

CHAPTER XIII

THE ARMY CRISIS: ITS CLIMAX AND SOLUTION

ALL was now in readiness for the receipt of the Egyptian reply. The position was immensely strengthened by the knowledge that His Majesty's Government were in complete agreement as to the plan of campaign proposed. That there were unknown quantities and consequent risks involved was inevitable. But I was not in any degree pessimistic, because I felt that I had secured the one position on which the fate of the engagement would turn—a firm and unyielding attitude upon the part of the British Government. The degree of uncertainty which existed in regard to the situation would be almost entirely removed by unmistakable evidence of our desire to go forward. The wavering elements, whose future attitude might in other circumstances be incalculable, would waver no longer. Even the forces of the opposition would not hold out for long after our determination had been clearly demonstrated. All depended upon that. The extremists' strongest argument in influencing their moderate elements, and a still more moderate Cabinet, was the argument that the British did not really mean to face trouble and would, as before, surrender to threats of violence. If that argument was shown at the outset

to be without foundation, there would be no crisis, and we should get what we wanted. On that point there was no ground for any serious anxiety.

Our note had informed the Egyptian Government of our desire for a friendly agreement covering the whole question of military co-operation, but had unequivocally demanded that pending the negotiation of such an agreement the Egyptian Government should at once give effect to a series of measures regarding the Army which were set out in detail. In other words, we had staked our position upon the acceptance of that unequivocal demand, and no progress could be made in any direction until our position had been secured by its acceptance. On June 3 the reply was received.¹

It was exactly the reply that anyone conversant with Eastern methods would have expected: its terms were expressly designed for adaptation to any policy that might ultimately have to be followed. It did not accept more than one of our definite demands, but it definitely rejected none of them, and it was so worded as not to exclude the appearance of desiring to maintain the *status quo* or of subscribing to the principle of negotiation. The purpose underlying it was clear enough, and it was cleverly promoted. The burning question for Egyptian politicians was—was the British Government really determined that its demands must be accepted? Until that question was cleared up, they would not take the responsibility of moving. The note was cleverly designed to force us to give the answer. If we replied by insisting on acceptance, then the Government would tell the extremists that they had been wrong, and listen to them no longer. But if our reply lacked

¹ See Appendix C.

definition, then the extremist argument would be strengthened, and as far as we were concerned the position would be weakened.

It was clear, therefore, that to reopen official negotiations upon the receipt of this note would be to take a step both dangerous and unwise. Such action could not fail to give the impression that the British Government found it difficult not to accept the account of the existing position contained in the Egyptian Note, and was not in any case determined to insist upon compliance with the categorical demands set out in its own Note. It was, however, suggested to me from an experienced and intelligent quarter that in spite of the studied evasiveness of the terms in which the Egyptian Note was couched, an undertone could be discovered in them sufficiently suggestive of a desire for conciliation—if not in public negotiation, then, at least, in private conversation. I did not desire to let slip any possible opportunity of securing compliance with our demands, but I was firmly determined to take at this stage no official step which could possibly be construed as a retreat, however small, from the position which we had taken up. To do this would have been a grievous political error, but if the Egyptian Government could be induced to approach us again with terms more nearly conceding our demands, we would be prepared to listen to them. I entertained no very strong hopes as to the success of any attempt on these lines. The Wafd were now in command of the situation on that side, and ample proof had been furnished of the incalculability and intransigence of their leaders. But there was a bare possibility that a solution might thus be achieved, and if not, then the next stage of the official programme would be

reached and we could ask for an immediate assurance that our demands would be complied with. I was confident that this step would give us what we required, and bring the tension to an end without serious difficulty. For our plans had been laid in detail and with extreme care, and although the strain and anxiety of the last few days had been great, there was compensation in the confidence that success was at hand, and that a valuable advance was now to be made, and consolidated.

Almost immediately, however, we received from London telegraphic instructions to call off our demands and to proceed instead to negotiate officially a "provisional agreement". The Secretary of State was at this juncture absent in Geneva, and these orders were received from Mr. Baldwin. My immediate and serious difficulty was that in view of the fact that the policy I was following had been fully considered and agreed upon by the Secretary of State and the Cabinet, I had spoken and acted both officially and privately so as deliberately to give the impression that His Majesty's Government regarded our demands as of supreme importance, and would allow no paltering with them. I had further received assurances from all the representatives of important foreign Powers that they regarded those demands as essential to the maintenance of a safe position in Egypt, and would strongly urge their Governments to afford us complete support in insisting upon them. These foreign Ministers, as well as my own advisers, were all of an identical opinion in regard to the Egyptian reply; that it was deliberately equivocal and could not be accepted as a basis for further negotiations. Knowing all this, knowing the internal political situation and the hopes and fears of

our enemies, what was I now to do upon receipt of orders which were not only a radical departure from the agreed plan but were fraught with danger to the success of British policy?

After careful deliberation I concluded that I must attempt to secure a modification of these orders, and I telegraphed at some length to London pressing with all the force at my command for a reconsideration. I pointed out that in making the specific demands contained in our original note we had already stated our desire to negotiate a provisional agreement, but had insisted that an essential preliminary to such negotiation must be the acceptance of our immediate requirements: that to waive these requirements and then proceed forthwith to negotiation would irretrievably weaken our position and seriously prejudice any chance of successful negotiation. In reply I received a further telegram from Mr. Baldwin elaborating the reasons which had led to the sudden and unexpected orders to retreat: "The test", this telegram said, "must not be sought in an attempt to secure compliance with individual requirements, but in the immediate initialing of the (proposed) agreement. . . . Your action on my instructions will lead to one of two things: either Sarwat will accept the agreement or he will reject it. . . . If, as I fear is probable, he rejects the agreement, he will have rejected the principle of collaboration with us in defence of Egypt, fairly and reasonably offered, and will thereby have revealed the Egyptian Government in their true colours"¹ The logic of this argument was flawless, but it rested upon assumptions for which it was impossible to find any warrant in the actual situation. There was no justification, unfortunately, for assuming

¹ F.O. Despatch: Sir William Tyrrell to Lord Lloyd, June 10, 1928.

that Sarwat Pasha would "either accept the agreement "or reject it". It was, on the contrary, almost certain that he would do neither the one nor the other but would procrastinate just as he had done when faced with the original note. If he had succeeded in postponing the acceptance of categorical demands, how infinitely easier it would be for him to postpone acceptance of an agreement, the most important part of which was a highly debatable schedule—while the agreement itself could not have binding force until submitted to the Chamber and ratified by that body. Moreover, Sarwat Pasha himself had actually made it plain to me that it was out of the question to expect from the Egyptian Government any admission of the principle of military co-operation, pending a general negotiation of all the reserved points. And, finally, I could not refrain from entertaining the thought that we had, after joint discussion and collaboration, agreed on June 3 upon the detailed steps which should be taken in the event of an unsatisfactory reply, yet on June 10, when the situation was most critical, Mr. Baldwin was telegraphing to me that he concurred that "the Egyptian Note was "unsatisfactory, capable of almost any interpretation", but in the same telegram he was ordering a radical departure from the steps agreed upon so shortly before and after such careful preparation. Again I telegraphed to London on June 11, urging the force of these considerations.

Meanwhile, with the knowledge and the good wishes of the Residency, unofficial and private efforts were being made to induce Sarwat Pasha and Zaghlul Pasha to step over the gap which existed between the British demands and the terms of the Egyptian reply. At one stage a report was brought in that a

solution had been found, at the next moment the Residency was informed that the attempt had broken down finally. In fact, Zaghul Pasha was proving as unaccountable as usual, but just at the moment when all hope had been abandoned, it appeared that, whatever their leaders' views might be, influential members of the Wafd were not inclined to let slip the opportunity of conciliation. Once again, Zaghul had left out of his calculations the material interests of his supporters. They were not yet prepared to take the risk of having to return to the political wilderness, and they insisted that conversations should continue and that a settlement should be reached. After this intervention, Zaghul Pasha remained aloof but hostile, and took no direct part in the resumed conversations; but by June 11 Sarwat Pasha found it possible to present to me personally a proposed settlement of our differences—a settlement against which Zaghul Pasha had made it clear that he would not protest. Sarwat Pasha proposed that I should send him a request for a further elucidation of the official reply, and in return he would address to me a second note, still more definite and more favourable. This note, accompanied by categorical verbal assurances given in the presence of the Minister of War and members of my own staff, constituted the concession of all the important demands originally made by us.¹ I repeated these to London recommending immediate acceptance before Zaghul had time to turn round and before further arguments in favour of a change of plan could be evolved in Whitehall. The next day the necessary notes were exchanged between myself and Sarwat Pasha—and the crisis was at an end. The envoi ran as follows: "From Prime Minister. I

¹ See Appendix C.

“congratulate you heartily on success attending recent negotiations with Egyptian Government on subject of Army control in Egypt. Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs telegraphs from Geneva asking to be cordially associated with this message.”

My first feeling when the affair was over was one of astonishment that we should have come off not only without loss, but with so large a measure of the objective which we originally set out to obtain. But as these feelings of not unnatural amazement diminished, the anxious consideration began to obtrude itself as to what had caused the Government at home suddenly to wish to change their carefully considered plans in the very middle of the engagement. That they should have disagreed with the proposals when they were originally made, or that having accepted them they should have been visited by much anxiety as they watched them being put into action, would have been natural and understandable. But surely there could have been no original misunderstanding, for I had in despatch after despatch and telegram after telegram been at pains to set out the situation in every aspect: I had taken into account all the probabilities of development, had detailed one by one the steps in the plan of campaign which I proposed, and had not moved until I had secured the full agreement of the Secretary of State and of the Cabinet. Nor could it have been mere panic that moved the Government to go back upon that agreement—at a moment when with their approval we were fully and irretrievably committed and the battle was at its hottest.

I could not accept either of these alternatives as a possible explanation. In searching for another, my mind was inevitably held by the private telegram which I had received from the Prime Minister soon

after my proposals had been rejected. "Am I right", it ran, "in assuming that you are satisfied that the "time has come to force an issue with the Egyptian "Parliament? If so, a stiffly worded statement on the "Army question might be a good means of doing so; "but it has the disadvantage of being open to miscon- "struction at home and in the world at large. We find "it difficult to believe in the expediency of this course. "An overt break may be unavoidable, and if unavoid- "able must be met without flinching. But if putting "in acceptable language our demands, which cannot "in themselves be acceptable to extremists, would "give any chance of their being adopted by Sarwat, "it seems to me that the attempt should be made. "That is my reason for asking you to propose to "Sarwat the alternative of accepting the military "agreement mentioned in my official telegram."

The suggestion that I had any objective except that of maintaining unimpaired the *status quo* in regard to the Egyptian Army took me completely by surprise. I had never given any advice or made any proposal which had in view any other end than that of maintaining the position which I regarded as essential for upholding the policy of 1922. I re-read with care my telegrams and despatches, and could find in them nothing which could possibly give rise to the impression that I had some other objective at which I was obliquely aiming. If Mr. Baldwin had in fact suddenly come to the conclusion that I had such an objective and was concealing it from His Majesty's Government, he was no doubt justified in recoiling from the plan I had proposed; for clearly I deserved to be sacrificed ruthlessly if I had been guilty of concealing my true intentions. But if that was his sudden impression, how did it come about that my duplicity

had not been recognised before, or that the Foreign Office, who to the best of my knowledge were in agreement with me, had not instantly dispelled this impression on their behalf and on my own? These questions were only finally answered for me when subsequently I had the opportunity of reading a memorandum reviewing the Egyptian Army crisis which as I have every reason to believe was an accurate statement of the contemporary official view.

That document, to which I had access four years later, disclosed to me then, for the first time, that although the Secretary of State had been in agreement with the measures I had proposed for dealing with this question, I had been wrong in believing that his advisers took the same view. The memorandum was dated June 29, a fortnight after the matter had been finally settled and when the Prime Minister and Secretary of State had announced their gratification at the settlement. In order that the matter may be quite clear, it is necessary to recapitulate quite briefly the plan of action which I had put forward and my reasons for concluding that such action was necessary. I had come to the conclusion that the gradual erosion of the *status quo* in the Egyptian Army was fraught with very grave risks of future disaster, and that, to permit it to continue was incompatible with our policy. I had, therefore, proposed that we should make to the Egyptian Government certain demands which would maintain that *status quo* in essentials and guard against future risks. In the event of a finally unsatisfactory answer I had proposed that we should ask the Egyptian Government definitely and clearly whether they accepted the Declaration of 1922, or not. If they replied in the negative, I suggested that we should procure from the King a sus-

pension of the Constitution and the formation of a *Cabinet d'affaires* to which we should present a draft and comprehensive treaty which would settle our relations with Egypt once and for all. What I envisaged and was working for was the extraction of a satisfactory answer from the Government to our first demands, but I felt that the best way to ensure success was to be prepared for failure. My objective was to impress upon Egypt that we were firmly determined to maintain the *status quo* established by the 1922 Declaration, and that nothing was to be gained by attempts to infringe it, and that her own interests could best be served by realising this and acting accordingly.

According to the memorandum to which I have referred, there was a different official objective stated as follows: "to force Egypt to recognise our right to maintain a garrison in the country for defensive purposes (and, so, incidentally, to accept the most important of the four points reserved under the Declaration of 1922) and her own obligation to cooperate with us for those purposes. The High Commissioner, on the other hand, preferred to insist only upon certain concrete demands, *e.g.*, as to the rank and powers of the Senior British Officers in the Egyptian Army."

It was this objective—clearly much more ambitious and much more difficult of attainment than the one that I had in view—which apparently it had been decided to aim at on receipt of the Egyptian Government's reply. It had not been disclosed to me previously, nor, I must suppose, to the Secretary of State who was absent at Geneva. But it existed, and the Egyptian Government's first reply had been taken as the opportunity to pursue it

and to drop the plan of campaign agreed upon. I had regarded the reply as unsatisfactory and had proposed adherence to the previous demands. "This 'course', says the memorandum, "seemed inexpedient. The Egyptian Note, while it certainly did not accept more than one of our requirements; at the same time did not definitely reject any of them. Its language was ostensibly friendly; it seemed to promise the maintenance of the *status quo* . . . and, finally, although in deliberately vague phraseology, appeared to subscribe to the principle of negotiation." The points about the Egyptian reply which condemned it in the eyes of my advisers and many other experienced critics in Egypt commended it in official quarters, and it was for this reason, I must suppose, that I received instructions from Mr. Baldwin, who had charge of the Foreign Office in the Secretary of State's absence, to call off our original demands and try to negotiate the provisional agreement which was to result in Egypt's recognising "our right to maintain a garrison in the country".

In view of the history of previous and subsequent negotiations, it is perhaps unnecessary to stress the extreme difficulty which would have attended any attempt to get a constitutionally governed Egypt formally to recognise our right to garrison the country. Indeed, it is almost impossible to understand how such an idea could have been regarded as practicable, and Sarwat Pasha had himself over and over again, made Egypt's attitude plain. The immediate danger that I foresaw and pointed out to the Prime Minister was that to call off our demands at this stage and enter into any official negotiation—however practicable its object—would immensely strengthen the hands of our extremist opponents, and would

tend to stultify our policy of rigid adherence to the *status quo* and the 1922 Declaration.

It is unnecessary, perhaps, to discuss the matter further. The plan of concentrating upon the original limited objective proved successful after all, and brought an issue out of the crisis which was welcome alike to Egypt and the British Government. But, to judge from the memorandum, official opinion was shaking its head dolefully even over this. "The solution reached is satisfactory in that possible attacks have been forestalled for the present. On the other hand, we may have lost an opportunity of materially strengthening our position." I do not think that any opportunity was lost. On the contrary, we had not only put a definite stop to those inroads upon the position which threatened such danger to the State of Egypt and to our policy, but this had all been achieved without proceeding to extreme measures or to open conflict. There was, therefore, very little cause for melancholy feelings, and some ground for hope in regard to the future.