

Chapter Six

AT EXACTLY five o'clock on the afternoon of October 8th, 1944, the Egyptian Radio was broadcasting a concert of light music when the program was suddenly interrupted by a special communiqué. The well-known voice of Mohammed Said Loutfi, director of the Egyptian Radio, announced the fall of the Nahas government—the government which had been sponsored by British tanks.

The announcer's voice betrayed his joy. Those who knew the background of the affair understood why: for three years Loutfi's life had been made miserable by the constant bickering between King and government.

The government had constantly humiliated the King, who lost no opportunity of taking his revenge. If the quarrel had been for Egypt's sake, there would have been less cause for complaint. But this was a struggle for power in which Nahas and the King opposed each other in England's name, not Egypt's. In these skirmishes the King more than once suffered defeat, and he was longing for the day when he would deal a

deathblow to the government which had so trampled upon his dignity.

This petty game of pin-pricking placed the Egyptian Radio authorities in a very difficult position. On one occasion, for example, the King ordered that readings from the Koran should be broadcast from the Palace during the month of Ramadan. Technicians and equipment were immediately sent to prepare the broadcasts. But because the idea had been Farouk's, the government objected, and sent its minions to remove both technicians and equipment from the Palace: a rather embarrassing situation for the Director, who was obliged to give and receive orders and counter orders on the same day.

Then the Wafd decided to make a tour of the provinces, and ordered that a complete report should be broadcast. The King, listening in, heard the frenzied cheers which greeted his Prime Minister and the speeches crammed with party propaganda. Infuriated, he informed the unfortunate Director of his displeasure, in his customary well-chosen vocabulary.

The Radio was thus in the delicate situation of having to satisfy three masters: the King, the Wafd government, and the British. It is easy to understand the joyfulness of the voice which announced the fall of Nahas Pasha, and his replacement as Prime Minister by Ahmed Maher.

On that day—I was still in prison—we were listening on a radio set which we were allowed to use when the camp authorities were satisfied as to our good conduct. I heard the news with joy. It was, it seemed to me, the first result of the ultimatum of February 4th. My enthusiasm was so great that it did not occur to me to wonder what the real reasons were for the King's decision. Farouk certainly did not act on his own initiative, and probably consulted the British Embassy before taking such an important step. Now that the Germans and Italians had been expelled from Africa, and the Axis was virtually defeated, the British had no further use for Nahas, and permitted the King to dismiss him without ceremony.

Ahmed Maher, as I have already stated, freed most of the prisoners, but thought it necessary to keep behind barbed wire a small group of patriots, of whom I was one, who were considered to be a danger to the public. Seeing that there was now no alternative, I decided to escape.

I regained my freedom only to be confronted by a number of unpleasant facts.

One of the things which troubled me most was the King's visit to Churchill at the British Embassy. How could the man, in whose person the whole of Egypt had been insulted on February 4th, 1942, so easily forget the indignity which he had suffered? His action was Unworthy of a sovereign, unworthy of the country he represented. But has Farouk ever possessed dignity? Being incapable of self-respect, how could he respect his throne or his country? One was forced to the bitter conclusion that what had wounded Egypt so deeply in the person of its King, had not touched the King at all.

I escaped only to find that the Palace of Ras-El-Tin, the second official palace, had been converted into a military hospital, not for the officers and men of the Egyptian Army, but for the British.

I escaped only to find that Farouk, ignoring the responsibilities of his position, had dashed the high hopes placed in him, and had greeted the Americans with open arms, spending his time hunting, gaming and drinking with them. It seemed as if he sought in their friendship a solid prop against the day when the British would abandon him.

For he sensed that the British would desert him, and the idea became a neurotic obsession. He always followed the movements of British troops very closely, imagining that they were massing in order to take his throne from him—which, in fact, they had done to several of his predecessors. During these crises, he used

to seek refuge in the Castle of Inchass, as if it had some mystic power of sanctuary.

He was now a docile and passive instrument in the hands of the British, and was therefore listed as our Enemy Number One. All the political forces of the country seemed to have entered the enemy camp: the king, the Wafd, the Saadist Party. The Muslim Brotherhood alone remained in the field. Could we count on them? In order to find a reply to this question, it was necessary to re-establish contact with the Brotherhood.

Once again I began to visit the Supreme Guide. His integrity, intelligence and increasing popularity surrounded him with such an extraordinary aura that his followers began to fear he might be assassinated by jealous enemies. In spite of the close friendship between us, Sheikh Hassan EL Banna—always a silent, secret man—hid much from me. For once, however, he opened his heart, and told me of his difficulties.

He told me that the King had begun to appreciate the danger to himself which lay in the Brotherhood's propaganda, having learned that one of the Brother-

hood's aims was to do away with the hereditary monarchy, and substitute an electoral one.

The Supreme Guide suspected the King of plotting to crush the movement, and feared that he might act before the Brotherhood had reached the height of its power. For the first time my friend acknowledged that his movement was by no means invulnerable. Usually he liked to give the impression that the Brotherhood was a giant of enormous power, possessing limitless resources.

Moreover, the Europeans in Egypt were becoming alarmed at the increasing power of the Brotherhood, who aimed to replace the Civil Code by Islamic law. They foresaw that such a change would endanger their property and trade, and would mean the loss of the civil rights guaranteed by the existing laws of the Egyptian Constitution.

This hostility from two different quarters severely curtailed and jeopardized the propagandist activities of

the Brotherhood, while any coalition between the King and the foreign colonials would be fatal to the movement.

I listened carefully to the Supreme Guide, commenting occasionally. Hassan EL Banna lowered his eyes, as if collecting his thoughts before launching on a new tack.

He would like, he told me, to make the situation quite clear. The foreigners would be reassured, if only the King himself could be persuaded to offer them reassurance. Then, watching me very carefully, he said:

"If I could meet the King, I flatter myself that I could set his mind at rest." He was obviously quite certain that he could allay the King's suspicions, and he made it clear that this was not an attempt to reach an understanding with the King, but simply a tactical plan to divert his attention.

Without further ado, he asked me if I knew Dr. Youssef Rachad, the King's personal physician, who

was thought to possess great influence over Farouk. I replied that I did. The Guide wanted Rachad to persuade the King to receive him, so that he might plead the cause of the Brotherhood.

I promised to do my best, though I could not help wondering if my intervention was wise. I was, after all, an escaped prisoner, hunted by the police, living an uneasy, hidden life. However, I went to Dr. Youssef Rachad and explained my mission. He promised to do everything in his power.

When I next saw the doctor, he told me that he had brought up the question while speaking to the King on the telephone. As soon as the Guide's name was mentioned, Farouk hung up, and on his next visit to the palace, the doctor was taxed with his carelessness: "How dare you mention such a subject on the telephone? Surely you know that Hassan Rifaat intercepts my calls?"

I was astonished. So Farouk felt himself spied upon from all sides. He was even afraid of the Under-Secretary of State of his own government.

Once again I begged the doctor to help. This time he obtained permission from the King to receive Sheikh EL Banna himself, and to-report their conversation.

Just as I was going out to meet Youssef Rachad to fix the date of the meeting, the telephone rang: "Forget what we said about Hassan EL Banna." The King had changed his mind.

I realized that there was no use insisting, and said so to the Guide.

The days passed. At last martial law was lifted, and I was able to take up my life again.

One evening the Guide, accompanied by one of his lieutenants, Mahmoud Labib, came to visit me at my

home in Ezbet EL Nakhl. During dinner, he discoursed on the need for national unity, and on other safe topics, referring only in veiled terms to the question of his relations with the King. The presence of the lieutenant had made him cautious. Reading between the lines, I realized that he wished me to renew my efforts to obtain an audience with the King. I gave him to understand that I would do it.

On the following day I went to Alexandria. This fresh attempt sent the King into a towering rage. For several days he refused to see Youssef Rachad, and when the doctor was eventually readmitted, the King said coldly: "Never mention that subject to me again."

I should add that the King, seized by some doubt, finally did tell the doctor to meet Hassan EL Banna. The meeting took place some time later. Afterwards, Youssef Rachad told me that he, personally, had been convinced of the Supreme Guide's sincerity, but when he reported to this effect to the King, Farouk cried: "Hassan EL Banna has made a fool of you!" It was useless for the

doctor to protest, for Farouk simply roared with laughter, and repeated: "Hassan EL Banna has made a fool of you!"

Youssef Rachad told me several years later that, during the last days of the Ibrahim Abdul-Hadi government, the King had said to him: "We were wrong in being so harsh with the Muslim Brotherhood. We should have gone back to our old policy."

"And what exactly was that policy?" I asked.

"God knows!" said Youssef Rachad.

It appears, however, that in 1946 the King was in touch with Hassan EL Banna, and for a short time adopted a conciliatory attitude. But after the Brotherhood's dramatic rise to power as a result of the war in Palestine, the King again changed his mind and broke off relations. This vacillation and unreliability was characteristic of Farouk.