

Chapter Seven

THE YEAR 1945 saw the opening of a new phase in the history of our secret preparations. The events described in the earlier part of this book were almost all directed by emotion, often quite irrational. From now on, our actions were controlled by a carefully-thought-out plan, aiming at a specific target.

For soon the hour for concerted action would come. Gamal Abdul Nasser was taking careful stock of the situation, choosing the moment when he would give the signal, and the fight for freedom would begin. Egypt had waited long for this moment.

The war with Germany ended on May 8th, 1945. New hope was born in the world. There was an optimistic belief that an age of justice was about to begin, that peace would reign among all men, and that the Atlantic Charter meant the beginning of a new, free life. Can one really blame people for their credulity, for their trust in promises so solemnly made and so often repeated?

We, too, had longed for the end of the war, but not because we believed in these fine promises. To us, the cessation of hostilities meant the lifting of that sword of Damocles—martial law—which had held us at the mercy of the British Intelligence Service.

Progress is almost invariably accompanied by a period of intellectual ferment. It was so in Egypt, where the revolutionary movement could not have made its appearance at a more propitious moment. Egypt had emerged from her medieval chrysalis under the enormous impact of the war.

The old Egypt was dying, and it was the intellectual union of the cultured classes and the masses which saved the new Egypt from disintegration. The University has a fine record of active political demonstration, and it was the students—instinctively on the side of the proletariat and the oppressed—who effected the spiritual revolution so necessary to our political revolution. The intellectual feels the need to "place himself"

in society; to him, our movement was a source of life in a dying country.

Now the intellectual and the politically conscious man in the street felt alike: *things must change*. What had seemed impossible before now seemed within our grasp. The battle was halfway won.

Gamal Abdul Nasser was at the helm. He has the politician's flair for understanding the true aspirations of the people, on which, in the long run, the fate of a country must depend. He drew up a realistic balance sheet of our strength and weaknesses before making the next move. Egypt's future was not to be thrown away in a wild gamble.

The country was in a state of complete social and political confusion. The government, completely lacking in imagination and drive, was incapable of satisfying the aspirations of the people, and it opened the way to disorder, unrest, and finally, revolution. Careerists, traitors and imperialists were grabbing all they could.

Several obstacles still blocked our way. The first was the mistaken idea which many good people held of the Army: that it was a weapon in the hands of the King, which he would use to tame his subjects should they rise in protest. This conception of the Army as a Praetorian Guard was, of course, carefully nourished by reactionaries and imperialists, whose interests lay in the maintenance of a gulf between the Army and the people.

Thus, if the people feared the King, it was not his person or his position which inspired fear. It was the fact that, as Commander-in-Chief of the Army, its troops were at his disposal.

This was far from the truth. The Egyptian Army was no longer composed of Mamelukes or mercenaries, as it had been at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Its roots were in the people, its problems and its hopes were those of the people. But the people were uncertain where the loyalties of the Army lay, and they dared not make a bid for freedom by rising in revolt, for fear of

reprisals by fire and sword. This foolish fear raised a barrier which it was not easy to break down.

Our second obstacle was the coalition between the King, the political parties and the clerical reactionaries—a powerful alliance, propped up by the British, whose ends it served.

The King was well aware of the abyss which separated him from the people. His familiars—worthless courtiers and self-seeking advisers—urged him to make no reforms or concessions. They argued that one concession would lead to another until the people became so demanding that the monarchy itself might be threatened. Speaking for the King, and trying to justify his master's attitude, Ahmed Hassanein used to say:

"When the King took a stand against the British, the people did not stir. But when the British humiliated our King by forcing the Nahas government on him, the people cheered Nahas and refused to take up the challenge." The argument ran that if Farouk was now col-

laborating with the British, it was because the Egyptian people showed on February 4th that they would not fight for him.

The coalition government included some minor political parties which had only come to power by means of electoral fraud, and by sowing discord between the King and the Wafdist party. They, too, were not above collaboration with the British.

As for the Wafd, which controlled Parliament, it was now steeped in corruption, having joined forces politically with the feudalists and the court party. There was nothing more to hope for from a party which had itself torn up the roots which bound it to the people.

Thirdly, there was the obstacle of the clerical reactionaries.

The Egyptian is a religious man. He has a deep respect for all religions, and for spiritual values. But religion is one thing, its exploitation for political pur-

poses quite another. It must not be given a purpose which it does not inherently possess. If a religion is turned into a political system, then fanaticism is born. This confusion of temporal power with the spiritual has been the downfall of many Oriental societies.

I should mention, too, the barrier of inertia and ignorance which we frequently encountered among the masses. The moral weaknesses of irresolution, resignation, hypocrisy and fear had been drilled into them by a long history of suffering and humiliation.

I have no wish to make a long catalogue of all the factors which contributed to the fall of the old regime. Only the desire for truth has persuaded me to suppress my repugnance at having to display Egypt's weaknesses and blemishes to the world. The sight of all these wrongs aroused the indignation of a group of good citizens, who rallied to the banner of revolution, and who never doubted that justice, honesty and patriotism would overcome the forces of decay. They knew that these evils had to be uprooted before a better

life could begin. A young, vigorous and healthy force was needed. This force the Army supplied.

After taking stock of the factors which would contribute to the success or failure of the revolution, Gamal Abdul Nasser took up the reins. The forward movement, which had begun on May 8th, 1945—VE Day, as the Allies called it—was now definitely under way.

We had fought against enemies within and without, and in spite of many difficulties and disappointments, we had succeeded in giving a demoralized and divided nation some sense of its own dignity and future.