

In the House *of* Muhammad Ali

A Family Album
1805–1952



Hassan Hassan

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I dedicate this album to
the memory of Great-Aunt Nimet,
Princess Nimet Mouhtar,
without whom
I would never have met
the Reeds or the Robsons.

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Introduction

by Elizabeth and Robert Fernea

Hassan Aziz Hassan is a descendant of Muhammad Ali, the ruler who a hundred and fifty years ago attempted to bring Egypt out of its Ottoman past and into the modern world. Prince Hassan is also a painter of note, whose works are found in private art collections around the world. His painterly eye for detail and for shapes and images is evident in these memoirs of his youth, which begin in his early childhood and end in 1952, when he was twenty-eight years old. Hassan was our friend when we lived in Egypt during the 1960s. His intellect and dry sense of humor enriched our lives then and he has remained our valued friend through the passing years.

Prince Hassan offers the reader a picture of the royal past in Egypt, as seen from the vantage point of an insider, a young grandnephew of King Fuad. This perspective is more or less absent from recent histories of Egypt, which tend to focus on the postrevolutionary period after 1952, the time of presidents Gamal Abd al-Nasser, Anwar Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak. Not surprisingly, most accounts of the last years of the monarchy in Egypt tend to dismiss its royalty as wastrels and debauchers. Hassan implicitly takes exception to this view of his family. He argues that the 150 years of Muhammad Ali's dynastic rule were crucial for the economic and political development of Egypt, which led to its present nationhood. This is the time when France and Great Britain jockeyed for position in Egypt, then regarded as the crossroads to Asia and Africa. As Sir Richard Burton wrote in 1853, "Egypt is the most tempting prize which the East holds out to the ambition of Europe, not excepting even the Golden Horn." For the Suez Canal provided access to the profitable trade routes to these lands. Muhammad Ali's

descendants struggled to maintain the nation's independence in the face of growing western intrusion and control.

Prince Aziz, Hassan's father, was the nephew of King Fuad I. He was a founder and supporter of the early Wafd Party, the objective of which was to seek an end to colonialism and usher in an independent nation-state. For this reason, the British, then *de facto* rulers of Egypt, exiled Aziz to Europe. Hassan's great-aunt gave her jewels to help found Cairo University, again against the policies of the British, who did not want to open higher education to Egyptians other than their selected elites. In these and other ways, Hassan stresses that many in his family strongly identified with Egypt and contributed to the movement for independence.

But these points are only a small part of this work, a few threads of the complex tapestry of the past, which Prince Hassan has woven for readers and illustrated with previously unpublished photos from family collections. Here, described with charm and humor, are the houses and palaces and gardens, the state occasions, the royal parties, the jewels and the gowns which he remembers from his childhood. Here also are the everyday activities of a group of people who were socialized from early childhood for rule and responsibility. Of course, not all members of the royal family accepted their responsibilities, but many did, giving generously of their time and wealth to Egyptians less fortunate than themselves. This is the side of the story which the author clearly feels has been neglected in most other histories, whether willfully or through lack of knowledge. In constructing this chronicle, Hassan has been able to draw not only on his own memories, but also on the stories told to him by other members of his family. As a result, this work is the text of an oral history, as well as a collection of personal memories, about a crucial period in the formation of modern Egypt.

Prince Hassan recalls other aspects of his childhood memories with less pleasure. For while he celebrates his ancestors, he is not uncritical of them. And while he records pleasures in Egypt and in travels abroad, there are also memories of the loneliness and isolation of a young boy whose schooling and guardianship were a matter of royal counsel rather than the decisions of his own parents. After the death of his father, Prince Aziz, Hassan and his siblings were sent to and removed abruptly from schools in Egypt and abroad. Hassan himself studied in Turkey and England and was returned to Egypt at the outset of the Second World War. At eighteen, he moved out of the royal palaces to establish his own residence and live a life of his own. This youthful past is often recalled with a certain irony, but it is not a history of complaints and grievances.

Indeed, the dignified acceptance of the changing world in this brief royal history has been characteristic of Prince Hassan's life. When many of the other members of his family went into exile with King Farouk after the 1952 revolution, Hassan remained in Egypt, his home, and has rarely left his country even for brief trips abroad. His life since 1952 has not been easy, for a royal past understandably was a cause for suspicion on the part of the revolutionary government and the confiscation of royal possessions has resulted in a very modest standard of living. Yet Hassan has earned the respect of Egyptian acquaintances in all walks of life as well as many foreigners in Cairo who have come to know him. He is a well-regarded member of the Egyptian artistic community and his good taste and unfailing good manners have won him the respect of some of the most stalwart critics of the old royalty.

Prince Hassan has had a long time to think about the past recalled in this memoir and has exercised his strong sense of propriety in making the choices that structure this personal chronicle. Sensational events, personal tragedies, love and losses are not to be found in the pages that follow. Rather, the reader will be given glimpses of a world long since disappeared, a world viewed through the prism of Hassan's own memory. In written descriptions and in period photographs, Prince Hassan has created a unique family album of the Muhammad Ali Dynasty, a personal account of an important period in Egypt's long history.

Preface

Many years ago Professor Elizabeth Warnock Fernea (BJ to her friends), the well-known author and expert on Middle Eastern affairs, was looking through some of my family photographs and found them sufficiently interesting to want to publish them. I readily agreed, but she then suggested that a text should go with them. Having no imagination, I thought of putting down our modest family life, with some description of houses and habits. But an authoritative voice insisted I should add some historical notes to liven the background, which I proceeded to do.

After that, the thing lay fallow for many years, but was always present in BJ's active mind. Thanks to her, it reached the American University in Cairo Press, where it was kindly accepted for publication.

This book represents a small section of our numerous family. But it is with great sorrow that I was not able to put down my mother's family tree. I hope my Spanish relatives will forgive this omission, but all my mother's papers and the family tree have been mislaid. Now that she is no longer with us, my thoughts are often with her side of the family — the Magallons.

Prologue

The First World War was the cause of my father's exile from Egypt and his meeting my mother in Spain. An ardent nationalist, he was obliged by the British authorities, then occupying the country, to choose a foreign land as his home. He decided on Spain, a neutral country, where he was followed by quite a few other Egyptians who were also considered undesirable, among them the 'Prince of Poets,' Ahmed Shawqi. There he fell in love with my mother, a beautiful Spanish girl with black hair, big reddish-brown eyes, and a splendid complexion. She was endowed with a wonderfully easy-going disposition, and could be equally delighted with the most trivial or the most beautiful things that life would offer her. To marry my father, Prince Aziz, she became a Muslim, choosing to be known henceforth by the name of Ikbal.

My mother told me that my father had had some reservations about her changing her faith and, as a last resort, he had asked for a Catholic priest to dissuade her from doing so. The gentleman turned out to be a congenial person who spent a couple of hours sipping sherry and chatting with my father about many international matters, and finally left without having accomplished anything. But at least legal morality had been observed.

It is completely within Islamic tradition for a Muslim to marry a woman outside his faith (but not vice versa) as long as she belongs to 'the People of the Book,' that is to say the Scriptures. There are innumerable examples of this, but of course the most illustrious case is the Prophet himself, who married Miriam, a comely Egyptian Christian. Despite the considerable difference in my parents' ages, I believe that theirs was a truly carefree and happy union. It was a time when security and bourgeois contentment were something which everyone had a right to aspire to. My father was to provide my mother with all these advantages while relieving her of most of the responsibilities, with the result that she was to sail through all the upheavals of life certain that, in the end, she would get her own way by a sort of personal, divine right—and usually she did. Their two eldest children, my brother Ismail and my sister Hadidja, were born in Madrid (in 1918 and

1919 respectively), followed by my sister Aicha in Shubra in Cairo (1921), and myself in San Remo, Italy (1924).

My father chose to build in San Remo as a place of political security, as he explains in a letter to Wasif Pasha (at the time Bey) Ghali,¹ and, as things turned out, it was to remain our most permanent home. But of the two places—Shubra and San Remo—Shubra was by far the more important because of its historical past. It had been the favorite palace of Muhammad Ali the Great, the founder of our dynasty. As history crops up every now and again in these family reminiscences, it is only fitting to briefly outline some of Muhammad Ali's life and origins, for without him nothing that follows would have ever occurred.

1. The letter was in the possession of Ambassador Ibrahim Ghali.

Chapter 1

Muhammad Ali 1769–1849

Passions, theories, reasons all pop up like Jacks-in-a-Box as soon as someone steps out of a teeming crowd to make his own way in life and, eventually, if powerful enough, to condition the lives of others too. When it is on a scale that upsets the already dealt hand of the superpowers, one can imagine the commotion that it can create—in Muhammad Ali's case, with a chain reaction that makes it almost impossible today to open a book on the international history of the period without coming across his name. For it was he who would reanimate a country that was at the hub of the ambitions of Britain, France, Russia, and Turkey, with all the ramifications extending to Austria and Prussia—that is to say, the great powers of the day. The United States was still a distant land which had not yet solved the economic differences between its northern and southern states; Spain continued to indulge in its splendid and romantic isolationism, its eyes riveted far away in the western hemisphere; and Italy was on the way to reestablishing its national unity. The Arab world lay dormant within the fold of the Ottoman empire.

It was an empire that had passed its zenith, but was held together by the swords of a soldier race and generations of remarkably able foreign ministers who played off the country's foes without apparently their ever sensing it—a rear-guard action pitting wit against superior modern technology and weapons. In its capital, in a setting of incomparable beauty spreading over both Asia and Europe, reigned the Sultan-Caliph, temporal sovereign and high pontiff of Islam. The