Narriman Sadek

'Cinderella of the Nile' who jettisoned her fiancé to marry the playboy King Farouk

NARRIMAN SADEK, who has died in Cairo aged 70, was the former wife of the late King Farouk of Egypt, and the mother of the heir to a now abolished throne.

Farouk's second wife, she was chosen from the ranks of Egypt's non-royal upper middle class as a populist gesture, intended to restore popular support for a monarchy on its last legs. Newspapers dubbed her the "Cinderella of the Nile", a commoner plucked from obscurity for a life of extravagant luxury in the royal palaces of Cairo and Alexandria, reluctantly accompanying her playboy husband in the casinos and grand hotels of Europe. She stood it for just over a year, having produced the desired male heir, and then bolted, divorcing the king at the age of 19.

Narriman Sadek was born on October 31 1934, the only child of a comfortably-off Cairo family. Her father was a high-ranking government official; her mother had keen social ambitions for her daughter.

At 16 she became engaged to a promising young man who worked for the United Nations secretariat and had studied at Harvard; but her plans changed after the couple visited a Cairo jeweller to shop for an engagement ring.

Farouk's wily information minister had let it be known that the king was on the lookout for a new bride to replace his first wife, Queen Farida, who had produced three daughters but no son, and whom Farouk had recently divorced. The jeweller informed the palace that he had just met the ideal candidate in his shop: she was young, plump and good-looking, just the kind of girl the king was known to like. Farouk's courtiers contrived for the girl to return to the shop – ostensibly to look at a special ring, at a very good price – so that the king could have a look at her.

Rather than observing her through a peephole in the door, as had been arranged, the king unexpectedly met her face to face. After a brief exploratory interview, he announced to her that he intended to marry her.

Her parents were persuaded to cancel the original marriage plans, which were at an advanced stage. Narriman's humiliated fiancé returned to Harvard to complete his doctorate; Narriman's father was given the title Bey.

She wrote of this meeting in the jewellery shop: "I could not help thinking of Zaki Hachem [her original fiancé] who, compared with the king, seemed like a little absent-minded insignificant schoolteacher."

At first, the engagement was kept secret. Narriman was sent to Rome to undergo training in the duties of queen. She lived at the Egyptian embassy in Rome, where she was given a new identity as a "niece" of the Egyptian ambassador. Tutors and ladies-in-waiting taught her history, etiquette, music and four European languages. Her weight was carefully monitored and controlled, to conform to Farouk's order that she return to Egypt weighing no more than 110 lbs.

AP

Queen Narriman in her wedding dress, with King Farouk

A flamboyant royal wedding was held. Narriman wore a white satin gown decorated with 20,000 diamonds, and was driven to the ceremony in a convoy of Rolls-Royces and Cadillacs through heart-shaped triumphal arches of pink neon emblazoned with the initials "F" and "N". All the wedding presents that were in gold were later secretly melted down into ingots.

The wedding was followed by a four-month royal honeymoon in Europe that, in its excesses, eradicated whatever good will had been achieved by the marriage to a commoner. For their departure on the royal yacht, Farouk dressed the entire honeymoon party of 60 in identical blue blazers, white ducks and yachting caps. He showered Narriman with expensive presents, and by night lost vast sums at the baccarat table.

Narriman began a life of boredom and luxury. She gave birth to a son, Ahmed Fuad, in January 1952. Ten days later, there was an outbreak of rioting and destruction in the Egyptian capital. The mob chanted, "Narriman, Narriman, why does your baby have teeth?"

The king, whose philandering continued unabated after his marriage, grew even more distant from the young queen as the threat to his crown intensified.

Farouk was forced to abdicate that summer, after an ultimatum by the committee of military officers that later seized power in Egypt. The royal family left Egypt on the royal yacht for Capri, and began a life of nomadic exile in Europe.

Narriman quickly tired of accompanying her husband on his nightly round of nightclubs and casinos, and in March 1953, accompanied by her mother, she returned to Egypt, where the new government gave her a new passport in her maiden name.

Announcing her decision to leave Farouk, Narriman told reporters: "It was the will of Allah, and when Allah wills he places scales on our eyes and seals our ears to wise counsel."

She left her son in Farouk's custody, and saw him only rarely. She received no alimony in the divorce settlement. Farouk died in 1965, after a characteristically gargantuan meal in a Rome restaurant.

In 1954 she married Dr Adham al-Naqib, an Alexandria surgeon whose father had been Farouk's doctor. They had a son, Akram. In 1967, she married, thirdly, another doctor, Ismail Fahmi, and thereafter lived quietly in Heliopolis, a Cairo suburb. She died on February 16.

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