

Chapter three

IN CAIRO I was again united with my friends from Mankabad. It was clear that rebellion at this time would be premature. We did not believe in miracles. Also, the philosophy of our movement rejected the idea of historical determinism. Progress was not automatic. It was the result of individual efforts, struggle and sacrifice.

In Egypt, personalities have always been more important than political programs. We in our movement resisted the cult of the "leader" and the idolatry of great names, but in the prevailing circumstances we were obliged to approach the leaders of a number of different groups who might serve our purpose.

In every revolution there are two phases. First, men lead the revolution: then the revolution leads the men. we were still at the first stage, where the human factor is of great importance. The solution of our problem lay as

much in our relations with our friends as in the struggle against our enemies.

Accordingly, I was ordered by the Revolutionary Committee to get in touch with two of the dominating figures on the Egyptian political scene: Sheikh Hassan El Banna, the Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, and General Aziz El Masri, Chief of Staff of the Army. I knew neither of them. I was at this time a Lieutenant, twenty-four years of age.

My chance came on the eve of the Feast of Moulded EL Nabi, the birthday of the Prophet, which is a day of great celebration in Egypt. It is a holiday for the children, who are given presents of sugar dolls in colored paper clothes and miniature horsemen in bright costumes. For adults, the traditional present is a girdlecake flavored with chickpeas and sesame. The rich, in their sumptuous mansions, pass the night in feasting and carefree pleasure.

But not for me! That night marked the beginning of a series of adventures of which the echo was to reach the Egyptian people, sometimes as a murmur, sometimes with the explosive force of a bombshell.

I was serving in Army Communications at the time, at Meadi. We were sitting, eating and talking, in a room in the barracks. Most of the men in Communications were technicians who had volunteered for the Army. They were shrewd and intelligent men, and I liked talking to them. After work, we ceased to be officers and men and became simply comrades.

On the evening of the Feast of Mouted EL Nabi, a certain officer entered the room accompanied by a strange figure, muffled up in a red *abaya* (cloak) which almost completely hid his face. I had never seen the man before. I shook his hand and invited him to dine with us. He politely accepted and sat down. He had sad and dreamy eyes, like a saint, and, despite his bizarre clothes, his bearing and conversation were noble.

He talked chiefly on religious topics, but not in the accustomed manner of the preacher, with sonorous phrases and learned references. He went straight to the nub of the question, and he spoke with directness and ease. It seemed strange to me, but here was a theologian with a sense of reality, a man of religion who recognized the existence of facts. This was my first meeting with Sheikh Hassan EL Banna, Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded by Hassan EL Banna in Ismailia in 1930. Its ostensible aim was the moral perfection of the individual, but its underlying aim was the reorganization of society on an ideal plane.

originally the Brotherhood had no political objective, it simply expressed the wave of moral regeneration which was transforming Egypt. The austere virtues of the Supreme Guide contrasted with the abasement of the people in high authority in the State~ His influence on the masses grew. The youth of the country flocked to join this dynamic new organization .

The Muslim Brotherhood rose to a position of power with extraordinary rapidity. It appealed to the egalitarian mood of the time, absorbing intellectuals and workers, rich and poor. Soon the organization became conscious of itself as a political force and began giving arms and military training to its members. This was a mortal error. The Brotherhood opened its doors to good and bad indiscriminately, and the germ of its future aberrations was sown. The Brotherhood was to become an organization of unbounded fanaticism, and a menace to public order.

But, such as it was in its early days, the Muslim Brotherhood seemed a useful ally to our revolutionary movement. We hoped to use our association with the Brotherhood as a lever to achieve our own ends. How we were deceived in our calculations will emerge later.

The man in the red cloak invited me to visit him at the headquarters of the Brotherhood. I hastened there on the appointed day. The place was an old, tree shaded mansion in an outlying suburb of Cairo. I felt strangely

frightened as soon as I walked inside. The place seemed shrouded in mystery. I entered an enormous room. The walls, in the usual style of these old buildings, were lined with white marble. Beyond this room was a sort of long corridor, which turned out to be not a corridor, but a library. The walls were literally covered with books. There was a smell of old paper. In the dim light, I became aware of two eyes, watching me. The Supreme Guide was sitting waiting at the end of the room.

We had a long conversation that day. Hassan EL Banna deplored the decline of religion and morals in Egypt and the common disregard of the precepts of Islam. I le said that the revival of Egypt must be based upon the Faith, and that the dogmas of Islam must be inculcated in all branches of the Army.

We met again frequently, and our conversations broadened to include political matter\$. He had a surprising, intuitive grasp of the problems facing Egypt. At once fanatical and clear-thinking, he realized that he was living at the end of an epoch.

Hassan EL Banna controlled the policy of the Brotherhood, and he ruled it like an autocrat. Even those close to him knew little of his plans, and I felt certain that this man was thinking out grandiose projects which he kept strictly to himself.

He had begun organizing Para-military organizations and shock battalions. He set up ammunition dumps and arms depots. For this kind of work he relied on the younger members of the Brotherhood, one of them being the officer who had brought him to me at the barracks at Meadi.

I was with Hassan EL Banna one day when a soldier entered unexpectedly, carrying two sealed boxes which he placed in front of the Supreme Guide. The soldier started when he recognized me. Hassan EL Banna reassured him with a gesture, and the young soldier, smiling, opened the boxes. They contained revolvers.

I felt great joy at this moment. I foresaw the time when we, the men of the Army, would give the signal for the battle to begin, and I knew that the great power of the people would sustain us.

But when would that day dawn?

Hassan EL Banna knew that I was engaged in some secret activity, and I learned later that he knew much more about our organization than I imagined possible at the time. He did not try to recruit me to the Brotherhood, because he realized that our group kept systematically apart from other groups and parties, that we felt did not share the same aspirations as ourselves. Neither did Hassan EL Banna try to sound me for information about our organization.

Our collaboration continued, cautiously and in secret. I functioned as liaison man between the Revolutionary Committee and the Supreme Guide.

One day I went to meet him in a very discouraged mood. The Military Governor had just announced the dismissal

of General El Masri, our second possible ally, from his post as chief of Staff of the Army.

We knew that the British were behind this move, and the Committee urged me to get in touch with the General as soon as possible. Since he was a friend of the General's, I asked Hassan EL Banna to arrange an interview for me. We had to act with the greatest caution, moving by night, in case we attracted the attention of the British Intelligence Service or their helpers, the Egyptian Secret Police.

I warned Hassan EL Banna that if I were discovered I should not be the only one to suffer the consequences. He inclined his head, smiling. Then he wrote a few words on a piece of paper and handed it to me, saying: "You will find him at this address."

I got lost in the maze of streets around the Place de Sayeda Zeinab before I found the house I was looking for. The brass plate outside said: *Clinic. Dr. Ibrahim Hassan.* I started to walk quickly up the stairs,, and then

remembered that I should be playing the part of a patient, in case the building was being watched. I climbed the rest of the stairs with a heavy tread, pausing frequently as though to recover my breath. I rang the door bell. When I entered I recognized the doctor as the vice-president of the Muslim Brotherhood. He at once ushered me into his office, where General Aziz EL Masri was awaiting my arrival.

The General was a small, slight man with a light complexion and grey eyes. Despite his advanced age, he had tremendous energy and fire. He combined the qualities of a soldier with those of a diplomat, controlling a passionate temperament with a will of iron.

He had achieved brilliant success during the Balkan Wars of 1912-1914 , and again in Libya where he fought with the Turkish Army against the Italians. He was receptive to modern ideas, having traveled in France, England and Germany. His experience, his patriotism and his past record were such as to arouse the

suspicion of the British and to make his services eminently valuable to the revolutionary movement.

It was the British Ambassador, Sir Miles Lampson, who had demanded the dismissal of Aziz EL Masri, on the pretext that the General was a pro-German Anglophobe. In fact, the British feared the presence of this imposing personality in the Egyptian Army, since he represented the spirit of independence and was known to support the liberation of Egypt, by force of arms if necessary. As long as he occupied the post of Chief of Staff, Aziz EL Masri was a dangerous man from the British point of view.

In 1938 I was one of the young officers present in the amphitheatre of the Military College when the General gave a lecture on defence tactics and motorized forces. He advocated a new method of destroying tanks, using one soldier and a special type of bomb. The British did not take his idea seriously, yet it was proved correct less than a year later, when the Second World War

showed that a single soldier, armed with a "Molotov cocktail," could knock out the most up-to-date tank.

Aziz El Masri, with some other officers, also began a project to manufacture armored cars in Egypt. It was a success, and the British were much disturbed.

Next, the General adopted the German system of reconnaissance in the Egyptian Army. Then he finally and completely alienated the British by asking Egyptian Army commanders to send him detailed reports on the activities of the British military Mission, in order to decide whether it was necessary to maintain this Mission or whether its services might be dispensed with.

The General did nothing to endear himself when he told the chief of the British Military mission: "I have regretfully come to the conclusion that you are a trade and commerce mission, not a military mission at all." This occurred after the mission had placed an order for Bren guns in Britain, although the Czechs were offering them at much lower prices.

The British had infiltrated Aziz El Masri's staff with a number of young officers with high military

diplomas the highest qualification of all being, of course, a diploma for espionage on behalf of the British Secret Service! After his enforced resignation, the General was put on the retired list. The British kept him under constant surveillance.

The Egyptian regime was sinking further and further into decadence under a King who was selfish, uneducated to his royal task, and surrounded by men of tarnished reputation.

The General knew this unworthy sovereign well, for he had been his tutor in England in 1936. He told me of his vain attempts to give Farouk, then heir to the throne, the type of solid education which would fit him for the royal task which would one day be his. It was a waste of time. Farouk had already fallen under the evil influence of two intriguers, Omar Fathi and Ahmed Hassanein, who, in order to enjoy the favors of the future King, flattered his every caprice, taking him into London's night clubs and places of ill repute and bringing him home dead drunk in the small hours of the morning.

The two accomplices were determined to remove their master from every salutary influence. They succeeded in persuading Farouk that the General had been

imposed on him by King Fuad and that he intended to poison Queen Nazli, in order that the King should enjoy his son's entire affection. Farouk was horrified, for as much as he was indifferent to his father, he cherished a deep affection for his mother. The General was instantly dismissed from his post.

Now the old patriot, though full of sadness, affirmed his faith in the regeneration of Egypt. His hopes lay in the young officers of the Army, who would, he believed, become the educators of the people. He instanced the example of Napoleon, who carried out a *coup d'etat* at the age of thirty, reconstituted France and went on to govern an empire.

The aim of the Army must be the liberation and the reconstruction of Egypt on a sound basis. Exhorting US to set to work immediately, Aziz EL Masri said

"Have faith! Act!"

Have faith! I felt the words deeply, for I was convinced that only faith could bring the Egyptian people out of the abyss.

For England, 1941 was a tragic year. For Egypt, it was a year of hope. the British Empire was confronted with the most dangerous situation in its history. In the Eastern Mediterranean, the revolt of Rashid Aly convulsed Iraq; in the West, the Axis was on the march; and between the two Egypt was stirring, ready to enter the fight. For Churchill it was really a desperate hour.

The situation was so menacing that the British Admiralty was faced with the prospect of abandoning the Eastern Mediterranean and concentrating the fleet at Gibraltar. The stepping-up of the Axis air offensive and the attacks on the convoys between Malta and Alexandria showed that a big move was under way. The Axis had superior forces. The Fascist war machine was now in the experienced hands of the Germans. Defeat stared Britain in the face. Egypt owed it to herself to profit from these favorable circumstances. The morale of our forces was very high, and they were ready to fight.

We made contact with the German Headquarters in Libya and we acted in complete harmony with them. For the intervention of Egypt could not take the form of an unsupported internal uprising. We were not ready to act

alone, and a regular war against the British was out of the question, for, weakened though she was, England had built up her armaments on an impressive scale. But if a junction could be effected between Egyptian insurgents and Axis troops, our war would become an international affair. We followed events from day to day, pushing ahead with our preparations and making the best use of the modest resources at our disposal.

For us in Egypt, the rebellion in Iraq acted as a kind of safety valve which prevented an explosion. It was the first sign of the liberation of the Arab world, and we followed the course of the revolt with admiration.

Now seemed to be the golden opportunity for General Aziz.

Masri—the man who had lived and fought in the Arab countries under the Ottoman Empire. Might he become the decisive factor in the struggle between Britain and Germany on the banks of the Euphrates? We saw him as an intrepid soldier and an incomparable chief. No one could do more than he to hold the Egyptian forces together and to win vital German support for the Arab cause.

But the old rebel took a different view of the situation. We, the young officers, wanted to attack the British and make Egypt a second Iraq. Rashid Aly had given the signal for the war of liberation, it was our duty to rush to his aid. To our great surprise, Aziz EL Masti refused to share our enthusiasm. He received the news from Bagdad with skepticism. He said: "You don't know Iraqi politicians as well as I do!" He told us remarkable stories about the political ethics of some of the Arab leaders he had known at the time of the Turks. No doubt he foresaw that Rashid Aly would be stabbed in the back. He was.

One day in March, 1941, an agent of the Wehrmacht sought out Aziz EL Masri at his home and gave him a message from Germany. The Germans, it said, thought highly of the General's patriotic activities, and they would be happy to make use of his military experience in collaboration. If he, on his side, wished to cooperate with Germany, he had only to make his plans known. Germany would see to their execution.

There was one difficulty, however: the British Intelligence Service. To my great surprise, Colonel Moussa Loutfi, chief of the Egyptian C.I.D., informed me that our

activities were known to his department, and that the Intelligence Service was keeping a vigilant eye on us.

I, in turn, warned Aziz EL Hlasri. After discussing the matter at length, we decided to accept the German proposition. But how was the General to get out of the country? His first idea was to escape to Beirut in a German submarine, which he would board in Lake Borollos, near the Canal Zone.

I had a friend in the Egyptian cavalry stationed in the Canal Zone. At my invitation he came to Cairo, discussed the project with the General and then returned to Borollos to reconnoiter. It came to nothing. We examined the plan from every angle and decided it was certain to fail.

We then considered the possibility of escaping by airplane. The Germans approved the idea and asked us to designate a disused airfield where a Luftwaffe plane could land and pick up the General and his companions. We decided from the map that the best airfield would be EL Khataba, and the General and I went together in his small car to reconnoiter the area. A pilot came with us. We took the road past the barrages and then turned off

along the Rayah EL Beheri Canal. When we arrived at Khataba we drove across the bridge and turned the car towards the Western Desert. Imagine our stupefaction when we saw that there were enormous army depots lining both sides of the road and the place was swarming with British troops. We drove past the airfield and returned to Cairo along the desert road to avoid British encampments.

The Germans did not like our choice of landing ground. They designated another place near Gabel Rozza on the Oasis Road. The Germans were right. The ground at Gabel Rozza was hard and level, and their choice showed that they knew our deserts perfectly. No doubt the German "explorers" who visited Egypt shortly before the war had contributed something to that knowledge.

A rendezvous was fixed for dawn on a certain day, and we were told what recognition signals to give the aircraft. The day was a Saturday. I was in a military hospital feigning illness, in order to avoid being drafted the Western Desert.

But fate was against the project. Aziz EL Masri's car broke down on the way to the landing ground and it was impossible to repair it. A German aircraft, bearing the insignia of the R.A.F., arrived at the rendezvous, but turned back when it found the General was not there.

The old warrior refused to be discouraged. He was determined to reach the German lines and he made one more attempt. He arranged with Squadron-Leader Hussein Zulficar to make his escape aboard an Egyptian military aircraft. They were to take off on the next night that Zulficar was in command of the airfield. But assuredly fate was against the General. The aircraft hit a post on takeoff and crashed. The fugitives miraculously escaped with their lives. They were arrested and imprisoned on a charge of conspiring against the security of the State.

I still think that if ill luck had not so dogged our enterprise, we might have struck a quick blow at the British, joined forces with the Axis and changed the course of events.

As it was, the formidable reserves of violence in the Egyptian people remained latent and suppressed. It was all the more certain that revolution would come.

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