

Chapter Eleven

THE SUPPRESSION of the Muslim Brotherhood had freed Egypt from terrorism, but had not removed the causes of social unrest. Return to normal life brought conditions in which reform might have at least delayed, if not prevented, the fall of the old regime. But this last chance was thrown away.

'The year 1949 was a year of depression and weariness, in which the only signs of life were the secret activities. Egypt was at a Low ebb, but destiny was knocking at the door.

Farouk was in a difficult situation, for he realized that he could not continue to rule without the support of a popular party. In spite of his strong dislike of Nahas Pasha, and the certainty that an election would mean a crushing majority for the Wafd, Farouk resolved to go to the country. In July, Hussein Sirry succeeded Abdul Hadi, and formed a coalition government with the Wafd, to prepare for the general election. The government was unable to reach agreement about the division of the country into electoral districts, and in December Sirry

was forced to resign in order to form a neutral cabinet composed of independents.

It was a sign of the times that the Wafd election campaign stressed the social question, promising economic reforms, a reduction in the cost of living, a curtailment of state expenditure and waste, and other promises which were never kept.

The election took place in January, 1955, and more than two-thirds of the seats went to the Wafd. Nahas Pasha formed a cabinet composed entirely of Wafdists, and the classic duel between the King and the Wafd began again. The political pendulum, regulated during the thirty years from 1922-52 by Britain, began to swing between these two extremities—the King and Nahas Pasha. Britain played off one against the other for her own ends. Constantly opposing each other, the King and the Wafd led their country to ruin, because they placed their own interests above those of Egypt. In the meantime, economic conditions deteriorated. The industrial output, which had been stimulated during the war by the needs of the Allied forces, dropped, while the price of food continued to rise. In five years the cost of living index had risen by 400%, while wages had only

doubled. Without an adequate system of direct taxation, the authorities were powerless to halt inflation. Increased import duties and indirect taxes made life even more difficult for the people.'

The Wafd tried to offer some justification for its conduct by saying that its negotiations with the British Foreign Office were proving fruitful. These talks, however, simply went on and on, getting nowhere. The situation became so grave, that Nahas was forced to try to distract popular discontent by creating a patriotic diversion.

On October 6th, 1951, Parliament was summoned to an extraordinary session, and in the course of a memorable sitting voted the repeal of the Treaty of August 26th, 1936, and of the agreements of July 19th, 1899, relating to the Sudan.

A few days later, the French, British and Turkish governments offered to conclude a four-power pact with Egypt under which the British occupation forces would be withdrawn from the Canal Zone, and replaced by an international force drawn from the four signatory

powers. The offer was rejected, because its only result would have been a domination by four powers instead of one. Every British Prime Minister seems to imagine that he is another Disraeli.

The judicial and fiscal immunity which had been granted to the occupying troops was withdrawn, and the Egyptian government resorted to force. Guerrilla warfare broke out. The Egyptian Army could not intervene, as no state of war existed between Britain and Egypt. It was the "Phalanxes of the Liberation," a picked body of young students and Muslim Brothers, who took up arms against the British. They were organized in small, highly mobile units, which harried the enemy in a merciless guerrilla war.

They blew up bridges and military depots, attacked enemy camps, shot up convoys, destroyed pipelines. At the same time, the workers deserted the Suez factories, and brought them to a standstill. Reinforcements flowed in from overseas, and soon the British had more than 80,000 troops in the Zone, not counting the non-European auxiliaries. While these struggles went on, resentment against the occupying forces increased. British civilians who had remained in the service of the

State—a few teachers and technicians—were expelled. English goods were boycotted. It was a determined fight.

When the struggle was at its height, Farouk recalled Abdul Fattah Amr, his ambassador in England, and appointed him as a political adviser. At the same time he appointed Hafez Afifi, governor of the Misr Bank, his Chief Adviser. Both choices were unfortunate. The former was a confirmed Anglophile, the latter a fervent supporter of capitalism. The two appointments could only be interpreted as a challenge to the patriots who were giving their lives for their country, and as an insult to the misery of the people. Farouk seemed to be proclaiming: "Look! I believe in imperialism and high finance!" Such was the stupidity and blindness of the King.

The ardent patriotism and resolution with which the government conducted the struggle raised the Wafd in the esteem of the Free Officers. We decided to support the government, and blow the spark of revolution which the Wafd had kindled. The Executive Committee instructed Kaimakam Rachad Mehanna—who was to be

a Regent after Farouk's abdication—to see how the land lay, by approaching Fouad Serag Eddin, the General Secretary of the Wafd party, who luckily happened to be related to him. Mehanna was so unwilling to undertake the mission that we substituted Colonel Ahmed Anouar, now Chief of Military Police. We thought that Mehanna's indecision arose from his strange and shifty character, but it never crossed our minds that he was deserting us.

Early in December, Ahmed Anouar was received by Serag Eddin in his magnificent house at Garden City. He told the minister that the Army would back the government when it had deposed the King, or at least put an end to his insanities. The suggestion did not seem to make much impression on the minister. He did not disapprove in principle, but he was worried by the King's constitutional right to dismiss the government, even if it had a majority in Parliament. Our emissary assured him that the Army would intervene in that case, and the government could simply refuse to resign.

In the report of this interview which was submitted to the Committee, Ahmed Anouar notes: "Serag Eddin hesitated, and I felt that slight persuasion would bring

him to our way of thinking. He trusted us now, and the ice was broken. He talked quite freely for some time, asking about our Society, its aims, the number of officers who belonged to it. Suddenly he asked me point-blank: 'Who do you think is the best man for Commander-in-Chief of the Army?' As we were talking of the Army, and not of the movement, I did not think it indiscreet to mention the name of Lewa Seif EL Din, which would compromise no one. 'An excellent choice,' he said, thinking, I suppose, that I had revealed the name of the leader of the Society of Free Officers."

We had thought we could count on the Wafd, to the point of entrusting it with the government of Egypt after the *coup d'etat*. We were quickly disenchanted. The Wafd was playing a double game. Our proposition was never even conveyed to the cabinet as we had intended. It remained a secret between Nahas Pasha and Serag Eddin.

The King was informed by his agents of the under-current of agitation in the Army, and he was well aware that something was afoot. We heard that he had referred to the Free officers in veiled terms to the Chief of Staff, Ferik Heydar Pasha. Our Committee met in Cairo, and

fixed the *coup d'etat* for March, 1952. Gamal Abdul Nasser was re-elected president. But events were proceeding at a dizzying speed, and the great day was postponed for the last time.

The battle of the Canal Zone was at its height, but now the Phalanxes were fighting for their own ends, and the Wafd government had lost control. British troops destroyed villages and terrorized the population. Women and children were among the victims. The first woman to be killed was named Om Saber. Her name was to be given to the first village built in the Province of Liberation, which is being reclaimed from the Western Desert. A second village was to immortalize the name of Omar Chahin, a hero of the University Phalanxes, who fell at Tel-el-Kebir.

Tension was rising in the whole country. The Army was purposely kept out of the way. I was stationed in the Sinai peninsula, together with Abdul Hakim Amer and Salah Salem. The High Commissioner sent General Tewfik Megahad from Cairo to talk to us, but he only made matters worse by his clumsiness, his defeatism and his dull lecturing.

"The time has not yet come," he said. "We are at the frontiers of Israel, and we must teach the Israelis a lesson before we attack the British." Salah Salem, furious, shouted, "No Sir! Our chief enemy is England. She occupies our country, and we must get rid of her first."

His words were greeted with cries of approval, and Megahad made a report to Cairo in which he described Salem as a "subversive element." We countered by protesting to Ferik Heydar about the way in which this curious inspector had tried to demoralize the Army with pessimistic talk, and he was transferred to some obscure command in the South.

On December 25th, we were in the mess at Rafah—Salem, Amer, and several others. It was my birthday, and my friends insisted on celebrating. Suddenly the telephone rang. Nasser's voice came on the line from Cairo. He said: "Teytel arrives today. Be ready to receive him."

The reader may think that Teytel was a new recruit, but it was, in fact, a powerful mine which we planned to

**give as a Christmas present to the first British ship
which passed through the Canal. We had not expected**

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Anything so large, for it was a monstrous affair, contained in four cases. We had to assemble it, and one of our comrades, who was an expert, was to lay it. Reasons of security urged that it be transported immediately to its destination. In fact, the mine was never exploded. It is still carefully hidden away somewhere in Egypt, where the Free Officers determined that it should remain as long as there was a British soldier in the Canal Zone.

The Egyptians were speaking the only language which the colonialists understood: brute force, blood, sabotage and dynamite. It appears that Great Britain really understood this time, and that the guerrilla warfare 11951 made them revise their international policy.

The strategic importance of the Suez Canal need hardly be stated. It separates Africa from Asia on a great international trade route. The British had built a complex system of military, naval and air installations on the banks of the Canal, which was without any doubt one of the most formidable bases in the world. And yet, however powerful Suez might seem in theory, in practice it was one of little value, because it had been

forced on an unwilling and hostile people. It was a fortified island in the middle of a raging sea.

If Britain has been forced to pack up and go elsewhere, she can blame no one but herself. She has never tried to make friends, but stirred up hatred instead. She humiliated Egypt too often.

On January 25th, 1952, a battalion of the Egyptian Auxiliary Police was surrounded at Ismailia, and called upon to surrender. The battalion refused, and resisted heroically when attacked by tanks and light artillery. There were more than seventy dead. Public opinion was outraged by the news. On the following day, an orgy of violence broke out in Cairo. This was the celebrated "Black Saturday."

The work of destruction began at about eleven o'clock in the morning, in the Place de L'Opera, where the mobs set fire to cafes, bars and cinemas. An army of idlers and trouble-makers—the rabble of a town of two million inhabitants—brought together by some mysterious signal, bore down on the center of the town. Gunsmiths' shops were broken into and looted. Barclay's Bank was set on fire, and clerks trapped in the basement were asphyxiated. Twelve people were killed

at the Turf Club. Before night fell there were other victims. The whole center of the town was ablaze.

From a window on the second floor of the Abdin Palace, a man watched Cairo burn. Terrible foreboding must have seized Farouk when he saw, for the first time, the fateful writing on the wall, lit by the dull glare of the flames.

The city was in the hands of the insurrectionists, and the police did nothing. either they were powerless, or they were acting in complicity. Not until six o'clock in the evening was the Army called in to restore order, but by then the damage was done. The Free Officers who were in Cairo that day were ordered to do all they could to stop the riots.

Black Saturday was an orgy of uncontrolled mob violence, motivated by hunger and despair. This does not excuse the episode, but it does account for it.

While the capital city of Egypt was in the grip of anarchy, the King was giving a banquet at Abdin, the Prime Minister was visiting his manicurist, and the Minister for the Interior was moving a piece of furniture

he had just acquired. Such were Egypt's "leaders" at this time.

The government was reduced to a shadow. It had lost all control of the situation. The only organization which remained on its feet, and retained any authority, was the Army.

On the day following Black Saturday, the King dismissed Nahas Pasha like a lackey for the fourth time in his career, and called on Aly Maher to form a new cabinet. Aly Maher perfectly understood the causes and implications of the rioting. The prices of bread, sugar and oil were reduced. Aly Maher made no attempt to consult the King, and governed as though he did not exist.

He denounced the negligence of those responsible for the situation, but took no action against them. He adjourned parliament, but took no steps to break the Wafd.

He was, in fact, too much a part of the regime to try to reform it. His government was strong enough to keep

both the King and the mob in check, but not strong enough to proceed any further. Farouk, who had thought of fleeing the country, had gotten no further than leaving Cairo. Now he returned to Cairo and to the attack. Thirty-two days after assuming office, Aly Maher was forced to resign.

He was succeeded by Neguib Hilaly, a breakaway Wafdist. An honest but weak figure, Hilaly lacked Aly Maher's political grasp, and he was too much under the King's thumb. His first measures, though justified, looked like acts of vengeance against his former comrades. Serag Eddin, Secretary of the Wafd party, was exiled, and the Wafd parliament was dissolved. This looked like the beginning of a purge, and the court party grew uneasy.

Karim Tabet, Farouk's press officer, and Elias Andraos, one of the palace clique, could think of no better plan than to ask the United States ambassador, Mr. Jefferson Caffery, to help them overthrow Hilaly.

This move was characteristic of the political morality of the last days of the old regime, when it was con-

sidered quite natural to invite the intervention of a foreign power in Egyptian affairs. This story was told to Galal Eddin EL Hamamsy, one of my colleagues on the newspaper *El Gumbouriya*, by the distinguished diplomat himself at a farewell dinner on his return to the United States.

Like so many before him, Hilaly hoped to consolidate his position by coming to terms with Britain. He was unsuccessful. He resigned on June 30th.

Hussein Sirry, an old and skilled politician, who took a much firmer line with the King, replaced him. He dealt very mildly with the Wafd, however, just as Aly Nlaher had done. He canceled the restrictive measures taken against their leaders. Then, with Egypt at her last gasp, he announced a general election.

The Wafd came to life, thinking that its hour had come again. The hour never did come, for clouds were gathering in the sky, and the storm was about to engulf the King and his pack of politicians.

After Black Saturday, and the succession of indecisive governments which followed it, the Free Officers

were spurred on to start the overthrow of the regime as quickly as possible. The whole of Egypt was tired of anarchy. We had to put an end to chaos. An urgent meeting of our Executive Committee was called on February 10th. Public opinion was in our favor. The Revolution was fixed for March, 1952

Gamal approached Kaimakam Rachad Mehanna for the second time, informing him of our plans. He approved wholeheartedly, and promised the cooperation of the Army corps under his command. This action of Oamal's worried me. I had already had occasion to warn him against Mehanna's cunning and duplicity. What followed showed that my fears were only too well founded.

Just when all arrangements had been completed for the deployment of Mehanna's troops in our plan of action, he suddenly announced to the Committee that he could no longer keep in contact with us, as he was being transferred to EL Arish. Discreet Enquiries at the War office revealed that the transfer had been made at the express request of Mehanna himself. Now that the situation had become serious, he preferred to keep well

away from the scene, so that he could change his allegiance if we failed.

He did not really believe that we would succeed, and had no intention of throwing in his lot with us until we had gained at least one victory. It was a sad blow to all except myself—I knew the gentleman rather better than they.

As a result of Mehanna's desertion, the Committee was forced to postpone the execution of its plans.

Meanwhile, we had decided that a respected senior officer should be chosen, who would be set up as a symbolic leader of the Revolution when the day finally arrived. The choice was narrowed to three candidates deemed worthy of the honor: Ferik Aziz EL Masri, General Fouad Sadek, and General Mohammed Neguib.

Aziz EL Masri was approached first. He declined on account of his great age and poor health, preferring to remain the spiritual father of our movement.

Next, we approached Fouad Sadek, who knew little of what was going on, though he was aware of the existence of the Society of Free Officers. At the time

when we contacted him, the post of Chief-of-Staff of the Army was vacant, and our emissary, Salah Salem, promised that the Free Officers would use their influence to ensure that he was appointed. General Sadek seemed satisfied with the arrangement, when the telephone rang and he was informed that he had been appointed Chief-of-Staff by the King. When he replaced the receiver, he had changed his mind.

Thinking that he had no further use for our good offices, he refused our offer, and brusquely dismissed Salah Salem, who swore never to set foot in his home again. As it happened, Sadek never did receive the appointment which meant so much to him. Now there remained only Mohammed Neguib.

It is not generally known that General Neguib took no active part in the revolutionary movement. The truth is that President Nasser, a man without personal ambition, wished to yield the place of honor to an older man, a soldier whose honesty and bravery was widely recognized. Neguib had been seriously wounded three times on the field of battle.

The world saw General Neguib's star rise and fall in the Egyptian firmament with the speed of a meteor. However painful it may be, I must tell his story, so that the world may know who it was sought dictatorship, and who democracy.

General Neguib was no stranger to the Free officers. On two occasions we had given proof of our esteem. In December, 1951, he was in command of the Frontier Corps, a body of well trained and well equipped troops. This was one of the most important commands in the Egyptian Army. Suddenly General Hussein Sirry Amer, one of Farouk's puppets, detested by the Free Officers, replaced him. It was a deliberate provocation by the King. Neguib was not a member of our movement, but the fact that he had received this unwarranted humiliation inclined him to sympathy with our revolutionary ideals. It was in this way that the Society of Free Officers established relations with General Neguib.

On another occasion we were able to push him into the limelight. In December each year a public meeting is held by the Military Club, so those members may elect a president and a committee. The Free Officers decided to

nominate General Neguib for the presidency, and certain of our own members for the committee.

The King was supporting his puppet general, Hussein Sirry Amer, for the presidency, and the struggle which ensued between the Palace and the Society of Free Officers was a trial of strength which enabled us to demonstrate publicly our opposition to the monarchy. The certainty that we would win disturbed the King, who tried to sidestep the issue by postponing the meeting for an indefinite period. This was a clumsy move, for our Committee ignored the royal command, and invited all Free Officers to meet on the original date.

When the meeting took place, the company kept five minutes silence in memory of Captain Abdul Kader Taha, one of our most active members, who had been assassinated by the secret police at the King's instigation. Then General Neguib was unanimously elected president, and the Free Officers obtained a crushing majority in the committee. This was the first direct blow we struck against the King. Farouk might well have heeded the warning. Instead, he dug his heels in still further.

It was in this way that General Neguib emerged from obscurity. We constructed a legend round him which everybody believed. The whole world was under the impression that he had been the brain and the motive force behind the Revolution. We did not wish to explain he was simply a puppet. So he became a legendary figure, a sort of George Washington of Egypt, crowned by the glory of a successful revolution.

It was a touch of a magic wand which made this man appear to the world at large as a great revolutionary, and the liberator of the Nile. For he was really no more than an ordinary, middle class man, a good father to his children, whose ambition was to end his career happily shuttling between his office and his fireside. For years the rest of us had worked in secret to prepare Neguib's path to immortality. We raised him to the summit, and then we had to dash him down again.

Until July 21st, 1952, Neguib knew nothing of the role which we had planned for him, and which he was to continue to play until October, 1952. On July 15th, orders came from high authority that the committee of the Military Club was to be dissolved. This was a sur-

prise, although everybody knew that the King bore the committee a grudge, for he could not forgive the fact that it had rejected the president of his choice. Also, he feared the increasing influence of the committee. The committee was dissolved, and an interim committee was formed from which all Free Officers were barred. We knew very well that the next blow would be aimed directly at the revolutionary movement.

On July 16th, the Executive Committee of the Society of Free officers met under the presidency of Gamal Abdul Nasser. Present were Hassan Ibrahim, Kamal Eddin Hussein, Abdul Hakim Amer, Khaled Mohieddin, Abdul Latif Boghdadi and myself. It was the most important meeting we ever held, for the situation demanded swift decisions and even swifter action. It was a race between the Palace and the Movement. The Minister of War was already preparing to disperse the Free Officers all over Egypt by wholesale postings and changes of command. Our chances of success depended on speed.

On July 20th, the Committee ordered all our officers to report to their assembly points, and to remain there until midnight. Kamal Eddin Hussein acted as liaison officer, keeping everybody informed on new developments.

The Executive Committee had devised a No. 2 plan, which could be put into operation immediately, if we failed in our attempt to overthrow the regime. This plan envisaged the mass assassination of the leading figures of the regime. Gamal Abdul Nasser strongly opposed this plan, however. He said it would give the reactionaries a chance to cry anarchy, and to denounce the Free Officers as criminal agitators.

While all this was happening, Neguib was at home, seeing nothing, hearing nothing. As yet, we had told him nothing of the role which had been planned for him. Gamal felt that it was now time to bring him into the picture.

On the afternoon of July 20th, Gamal went to Neguib's house, but he was unable to tell him anything, as two of Neguib's friends were present: Colonel Galal

Nada, and the well-known journalist, Mohammed Hussein Heykal. For the sake of appearances, Gamal and Abdul Hakim Amer, who had accompanied him, talked for some time about the dissolution of the committee of the Military Club, and the possibility of getting the order rescinded. Our two emissaries then left, having been unable to fulfil their mission, leaving the General under the impression that the sole purpose of their visit had been the affairs of the Military Club. Gamal thought it unwise to make another attempt, in case Neguib was being watched.

On July 21st, our preparations for the *coup d'etat* were not entirely completed, and it was postponed until the night of the 22nd. Twenty-four hours before zero hour General Neguib still knew nothing whatsoever about the plot.

A bad poker player, Farouk was also a bad gambler in politics. In spite of the storm warnings on the horizon, he thought his authority had been merely slightly shaken, and he tried to assert himself by forcing the appointment of General Sirry Amer as Minister of War. The Prime Minister, Hussein Sirry, resigned. He was succeeded, on July 21st, by Neguib EL Hilaly.

It was the fifth Egyptian government in six months! Obviously the machinery of government had completely broken down. Instead of constitutional law, we were being governed by the whims of an incurably pig-headed monarch devoid of any sense of public responsibility. Each government was as sterile and as incapable of action as the last. The people had lost all confidence in their leaders, and impatiently awaited their liberation. The end was very near.

Time and experience suggest that tyranny is very close to anarchy, in that both end by destroying the values of civilization: justice, morality and reason. A State which does not care for the well-being of its people ceases to be a State, and the people have the right to act in accordance with natural law. It is their duty to fight against despotism, treason or any menace to the life of the community. It is the people who set up governments, and define the limits of their authority. The Egyptian leaders failed to fulfil their obligations, and their power reverted by right to the people. The people reclaimed their sovereignty.

In 1952 the Egyptians did only what the English had done under Cromwell three hundred years before; what

the Americans did in 1776: and the French in 1789. But our revolution was less bloody then these.

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