

Chapter Four

THE REVOLUTIONARY COMMITTEE had to keep changing its tactics to meet the changing situation of the war. When Britain showed the smallest weakness, that was the time to act.

We were no longer the feeble and flabby Egypt of the First World War. Britain faced a country which was determined to achieve its independence at all costs. As the tide of war turned against them, the British stiffened in their attitude to the Egyptian government, and they began to put on pressure. Soon, the British arrogance knew no bounds, as was demonstrated in the famous incident of February 4th, 1942.

When Rommel launched his attack in the Western Desert in January of that year, it seemed clear to the British that an offensive on such a scale could only have been mounted by the connivance of marshal Petain with Hitler and Mussolini. Accordingly, in February,

1942, the governments of Hussein Sirry broke off diplomatic relations with Vichy France at the "request" of the British government. But the British did not approve of

Hussein Sirry. They "requested" immediately afterwards that Sirry should be dismissed and Nahas Pasha called to power. Farouk resigned, and a crisis resulted.

On February 4th, 1942, there was a demonstration against the British in the streets of Cairo. The cry went up: "Rommel! Rommel!" It made an ideal pretext for the British, and they acted instantly. A squadron of tanks and armored cars surrounded the Royal Palace and smashed through the gates of the courtyard.

Sir Miles Lampson, the British Ambassador, walked into the Palace surrounded by South Africa, officers carrying pistols. A court official approached them. Lampson brushed the man aside saying: "I know my way." He walked into the King's study and presented him with an ultimatum: Farouk could either appoint Nahas Pasha as Prime Minister within twenty-four hours, or lose his throne.

A great deal has been written about this incident, and many writers have classed it as a political "story." In fact, because of the events which followed, it emerges as one of the crucial incidents in contemporary Egyptian history. The king lost face. Virtually a prisoner in his

own palace, he played an obscure and insignificant role for the rest of the war.

Up till now the King had been synonymous with the patriotic idea, and the violation of the Royal Palace was regarded by all patriotic Egyptians as an outrage against Egypt herself. But from now on Farouk changed utterly, and Egypt began to despair of him. He had suffered a severe shock, which was followed by chronic nervous depression.

Unstable and anxious by temperament, Farouk became the prey of psychological inhibitions. He suffered from persecution mania. He was irascible and violent. He lived at night and slept during the day. It became gradually obvious that he was a paranoiac. He underwent a physical change at the same time. He became very fat and prematurely aged.

The result of the British *coup* of February 4th, 1942, was to impose upon Egypt two years of dictatorship by the Wafd—two years of nepotism, jobbery and peculation which thoroughly discredited the major nationalist party in Egypt. The government's incompetence, and a series of scandals, embittered the

already discontented public, while the Muslim Brotherhood gained in prestige and popularity.

Meanwhile, the British tried to break down Egyptian resistance by applying the formula—no longer original, but one in which they are particularly adept— of divide and rule. They tried to turn the people against the Egyptian Army, representing it as a kind of Praetorian Guard of Farouk's, an instrument of oppression which the King would not hesitate to use against the people if they showed any sign of unrest. It was a clever idea, whose true nature was only later to become apparent to the Egyptian people.

The officers of our revolutionary group met at Zamalek to discuss the possibility of avenging the British insult of February 4th. But Egypt was not ready to fight, and impetuous action might have compromised our future aims. Moderation won the day, but the hostility of the Egyptian Army resulted in the immobilization of considerable British forces, which Britain could more usefully have employed elsewhere.

This latest affront to our country gave a new stimulus to the revolutionary movement. Abdul Nasser and Abdul Hakim Amer determined that Egypt must never again

suffer such a humiliation. The real revolutionary conspiracy dates back to this time. The movement had now passed from the theoretic to the militant phase. Recruitment was stepped up. Abdul Nasser, during the course of the year, was appointed as an instructor at the Military College, where he came into contact with hundreds of cadets and was able to select the best elements for the revolutionary movement. If he had made one false step, or if anyone had informed on him, he would have been instantly court-martialled.

Such, in my view, were the effects of the incident of February 4th, 1942. The political and psychological repercussions were immense.

The war situation changed dramatically at the beginning of July, 1942. Fortune betrayed the Allies. Hong Kong, Singapore, the Dutch East Indies and Malaya fell to the Japanese. The losses of the Royal Navy were so heavy that the Admiralty had nothing left in the Eastern Mediterranean but a skeleton fleet of a few cruisers and destroyers. In Russia, the Germans had conquered the Ukraine and were advancing towards the Caucasus. In the Middle East, the British were defeated in Libya. Forty thousand British prisoners were captured at

Tobruk and the Africa Corps stormed across North Africa to reach EL Alamein, at the gates of Alexandria. The Luftwaffe, master of the skies, bombed the retreating British without respite. The British forces in the Middle East were isolated. Britain openly began preparations for the evacuation of Cairo and Alexandria. The civilians left. The British Embassy burned its papers. It seemed that the end was near.

Egypt had been patient. We had suffered insult and provocation, and now we prepared to fight side by side with the Axis to hasten England's defeat.

The plan of our revolutionary group was as follows. We would carry out a military *coaf d'etat* in Cairo, overthrow the Wafd government under Nahas Pasha, and put Aly Maher back in power. The Egyptian Army would harry the British forces. We would join up with the Axis troops, and the fate of the British Empire would be sealed. The Revolutionary Committee assigned to me the task of informing the Muslim Brotherhood about our plan.

The Supreme Guide was the only man in the Muslim Brotherhood with whom we had any contact, and Hassan EL Banna took care to keep it so. I remember

once, when I went to see him, he was engaged in conversation with one of the vice-presidents of the Brotherhood. He took great care that this man did not see me. I was made to wait in another room on another floor, which Hassan EL Banna presently entered by a hidden door. Without a word, he took my arm, conducted me to a car and we drove to his home, where the interview took place in his carefully shuttered study.

I went straight to the point in my conversation with Hassan EL Banna. I told him that the time had come for action. I explained our plan and the role which we hoped his followers would play in it.

The old man, with his sad eyes and black beard, listened attentively. He murmured a few words in a low voice, as though talking to himself. Then he burst into tears. Presently he recovered himself and began talking enthusiastically about our plan. His soul was moved, he said, by the vision of Egypt in arms, marching towards her deliverance. The welfare of Egypt was the thing he cared more about than anything else in the mortal world. He reflected for a moment, and then, with a smile that failed to mask his uneasiness, he said: "We are ready to come to your aid at any time."

His heart was with us, but he had not spoken the words I expected of him. He had not expressly approved our plan, he had not said that his troops would join forces with us when the signal for action was given. He had simply promised the support of the government, without specifying whether this support would be total or partial, material or moral. But he came out of his habitual reserve and gave me some information about the arms and training of the paramilitary formations at his disposal. Finally, he asked me to propose to the Committee that our revolutionary group join the Muslim Brotherhood.

I objected that the ideology of the Brotherhood was essentially different from ours, and that the merger would be virtual suicide for our party. We were an Army organization, and on principle we avoided tying ourselves to other groups. Both we and the Brotherhood shared the same immediate objective—the overthrow of the present regime—and we should concentrate on this program of action rather than on the precise political structure of the future.

Hassan EL Banna was vague and enigmatic in his replies. I do not know if he doubted himself or if he

doubted us. His mind alternated between hope and fear, enthusiasm and pessimism, the secular and the sacred, and this sometimes prevented him from taking the objective view of a situation and the opportunities which presented themselves. He believed that the people should rise up in religious exaltation, yet he never succeeded in mobilizing the spirit of revolution which existed on all sides, he never brought that explosive mood to a point of concentration where it could be detonated with maximum effect. In the atmosphere of mystery with which he surrounded himself, it was easy for him to create the impression that he had mighty forces at his disposal, yet he always avoided committing himself on their deployment.

This was the last interview I had with Hassan EL Banna before my arrest and imprisonment. It showed that we had built too high hopes on the Muslim Brotherhood. The truth was that we could rely on nobody to make the revolution but ourselves.

Despite the elaborate precautions I took, I was caught by the British Counter Espionage Service with two of Rommel's agents, while working on a plan for a

combined operation by our joint forces against the British.

The story began one evening in June, as the Nazi advance on EL Alamein reached its peak, when there were three light taps on the door of an Army colleague, Major Hassan Ezzat. Herr Appler and Herr Sandy, agents sent by Marshal Rommel, presented themselves. Hassan Ezzat immediately brought them to me. The two young Nazis had been seconded from the Africa corps in Cyrenaica to carry out this special mission for the Intelligence Service of the Wehrmacht.

Hans Appler knew Egypt inside out. His German mother had made a second marriage to an Egyptian magistrate, and she brought her son to Egypt. He had an Egyptian education, he spoke perfect Arabic, and he adopted his stepfather's surname. Hans Appler became Hussein Gaafer. But Hussein turned out badly. He mixed with doubtful company and spent his nights in the cabarets, to the great distress of his stepfather, who tried to bring him back to the straight and narrow path, but eventually gave up the attempt. Hussein returned to Germany in 1939, just before the war, and became Hans Appler again. He was called up when war broke out and

employed on special duties by the Wehrmacht as an expert on Egyptian affairs.

The two men arrived in Egypt with a radio transmitter and £40,000 in false banknotes, printed in Greece. They set out from the German lines disguised as British officers in a British military vehicle, and they drove into Egypt along the little-used route that runs south of the Siwa Oasis. They reached Kharga, where they turned on to the main road for Assiout.

This was the most dangerous part of the journey, for the road passed through a military zone with many check points. Halfway, they ran out of gasoline. Appler said he coolly drove into a British camp, showed his papers, filled up and drove away, returning the salute of the sentries as he left. From Assiout to Cairo they had a clear run.

Once in Cairo, the two spies traded their British uniforms for civilian clothes and immediately got in touch with us. We examined their documents, which proved beyond doubt that they were what they purported to be. They at once established radio contact with the German High Command.

One day they asked me if I would repair their radio transmitter, which had broken down. As a Signals Officer I knew something about radio, and I said I would do it for them. I was astonished to discover that they had set up their quarters with a celebrated dancer, Hekmat Fahmy, in a house boat on the Nile.

Appler laughed at my surprise. "You didn't expect us to look for lodgings in a British barracks, did you?"

This was not the only thing that disturbed me. They told me they had changed their £40,000 in false bank-notes into Egyptian money through the agency of a Jew. The Jew took 33 1/3 percent commission. It seemed to me foolhardy to deal through a stranger.

I went down to the houseboat to repair the radio, and I was astonished to see that the transmitting aerial was perfectly visible from the outside.

I began to be worried. What did the Jew know about the source of the money he had changed? He had taken an exorbitant commission, but was it enough to keep his mouth shut? And what role was the dancer playing in this curious affair?

I rang the bell, and she opened the door. The two Germans were there. I glanced around the room in which I found myself, and I was quickly enlightened about the sort of life which these young Nazis were living. The place was furnished like something out of the *,Arabian Nights*. In these soft and voluptuous surroundings, it was clear that Appler and Sandy were rapidly forgetting the mission for which they had been sent to Egypt.

I looked around for the transmitter. The room seemed to be full of bottles of perfume and whisky. Appler took me out into the hall and showed me a phonograph, with a lid of carved wood. Under the lid there was the usual pickup and turntable, but by pressing a catch the whole top of the phonograph opened up to reveal a space big enough to contain transmitter and operator. A small lamp illuminated the space, and the operator, once inside, could be hidden from view by closing the lid on top of him. While he worked, the phonograph played dance music . . . It would need a clever investigator to guess that inside this commonplace article of furniture there was a secret transmitter sending messages to the Wehrmacht.

I got inside the space to examine the transmitter. It was a solid piece of work, and it had been carefully installed. I could not find out where the fault was. Suddenly a doubt crossed my mind.

I told the Germans I could find nothing wrong with the set. They seemed troubled by this, and they asked me if I knew a Swede named X (using a password). I did know X, a diplomat in the Swedish Embassy at Cairo, who had looked after the interests of German nationals in Egypt since the German Embassy closed on the declaration of war. The two Germans asked me to get in touch with X, adding, after a moment's hesitation, that the Swede had supplied them with another

transmitter, but they did not know how to work it. I asked them to show me the set. It was an American Hallicrafter, in perfect working order and easy to handle.

My suspicions about these two young men were now confirmed. With thousands of pounds to spend on girls and easy living, they were trying to spin out their stay in Egypt as long as they could. They had put their first transmitter out of action and then told X they had no set.

X got in touch with the German High Command, who had ordered that another transmitter should be secured for them. Now they had one transmitter out of order, and a second which they said they could not work.

I stumbled across their game too late. The second time I went to the houseboat I found the pair of them dead drunk with two Jewesses. They were arrested the following day.

I at once informed the Committee. It was important to find out how they had been caught, because the British Intelligence Service, having once uncovered Nazi spies in Cairo, had doubtless gone to a lot of trouble to find out who their Egyptian contacts were.

I was now in danger, but I was chiefly disturbed in case the British got a lead on our secret organization by uncovering my link with the two Germans. This would have been a catastrophe for the movement.

Major Hassan Ezzat, who was a member of our cell, was arrested two days after the Germans were arrested. I was taken the day following. I had not expected to be arrested so soon. I had supposed the Intelligence

Service would give me a longer run, keeping me under surveillance in order to uncover the revolutionary network. But the British never uncovered our organization. It was not even their men who had discovered the Germans, for they had been betrayed by the two amiable young Jewesses in whose company I had found them on my last visit. These ladies of doubtful virtue had been promised £200 for their services. What matter if they got it from the young Nazis or from the British Intelligence Service?

The British interrogated the Germans for twenty four hours, but they refused to talk. It happened that Winston Churchill was passing through Cairo at this time, and he said he would like to interrogate the spies himself. Brought before Churchill, the Germans at first persisted in their silence, but when the Prime Minister promised that their lives would be spared, they talked. As a result I was arrested on a charge of conspiring against the security of the State in time of war. I was tried before two British Intelligence officers and one Egyptian police officer.

An Egyptian Army officer appearing, before British military judges—this was the end! Our indignation knew

no bounds when we discovered that this special court had been empowered to try Egyptian citizens by order of Nahas Pasha's government.

I refused to make a statement or give any information. I was cashiered from the Army, sentenced, and imprisoned in a detention camp at miniah on October 8th, 1942.

I reflected on the myth of the British Secret Service. In the minds of many people, it has become a dark legend, an organization of fantastic power, whose tentacles extend everywhere. The reality is a little different. Nobody will deny the power and ability of the Secret Service, but it is a long way from being the "all seeing eye" of popular legend. What keeps the British Secret Service functioning is simply money, and the irresistible temptation which money represents to rogues and traitors. But the Egyptian patriots—they were men of a different stamp.

It was not my arrest which prevented the revolution from taking place. It was Egyptian treason. The patriots were hunted down and there were mass arrests. Nahas

Pasha and his colleagues were serving the British, who had put them into power. This roundup of pro-Axis Egyptians took place just as the fortunes of war changed in favor of the British.

On October 19th, 1942, the Allies defeated the Germans at the Battle of Alamein, and the Eighth Army pursued the enemy along the North African littoral as far as Tunisia. The Russians won the Battle of Stalingrad and launched a counteroffensive in the Caucasus. Thus, both arms of the German pincer movement on Egypt were broken, and Egyptian hopes were broken too.

The French fleet, immobilized at Alexandria, was put at the disposal of General Giraud. The war flowed back from the Middle East. Russian resistance and the arms buildup of the Allies made it clear that the Axis was going to lose the war. The liberation of Egypt was not for tomorrow. England, unlike Carthage, was not to be destroyed.

Henceforth, the people of the Nile Valley knew that they could count on no-one but themselves. There would be no help from outside.

We were not discouraged. We had absolute faith in our cause, and it was only a question of time before Egypt came to be the arbiter of her own destiny.

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