

## MISSION IMPLAUSIBLE

*“I remember my mother being less than impressed by pictures sent to us of my father’s Egyptian magic show, which included some rather good looking female assistants. It was this charity show which he apparently gave before King Farouk. Whether or not the story about the radio transmitter is true or not I do not know.”*

Alistair Maskelyne’s first letter

Another example of Fisher manipulating the historical record is his melodramatic account of Maskelyne’s spy mission on behalf of Dudley Clarke: *“only once did Clarke allow him to work as a spy, an incident that took place prior to Operation Crusader. Jasper put on a grand magic show for Clarke, and it almost cost him his life.”*

Fisher describes Maskelyne’s daring attempt in November 1941 to locate a powerful radio transmitter hidden inside Abdin Palace, Cairo. During Maskelyne’s command performance for King Farouk, A-Force agents pretended to be members of his magic crew. They gained access to prohibited areas inside the palace but were unable to find the rogue transmitter.

Fortunately, Maskelyne volunteered to help out. He boldly invited the King onto the stage as an observer. Then, in the middle of a baffling illusion, Maskelyne escaped via a trapdoor. With the palace guards distracted, he had only six minutes to complete his mission. He miraculously found the transmitter in a printing room and managed to return to his gimmicked trunk just in time.

After the successful performance, Maskelyne and his crew dined with the King.

The next morning, troops arrived to confiscate the transmitter ...

Is there any truth to this tale? Is this adventure fiction?

John Booth wrote that Maskelyne showed him the gold wristwatch in Kenya in 1954 and said: *“This is the gift King Farouk gave me afterward in appreciation for that ‘innocent’ evening show of magic and illusion which I gave in his palace.”* Booth, at the time, thought Maskelyne’s tale about the transmitter stretched the truth. But the material in *The War Magician* later convinced Booth that the Palace escapade was genuine.

My theory is that the whole episode is synthetic fiction. Maskelyne’s frantic search midway through a disappearing act resembles a fanciful episode of Mission Impossible.

Fisher has jettisoned any pretence at historical accuracy. Two factual ingredients may have been conflated to create a more entertaining account:

1/ Maskelyne did perform a magic show for King Farouk.

2/ On a different occasion, the British Ambassador, Sir Miles Lampson, did surround the King’s Palace with troops. However, this military confrontation took place almost three months later (on the evening of February 4<sup>th</sup> 1942) and was triggered by a political crisis. Farouk was about to bring a pro-Italian minister back into his cabinet. The British interpreted this as a breach of neutrality and issued him an ultimatum. Farouk gave in and agreed to install a pro-British prime minister. If Farouk had refused, he would have been forcibly escorted to a Royal Navy ship and exiled to the Seychelles.

Egyptian author Sabit argues that Lampson was unreasonably hostile to Farouk: *“Sir Miles dislike of Farouk led him along some strange paths of the imagination. The King, he thought, was obviously plotting against the British Empire. He was harbouring Italian spies. He controlled an intelligence network that supplied Hitler and Mussolini’s armies with vital military information.”*

Sabit denies there was any dangerous spy ring hiding in the palace. The suspect ‘Italian aides’ were merely the palace barber and the dog handler. There was no evidence that these lowly employees wielded sinister political influence over Farouk.

Was there even a hidden radio transmitter in Farouk’s palace? According to Sabit, *“Lampson ... suspected that the King had set up a clandestine radio link with the Axis, through which, in some unaccountable way, he was passing secret information.”* Sabit regards these allegations as unfounded. It was not in Farouk’s interests to favour an Italian victory.

Other sources claim the British already knew where the transmitter was within the palace and therefore had no urgent need to confiscate it. Instead, they ran a counter-intelligence operation and secretly deciphered the transcripts being sent to Rome.

On the available evidence, which is partisan and contradictory, I am not sure whether an enemy radio transmitter operated from the Abdin Palace and, if it did, who ultimately benefited.

## THE ROYAL SCAM

In October 1966, Jasper Maskelyne wrote about the Palace incident in his correspondence with Twentieth Century Fox:

*“Another exploit was the need to get enough searchers into King Farouk’s palace and at the same time distract the King’s attention—and that of his aides—while a search was made for a hidden radio transmitter by which he kept in touch with the Italians.*

*Fortunately Farouk as a young man had visited my magic shows in London and when it was suggested to him that, as I was entertaining the troops, I would be honoured to put on a special show for him in the palace, he was delighted.*

*I decided to put on a “Chinese Show.” This would allow complete disguise for my eight helpers. In fact I brought in 18. They were all heavily made up with long moustaches, plenty of grease paint, elaborate wigs and mandarin style clothes with long sleeves. I told them to wander about the palace and if challenged to say they were lost. I said that it would take me several hours to prepare my act so my Chinese helpers had a long time to make a search of the obvious places. On stage I had eight helpers. The King, Queen Farida, and all the court officials were in the private theatre giving the extra ten searchers dressed up as Chinese time to make a real search. The radio was actually found in a roll top desk in a small room under the stage. We took no action, except to tell the British Embassy. I dined with the King in most elaborate style off gold plate. He gave me a gold watch which he had engraved specially for the occasion.*

*The following morning the New Zealand Armoured Brigade rolled up in front of the palace with its guns loaded and trained on the palace. The British Ambassador then told the King that unless all his Italian staff were not outside the palace to give themselves up within ten minutes the tanks would open fire. The Italians came out, some half dressed, others with suitcases.”*

In this unpublished version, Maskelyne does not claim he personally found the spy transmitter.

*Magic–Top Secret’s* original version of the transmitter story differs significantly from either Maskelyne’s film notes or Fisher’s account. The transmitter was hidden “*at the house of a very rich foreign merchant in an Egyptian city.*” Maskelyne stages a magic show and searches the house while the audience is distracted. He fails to find the transmitter but comes up with suggestions as to which room might contain it. “*Whether what I discovered was any use or not, I never really knew ... Not long afterwards, a great fire broke out in that house ... the suspected part of the building was completely gutted by fire. The radio sender was silent after that.*”

These major discrepancies hardly vouchsafe the authenticity of the Farouk escapade.

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