at zero. France had been knocked out. Britain hoped that the French armies in Africa and Syria, at least, would refuse to accept the French armistice of June, 1940. But after a brief hesitation General Nogues in North Africa and General Mittelhauser in Syria proclaimed their loyalty to Marshal Petain.**

**Great Britain stood alone. Her position in Egypt was as desperate as it was at home. Her weakness in the Middle East was apparent to everyone, and the position of her Army, Navy and Air Force in the Mediterranean had become untenable.**

**(Encouraged by the isolation of the British in the Middle East, Mussolini launched an offensive from Libya. Under the command of Marshal Graziani, the Italian Army marched across the desert of Cyrenaica and attacked the British Army under General Wavell. (It was a short, victorious campaign. On September 14th, the Italians occupied Sollum. On the 17th, they took Sidi Barrani, sixty miles inside Egyptian territory~ Graziani placed his infantry about 25 miles east of Sidi Barrani. Then he hesitated. The British, worn out, had nothing with which to oppose him. But Graziani waited, and he**

**gave the British time to get their second wind, regroup and bring up reinforcements.**

**If Graziani had attacked from his position east of Sidi Barrani, he could have led the Fascist Army to victory and occupied Egypt. It would have been all the easier for him, since relations between the British and Egyptians had seriously deteriorated at this time**

**This deterioration arose in November, 1940, when Churchill succeeded Chamberlain as Prime Minister of Great Britain. The change had immediate repercussions in Egypt, for Churchill decided that Egypt must be completely subordinated to the British war machine, using whatever degree of intimidation proved necessary.**

**As he writes in his memoirs, Churchill began by neutralizing the Egyptian Army. Through the British military authorities in the Middle East, he ordered the Egyptian High Command to disarm and immediately to withdraw all Egyptian forces from Mersa Matruh in the Western Desert.**

**The zone of Mersa Matruh was divided into three sectors, one held by the British and two held by two Egyptian divisions. The Egyptian Army was notified of the British demand on November 20th, and we were ordered not only to evacuate our positions, but to hand over our arms to the British. This caused a great deal of unrest among us. Was it a trap designed to make the revolutionary elements betray themselves, or did the British fear we would attack them unawares at a crucial moment in the war?**

**At all events, the two Egyptian divisions were withdrawn from Mersa Matruh, and our humiliation was complete.**

**We could not take this new provocation lying down. I pressed the view that, now or never, the time had come to act. The Army should rise up in general revolt with the support of the civilian population.**

**Our plan was as follows. Our forces would return to base, but on the way they would occupy strategic points, lines of communication and public utilities. We should then put the government of Aly Maher back in**

power there was perhaps one chance in a hundred of the rebellion succeeding, but it seemed to me that we should take that chance. Our revolutionary spirit must not be allowed to die, even if it meant fighting without hope. If we were defeated, then our gesture would serve as an example to those who followed us. The young people of Egypt would see our sacrifice as a demonstration to the world that our nation was as ready as any other to take arms against a great power rather than to abjure our faith.

But it was not to be.

We marched on Cairo. A cold appraisal of the facts showed that the revolt had the smallest chance of succeeding, and that defeat would seriously compromise our long-term plans. Sick at heart, we abandoned the idea of revolt. Nevertheless, we refused to hand over our arms to the British. We simply marched back to base.

I told myself that better days would come. We had to hang on, see it out. For the moment, we were defeated, but, soon, Egypt's day would dawn.