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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 SIX



*November 1st 1951*

I called the number Simon had given me today; no answer. Next I took out the list of places that he said he frequented and went through it one by one making notes.

- Sheppard's Hotel; bar, restaurant and ballroom (Well he certainly isn't here)
- Windsor Hotel Officers' Bar Can a lady go there unaccompanied? Doubtful)
- Café Riche Restaurant (Perhaps I could ask about that one to see if I can go there alone or not)
- Groppi's Tea Room(That seems possible)
- Auberge Night Club: Pyramids Road (Definitely not)
- Gezira Club (Yes but I think I might need an invitation)

That leaves me with one definite option and two possible ones. Also I have to consider the cost of all this. Firstly I paid for my room for two months. The manager assured me that the hotel will return any of the money I have paid in advance if I depart prior to the 1st of January next year. I will pay cash for anything I buy in the hotel. I want to be sure I am not running up bills that I can't pay later. That would be most embarrassing. Counting my money after paying the hotel I am pleased to say that I have a good amount left; more than I expected. Egypt is not an expensive place it seems.

I spent my first full day in the hotel sitting in the lobby trying to discreetly listen in to any conversations I could without appearing too obvious. I was hoping to hear any mention of Simon. There was none but what I did hear was a little disconcerting. It seems the British are not very welcome in Egypt at the moment. A couple of young officers were saying that Parliament has just approved some decree abrogating the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936. I don't understand what that means exactly or the ramifications of it but it sounds serious. They have recently proclaimed their monarch, Farouk, King of Egypt and the Sudan which I thought he already was but it seems like he wasn't. One man had a newspaper which he was brandishing around angrily and I saw the headline:

'Egypt has broken the fetters of British imperialism.'

The gentleman left the paper on the chair when he stood up to go to the bar so I surreptitiously grabbed it so that I could read the full article.

'The Wafd government looks like they are giving way to pressure from the Brotherhood. This could lead to possible militant opposition to the British. Already the Brotherhood and some of the police are armed.'

I put the newspaper back where I had found it and contemplated on what I had read. I decided that there was nothing I could do about all this and I am not sure how it will affect me anyway. I have other things to worry about. I made a plan to visit Groppi's Tea Rooms tomorrow if I still can't get an answer from Simon's telephone.

#### *November 2nd.*

Still no sign of Simon and no answer on the phone. I spoke with an English lady at breakfast who said that I definitely will need accompanying if I want to go to Café Riche. She knows someone who is a member of the Gezira Club and she said that she might be able to get me an invitation to the races or to the croquet green there. It's not definite and she is only a tourist herself and I might not see her again as she is not staying in Cairo much longer. I went to Groppi's this afternoon; a charming place with excellent English tea and cakes. There is a gentleman's bar as well and you can see right into it from the tearoom. I will have no problems going there alone as long as I keep out of the bar. I still have not met anyone who even knows Simon let alone who has seen him. I hope for a better day tomorrow.

#### *November 6th*

The last few days were exactly the same as the ones before. No whisper of Simon and no chance of visiting any other places on his list. Starting to panic.

*November 7th.*

At last Simon has turned up and in the hotel restaurant of all places. He walked in this evening at around 7.00pm but to my chagrin he was accompanied by a lady. He spotted me as soon as he came in and beckoned me over to a bigger table where I could join them. He introduced me to his lady friend, the Right Honourable Lady Valentine, wife of a well-known archaeologist. The way they chattered on I am concerned that their friendship may extend to more than an occasional dinner but at least I know that she is safely married and even better, married to someone who sounds important. I told them both that my companion had taken ill and had had to return home so I was now completely alone in Cairo. Lady Valentine said that sadly she could be of no assistance to me as she was leaving for Luxor in the morning. Simon said that he would do his best but he had a lot of work on at the moment and the atmosphere in the city was not conducive to sightseeing at present. Whatever that meant I don't know but it looked as though Simon might not be that interested in me after all. I started thinking that this had all been a dreadful mistake and that I had totally misread Simon's intentions back in England. "Perhaps I should go home before making a complete fool of myself" I thought. Then just as I was about to give up on him Simon slipped a note into my hand. I couldn't read it with his friend sitting there so I made my excuses and retired to my room. Wonder of wonders Simon does want to meet me and he wants to meet me tomorrow.

His note simply reads; 'Groppi's tomorrow 4.00pm.'

I will sleep more peacefully tonight.

*November 8th*

Simon was waiting for me when I reached Groppi's a little after 4.00pm today. He casually informed me that he hadn't wanted his colleague's wife knowing all his business hence his secretiveness yesterday evening. I don't altogether believe him. I am sure there is something going on between him and Lady Valentine,

but I let it go without question. We sat and talked for almost two hours. He asked me if I had read 'Catcher in the Rye' yet which I haven't so that line of conversation was cut short. In order not to appear a complete ignoramus I turned the topic to politics. 'What do you think of this anti-Anglo feeling amongst the Egyptians?' I asked trying to sound like I knew more about it than I actually did. I couldn't have asked a better question. Simon started telling me how things had arrived to this point in Egypt's history and he never once stopped to ask me my feelings or opinions on it all thank goodness. I tried to look interested and indeed I was a little but most of it went over my head. I will write down what I can remember in case I have any need to call upon it in the future.

The anti-British feeling is not a new thing. It dates back almost fifty years to some village incident that I can't recall the details of. Following that a protectorate was established with a Sultan but that wasn't good enough for the Egyptians. A group of Egyptians known as the Wafd went to a conference in Paris to demand independence. Someone called Saad Zaghloul was there and he must have been pretty important as later on he became Prime Minister. (I think I should try to remember that name.) There was some trouble with this Wafd group and most of them got deported which led to a big uprising which is sometimes referred to as the first revolution. The British Foreign Secretary at that time was Lord Curzon and he recommended replacing the protectorate with some kind of alliance treaty so he met with Zaghloul to discuss it. Everything would have been approved but for some disagreement over the Suez Canal which the British wanted to keep under their control but the Egyptians didn't like that idea apparently. Zaghloul got deported again and the British declared martial law. More demonstrations and more violence followed. Then the High Commissioner, Lord Allenby, suddenly declared Egyptian independence without referring to anyone. I don't know how he was allowed to do that and I don't think that it was real independence because the British seemed to continue telling the King what to do and they definitely kept control of Suez.

The King, Fuad, died back in the thirties and his young son Farouk took over. Because of something to do with a war between Italy and Ethiopia King Farouk was scared and signed a document to say that the British could stay until 1949 when they would then have to withdraw their troops but they could still keep control over the Suez Canal. During World War Two Egypt was used as a base and the British actually withdrew to Suez in 1947; two years earlier than they had promised. According to Simon these years of imperial dominance by Britain over Egypt, coupled with the new Israeli statehood have caused nationalistic feelings to grow. In January of this year, the Wafd returned to power with someone called Nahhas as Prime Minister. Simon thought that things might come to a head soon and there might possibly be another revolution. "A proper one this time" he added.

I didn't like the sound of that! Simon, seeing the look of horror on my face quickly assured me that nothing much would happen during my two month's stay so I shouldn't get myself worked up about it. He then escorted me home and we have arranged to meet for dinner at Café Riche tomorrow evening. He will collect me from the hotel at 8.00pm.

### *November 9th*

I have no idea what to wear for a dinner at Café Riche. I asked the hotel manager and he said semi-formal whatever that means. My salmon pink 'New Look' dress would have fitted the bill perfectly but Simon has already seen me in that. I have a black cocktail dress that belonged to my mother but it needs some alteration. My mother has a much fuller figure than me. The dress is almost twenty years old but I don't think these little black numbers ever really go out of fashion.

### *2.00pm*

The hotel manager has found me a tailor and the dress should be back within the hour. I tried putting my hair up but it looks too severe. I will leave it down

in soft curls and wear no make-up other than eyeliner, a little rouge and a pale pink lipstick. The overall effect I am looking for should be one of sophisticated innocence.

*7.00pm*

I am finally ready. I have no jewellery left other than a silver fish pendant with a black stone that I found in the hotel shop a couple of days ago and couldn't resist buying. The shop owner told me it's from the Yemen and is supposed to be a lucky talisman. It doesn't go with my dress at all. I have only an emerald green shawl to throw over my shoulders and some green accessories would have been perfect but alas I have nothing of that sort left. Anyway this lack of adornment accentuates my naiveté which I have already decided is the image I want to put across to Simon.

*November 10th*

I awoke this morning with mixed emotions. Last night didn't go exactly as I would have liked. Simon picked me up over half an hour late and we took a street taxi to the restaurant. I had been expecting him to come in a car and as for the restaurant the hotel manager had led me to believe it would be something much grander. Café Riche turned out to be a rather rowdy bar that serves basic food and it was packed to overflowing. The waiters seemed to know Simon and managed to find us a table albeit at the back of the room near to the kitchen. I looked round and the first thing I realised was that I was totally overdressed. The place was teeming with army officers with their wives or girlfriends and all the men were in uniform and the women were wearing casual cotton dresses of the type that had gone out of fashion ten years ago in England. We were inundated with young men coming over to our table to welcome Simon back to Cairo and anyway it was far too noisy to have any real conversation

Simon ordered beers for us both which I wasn't happy about; I would have



preferred a good bottle of Beaujolais. The menu looked to consist of standard Egyptian fare and from what I could gather from the quick glance I had at it the food was quite inexpensive. I wanted to order the quail but Simon ordered pigeon for me telling me I had to try it because it was the house specialty. The food came accompanied by about twenty small dishes of salads and dips most of which I had not seen before let alone tasted. I have to admit it was surprisingly good.

"Seeing as you are dressed for a cocktail party let's get out of here and go somewhere else" Simon proposed almost the second we had finished eating. He downed what was left of his third beer and got up and started making his way to the door leaving me to trail on behind. We went out on to Talaat Harb, one of the busiest streets in the city, and started walking in the direction of Groppi's. We passed the tea room and on the next block on the other side of the street I spotted the place we were obviously heading towards; "After Eight Bar and Cocktail Lounge.'

We entered the bar and at once I felt more comfortable. The place, despite its unprepossessing exterior has a certain charm and definitely some class. Very few tables were taken but the dim lighting and the pianist who was playing some popular music of the day gave the whole place an air of quiet sophistication. I glanced round to see that all the ladies were smartly dressed and were sipping on cocktails through brightly coloured straws. I was about to order a White Lady when the barman arrived with a full bottle of whisky, some ice and two glasses. Once again Simon had made no recourse to asking me what I would like and just assumed I would drink what he was drinking.

We sat in silence while I watched Simon make huge inroads into the bottle of Scotch. "He must be getting drunk by now" I thought, hoping that this was out of character for him. Perhaps he was summoning up the courage to talk to me

about something of a more intimate nature and needed some Dutch courage. I was wrong. When he did finally speak he talked only about his work. He told me that he believed the greatest discoveries had already been made in Egypt and all they were unearthing now were tombs full of rotting corpses. He droned on and on about how the days of Carter and all the other great adventurers were long gone and how his only hope now lay with Lord Valentine who he said could smell out any site worth digging in from a thousand paces. At shortly before 2.00am he drained the last glass of whisky and we left. All in all a most disappointing evening! I couldn't sleep last night after that and as we have made no further arrangements to meet I don't know what my next move should be. I will wait around in the hotel today to see if he shows up. There is not much else I can do.

*1.30pm*

The manager has summoned me to the reception where he says a gentleman is waiting to take me to the pyramids.

*11.30pm*

A much more satisfactory day! When I went down to the hotel lobby I found only a driver there who informed me that Simon had sent him with a guide to take me to the pyramids. Simon would not be able to come with me he said but would meet me later for an early dinner.

I spent a frustrating day sightseeing. I have absolutely no interest in these ancient monuments and flatly refused the offer of a camel ride. Instead we took a rickety carriage and I reached the Great Pyramid visibly shaken up. The guide suggested I might like to climb up or even go inside. I shook my head in disbelief. Surely he could see I was not dressed for such an expedition. The whole place was full of vendors selling tacky souvenirs and cheap pieces of silver and it seemed like foreign tourists were fair game to them. My guide stopped at nearly every

stall and became visibly annoyed when I refused to buy anything. At precisely 5.50pm my ordeal was over and I was driven to a smart rooftop fish restaurant with stunning views over the desert. "This is a better way to see the sites" I thought sinking down into a deeply cushioned bamboo chair and ordering a lemon juice.

Simon arrived almost immediately and apologised for not being able to be with me on my afternoon excursion. After giving him a brief résumé of my afternoon at the pyramids, trying to sound much more enthusiastic than I felt, we were ready to order. This time Simon did consult me. We ordered a bottle of white Egyptian wine and a wide selection of fish and seafood. The wine was terrible but at least it was cold but the fish was excellent. When we had finished eating Simon struck up a conversation of a much more personal nature.

"Have you ever been in love?" he asked without the slightest warning. Taken aback I blushed and lost for words I just shook my head.

"I have" he continued, "but sadly it didn't work out. The lady was already betrothed to another and although she returned my affections she had far too much good breeding to call off her engagement. I have never met anyone else since then. The problem is I need an heir. I have to get married and I need a lady who is still of child bearing age. I am not expecting to find love. I just need someone I can rub along with."

I had no idea what to say so I said nothing. This was not what I had been expecting. I honestly believed that Simon, being swept away by my beauty, would have been starting to fall in love with me by now. If all he was looking for was a companion and a mother for his children I might have more difficulty fitting the position. I need not have worried.

"Do you think you could be that person?" he asked. "I can't promise to love you but I will take care of you financially. You will want for nothing. I would expect you to relocate to Luxor which I am sure you will like but you need not accompany me on my trips around Egypt; unless you want to of course" he added. "Don't give me an answer now. I checked at the hotel and I see you are booked in until the end of December. Tell me then. In the meantime we can meet a couple of times a week and see how we get along. I know a girl of your age is probably looking for more than this. I suppose you want romance and someone to sweep you off your feet and a lady with your good looks can probably find that so if you do not wish to consider my proposal please let me know now.'

I knew I had to tread carefully here. I didn't want to lose him nor did I want to appear too eager. I measured my words carefully.

"I am very flattered Simon; of course I am but honestly I am not thinking about marriage at the moment. I am still young. There is no doubt I find you a fascinating and charming man" I lied, "and I have never believed in all that 'love' nonsense one reads about in penny-dreadfuls. Your proposal has come as a complete surprise to me but not an unwelcome one. I will give it full and proper consideration but you must understand that I can't make you any promises at the moment."

With that he pulled a ring out of his pocket. "It's malachite" he said. "It symbolises money and wealth. Take it. If later on you agree to be my wife I will get you a proper engagement ring but I saw this in the Khan-el-Khalili this morning and it matches the shawl you had on last night. Now let's not speak of this again until the New Year."

I walked with him to the car, triumphant in my success and after such a short time too. This is turning out to be more like a business transaction than a love