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## DJORFF PALACE THE NOVEL

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**The story of two women,  
two revolutions and one house.**

*Marina Hitchen*



## CHAPTER TEN



*March 31<sup>st</sup>*

The days pass interminably slowly here. Simon came home for a couple of days last week but I hardly saw him. He claimed to be very busy with some photographer called Mr. Gaddis who is about to retire. He wanted Simon to go through his pictures with him before he bequeathed them to his children who apparently don't have much interest in them. Simon was doing it as a favour he told me because this Mr. Gaddis has done a lot of favours for him in the past. As soon as he had finished helping him Simon left Luxor without even informing me. It doesn't bother me like it used to. I'm getting accustomed to his selfish little ways.

Mamdouh told me today that there are going to be elections in May but elections for what for I have no idea.

*8.00pm*

Simon called this evening. He made no apology for his sudden departure out of Luxor. He is back in Assuit now with Lord Valentine. I asked him about these elections and it all sounds very complicated. Parliamentary meetings have been suspended and the Wafd have declared no confidence in the government. Last week a decree was issued dissolving the Chamber of Deputies and setting the date for elections. "They are going to change it" Simon went on to tell me. "They are trying to form a new political party first before going to a vote. The idea is to get the best men from each of the current parties to run for election under the banner of the "New Party."

Not a very original name!

*April 1<sup>st</sup>*

Simon arrived home unexpectedly this afternoon.

"This country is in a right old mess" he proclaimed immediately he walked into the house.

"Good afternoon to you too" I said. Simon really must learn some basic man-

ners. There are other things in life than Egyptian politics. He took not one blind bit of notice of me and carried straight on with what he was saying.

"I know El-Hilali's government is trying to curb corruption but they are way overstepping the mark. They have abolished all sorts of employee privileges which the Wafd reinstated and had even extended when they were in power. Some of those privileges date back a decade or more. Their latest move this morning was to pass a decree stopping all salary increments over fifteen pounds a month. They are cutting back on employee expense accounts too and pensions so this is going to affect me badly. I was rather hoping for a big pay increase when I change over to working for the Egyptians. We will either have to cut back or subsidise my salary with money from England. That means going cap in hand to my father. I have been thinking about it and a good time to do that would be at our wedding. He'll be feeling generous that day I'm sure. We will get a contract done at the Embassy here as we said but I won't tell my father that we are married. We will have our wedding in England as though this contractual one in Egypt never happened. That means not telling your parents about it either. Do you mind?"

So the wedding in England will be going ahead. I was really hoping that it wouldn't.

"No not at all" I replied. "Whatever you want, you know best. When do you expect these two marriages to take place?"

"Early July for the Embassy one in Cairo I would imagine, and New Year's Day in England as we originally planned for the big one. I can't say for definite. The Foreign Office is playing around now trying to put the Sudan issue on the table as a reason not to evacuate immediately."

"What Sudan issue?" I asked trying to sound interested. I should have known better. Simon went into a long boring diatribe about how the status of the Sudan is tied up with that of Egypt. "The Prime Minister has been holding meetings with the British Ambassador again as well as the Foreign Minister but they never reach any conclusions at these meetings" Simon continued, elabo-

rating far more than was necessary. "The British have no objection in principle to the King's title being 'King of Egypt and the Sudan,' but only on condition that Egypt recognises the right of the Sudanese people to self-determination. It seems like America is interfering as usual and that more meetings will be held now with some Sudanese delegation."

Evacuation of the British doesn't appear imminent to me but Simon is still convinced that it is and according to him our Cairo marriage will definitely be happening.

"By the way, Barbara will be in Luxor in about ten day's time" Simon said suddenly changing the subject. "She has three pals coming over from England who want to go on a Nile cruise. She said she will contact you as soon as she arrives. They will be staying in The Winter Palace for three or four days before the cruise. You ought to meet up with her Nancy. It will get you out of the house; give you something to do."

I'm not thrilled at the idea of meeting up with Lady Valentine again but at least it will be someone to talk to other than Mamdouh. It will give me a chance to ask her about all those old photographs too. Simon is leaving tomorrow. He only came to tell me about our marriage plans he said.

*April 13<sup>th</sup>*

Lady Valentine called me today and invited me across to the Winter Palace to meet up with her and her friends.

"Good that you could come" she said greeting me like a long lost friend and kissing me on both cheeks. She introduced me to two of her companions; Julia and Caroline Openshaw. "There were supposed to be four of us altogether on the cruise but Valentine's sister cried off at the last minute. She says she is ill but I don't believe her. She has been on five Nile cruises already and I don't think she could stomach another one. It was my husband's idea that she should join us and it's very difficult to say no to Valentine. She only let us know last night that she's not coming. It's very short notice. She was supposed to be arriving

this evening. We came earlier so we could look round Luxor first before we go on the cruise and we have already been here three days. We were so busy that I never found the time to call you. Isn't that just too awful of me? Well never mind, you are here now."

"Yes it is awful of you" I thought but there was no point saying anything so I turned my attention to her companions. The Openshaw sisters are about the same age as Barbara and neither of them has ever been married. They seem pleasant enough as far as aging spinsters go but judging by what they were wearing they are probably a bit eccentric. We had been talking about life in England, temples in Egypt and bits of Cairo gossip for about an hour when Barbara suddenly invited me along with them on the cruise.

"I say Nancy, if you have nothing better to do why don't you join us? It won't cost you a penny. Everything has already been paid for by Valentine for his sister."

"I can pay my share" I responded indignantly.

"Of course you can" Barbara responded soothingly, "but why on earth should you. It serves Valentine right for trying to press gang his sister like that."

"I'll think about it" I said. Part of me wanted to go to break the monotony of my life in Luxor but I wasn't convinced I wanted to spend a week or more in the company of these three.

"Well you had better think about it quickly; we are leaving the day after tomorrow. The dhabaya will be ready to set off straight after breakfast on the fifteenth."

"I thought you would have been going on one of those Nile cruise ships" I said in surprise. "I hear PS Sudan is very good."

"Nonsense" Lady Valentine exclaimed in disgust. "My friends and I pride ourselves on being travellers not package tourists. A dhabaya is the only way to really see the Nile."

"Have you ever been to the Sudan?" I asked thinking this was my chance to ask about the photographs.

"On the Sudan you mean. Yes once. It's very luxurious but you would hardly

know you were in Egypt. You could be anywhere."

"No not the boat" I corrected her. "I meant have you ever been to Sudan the country."

"Goodness me, no! What on earth would I want to go there for?" She looked horrified and I had the feeling she might be telling me the truth. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason really" I said trying to think of a reason why I would have asked such a question. "You know how my mind wanders sometimes Barbara. Simon has been talking a lot recently about how the Sudan and Egypt have similar problems with the British and us talking about a boat with the same name made me start wondering if the Sudan is really like Egypt or not. I thought you might have been there. You seem to have been everywhere else."

I got away with that one but if it wasn't Barbara Valentine in the photographs who was it? I could hardly ask her if she knew of anyone who looked a lot like her who might have been in the Sudan about twenty or so years ago. I'm sure I'll find out who it is one day.

"Yes I think I will come with you." I decided all at once. "It might be fun. How long will we be gone for?"

"About eight days. It depends on our mood, oh and the wind of course. You need to be at the hotel dock by nine the day after tomorrow and bring a decent dress with you in case we stay in Aswan one night. The ladies here want to see The Old Cataract Hotel. Agatha Christie fanatics the pair of them!"

With that I left for home still wondering if I was doing the right thing.

*April 15<sup>th</sup>*

Thank goodness Mamdouh helped me pack this morning. I would have forgotten to take insect repellent along and he also reminded me that I needed some dress shoes to go with my 'hotel' outfit.

*11.00am*

I am beginning to wonder if I haven't made a dreadful mistake. The boat looks very smart from the outside but my cabin is quite claustrophobic. There is no port hole that opens and no balcony. What should be a romantic sailing experience is being spoilt due to lack of wind. We left the dock towed by a noisy motorboat that is spouting filthy fumes onto our deck. To top it all Barbara has now informed me that the Openshaw sisters are dedicated vegetarians and as a matter of politeness we will also not be eating any meat or fish on the journey. Luckily they are also dedicated tipplers and the galley is positively heaving with a whole array of decent wines and spirits.

*3.00pm*

The wind has got up at last and we have abandoned that dreadful motorboat. Unfortunately it's too hot to sit on deck at the moment but we will all be meeting there for dinner. Dinner; that should be interesting.

*Midnight*

I'm sure I won't be able to sleep a wink. My head is spinning. These two sisters really are the strangest people I have ever met.

Dinner consisted of a slimy green vegetable called molokhia. This is an Egyptian staple according to Julia which luckily Mamdouh has never seen fit to inflict on me. This was accompanied by flatbreads, some raw carrots and several bottles of good French Chardonnay. The conversation was all about Egyptian history and especially the myths of Ancient Egypt, a subject I'm not ashamed to say that I know absolutely nothing about.

"My favourite god has to be Horus" Caroline declared. "I love all those stories about him don't you Nancy."

I had no choice but to admit my ignorance.

"Well, Horus was god of the sky" she began determined that I should live in ignorance no longer. "He was born to the goddess Isis after she retrieved all the



dismembered body parts of her murdered husband Osiris. That's all of him except for his penis, which was thrown into the Nile and eaten by a crocodile; or maybe it was a catfish. Anyway, Isis used all her powers to bring her husband Osiris back to life and make him a new penis. That's how she was able to conceive Horus. She had to disappear up to the Delta while she was pregnant to stop her brother Set trying to kill her unborn son. He was the one who had murdered her husband in a fit of jealousy you see. Set was in love with his sister Isis himself. When he grew up Horus had a grand affair with his mother too. She must have been very beautiful to have all those men fall in love with her like that. Isis and Horus had four sons. Each one of them was responsible for looking after parts of the body after a person died and each one of them had his own goddess to help him. One son took human form and protected the liver, another was a jackal and he protected the stomach, the baboon one protected the lungs and the hawk one the intestines. That's what the canopic jars are all about. Horus himself is usually depicted as a falcon but of course you must know that. Some say he took human form most of the time and was actually the pharaoh. As each pharaoh died Horus went back to the gods and then came down to earth again as the next pharaoh. I don't believe that bit of the story at all!"

"Are you telling me you believe the rest of it then" I said, amazed that anyone could actually believe any of this stuff. Julia, who had so far been silent, joined the conversation then.

"Caroline is not a complete believer in Horus. She is not totally convinced. I on the other hand am; I do believe it."

"What! You can't be serious" I replied aghast.

"Why not? Why can't I be serious?"

How was I supposed to answer that!

"No doubt you are a Christian" she continued obviously not expecting an answer, "and as such you believe in your god. What is so strange about me believing in a different god; an Egyptian god? After all the Egyptians believed in them for thousands of years."

"Yes but those stories are too fantastic to be believed nowadays. We have science now. Those Egyptian myths are not at all like Bible stories."

"Really" Julia continued. "You mean turning water into wine and resurrecting the dead and feeding thousands of people with a few loaves of bread is not fantastic? You have science to explain all that do you? Why is it that when people talk about your religion they talk about faith which is completely rational according to them whereas anything else is supernatural mumbo jumbo and not rational at all. I'm tired now I think I will retire. I will be delighted to continue further with this line of conversation tomorrow if you so wish. If on the other hand, you don't wish to then I will say no more about it. Goodnight. Sleep well"

Julia and Caroline both went down to their cabins then leaving me alone on deck with Barbara who had said nothing so far on this subject of Egyptian gods. She spoke to me only after they left and it was as if she was giving me some sort of warning.

"Nancy, I wouldn't argue with those two about theology, philosophy or anything at all of that sort if I were you. They are both very clever and they both know a lot more about it than you do."

"Are you saying I'm not clever?" I asked indignantly.

"No of course not" she said hurriedly trying to cover her faux pas "But you are clever in quite a different way my dear. Clever in a worldly sense would be the way to describe you I think."

I didn't like what she was implying there.

"I haven't studied Egyptology if that's what you mean and clearly they have but I never imagined for one moment that anyone actually believed in it. I don't think that's terribly clever."

"There is a great deal that we don't understand in this world Nancy and neither of us is in any position to mock the beliefs of others. People like you and I dear do better when we confine ourselves to a more material way of life. Don't be surprised if the two of them tell you more unbelievable things tomorrow. I find them fascinating don't you? "

I find them disturbing. I will try to keep away from talk of this nature for the rest of the journey.

*April 16<sup>th</sup>*

I woke late to find the boat already docked in Esna and only Barbara was still on board.

"The two ladies have gone off to the temple. They will spend all day there. I thought we could wander over there later for about an hour. It's far too hot to spend any longer than that out there."

I am quite relieved we won't be visiting the temple with those two sisters. I am happy to visit temples of course but not to be subjected to any more of the kind of nonsense I had to listen to last night. We have agreed to go to the temple about four when it has cooled down a bit so I am going to do my nails now.

*6.30pm*

Esna is not that interesting. I think once you have seen Karnak temple you may as well dispense with the rest. To relieve the boredom I have dedicated some time to my appearance today. If I don't have the brains of the others I can certainly compete with them in looks. To complete my image I am wearing my Yemini fish necklace. I only hope dinner is better than last night.

*Midnight*

Dinner consisted of tomato soup and vegetable couscous which was a great improvement on yesterday. The Chardonnay was still flowing freely but I noticed that the Openshaw sisters weren't drinking it. Tonight they were knocking back the cognac. Most of the conversation centred round the day's visit to the temple and I politely refrained from saying I hadn't been impressed.

"That's quite an interesting pendant you have there" Julia remarked during a lull in the conversation.

"Yes I bought it in Cairo but I believe it's from the Yemen. It's supposed to bring

good luck." I could have cheerfully disappeared into a hole in the ground as soon as I said it. I knew what would be coming next.

"Ah so you believe in luck and fate" Julia smiled. "That particular piece is for protection I believe rather than luck. I saw one once before but the stone was pink not black. The fish amulets used to be placed on mummies under the direction of Horus to help guide the spirits safely into the afterlife. These little charms are widely accepted even today as a source of magic and power. You can buy them from so-called protection-merchants although you have to be careful as many of them are charlatans. The Arabs set great store by such things. Do you know that most of the Arabs use magic only for the good and it's only foreigners who practice evil magic? The Egyptians do occasionally use black magic and it's usually linked to the full moon or sometimes to the horned god of the sun who also represents death."

"You are quite wrong about that fish Julia" Caroline interrupted. "If it's from the Yemen then it will be of Jewish origins and not linked to Horus at all. To the Jews the fish is a symbol of luck as Nancy says and not protection as you are quite wrongly asserting."

"Yes you are possibly right" Julia sniffed. "Caroline is the expert on these trinkets by the way Nancy."

"I know I'm right" Caroline continued smugly, "and stop frightening Nancy with your silly stories about black magic. It's time we were getting to bed. We have a long day tomorrow."

I am pleased that my fish has no link to Horus. These sisters are quite remarkable and they are also the only people I know who can shut Barbara Valentine up. She hardly said a word all night.

*April 17<sup>th</sup>*

I had a dream last night in which I was a young girl in Ancient Egypt going to the funeral of some pharaoh. I made the mistake of telling Julia about it over breakfast.

"Now that's interesting isn't it? How can you tell what is a dream and what is real. Tell me that if you can Nancy. Maybe you really are a girl living in the time of the pharaohs and only dreaming that you are a woman in the twentieth century on a Nile cruise."

"Don't be silly" I laughed.

What a strange thing to say though. I can't get it out of my head now. The boat will arrive in Edfu shortly and we will be staying there for two whole days. The temple there is the official temple of Horus so the Openshaws will certainly have a lot to see at that one. I am going to give it a miss. I need to clear my head of all their nonsense.

*April 22<sup>nd</sup>*

Thankfully the rest of the evenings' discussions were all on very earthly matters and not worth noting down. I haven't been off the boat since Esna so it's good to be on dry land again. We have reached Aswan at last and we are in a most comfortable hotel that serves decent food. The Old Cataract where we are staying has had many famous guests through its doors which is of some passing interest. Well it's something to talk about that is neither mystical nor mundane. I just heard from one of the other guests that the elections have been postponed for an indefinite period now. There is some problem with the voters' registry. They are saying that the Wafd party tampered with it when they were in government and registered only the names of their supporters, missing out the registration of all their opponents. So typical of these silly Egyptians.

We are leaving tomorrow. We will take the train to Luxor where I will get off and the others will continue on straight back up to Cairo.