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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 SEVEN



November 14th

I haven't seen or heard from Simon for four days and I am starting to worry. Perhaps things had gone a little too well. I don't have enough money to go out so I have just been sitting around the hotel bored to death and fretting. Today Lady Valentine called and invited me down to the lobby for afternoon tea. At least it broke the monotony and to some degree she has put my mind at ease. "Do call me Barbara" she said cloyingly as soon as I had greeted her as 'Your Ladyship'. Thank goodness for that. I don't have the slightest idea how to address gentry correctly and I am sure to be doing it wrong.

"I hear that Simon has proposed to you; congratulations" she went on.

"Well there's nothing definite yet" I responded, "we are just getting to know each other at the moment and we will take our decision in the New Year. I can't say getting better acquainted with Simon is an easy job. I haven't seen him since his proposal. Do you know where he is? Is he still in Cairo?"

"Well that's Simon for you" she laughed, "always out and about somewhere. Yes he is still in Cairo, my husband saw him only yesterday. He's probably been going to that awful club he loves so much on Pyramids Road. I won't let my husband go there anymore. The place is full of prostitutes."

"Surely not" I said leaping to Simon's defence. "If you are talking about the Auberge then I have heard from many people that it's most respectable. Samia Gamal herself performs there and she's a world famous dancer."

"Goodness Nancy I don't think Samia Gamal has danced there in over ten years. She doesn't dance in public at all these days since she became a big movie star let alone in a nightclub like that." I could see that Barbara was laughing at me again. She seems determined to make me feel completely inadequate and right at that moment she was succeeding. "I'm afraid the heyday of the Auberge is long gone. The girls who dance there nowadays are a far cry from Samia Gamal. Not that I'm suggesting Simon goes there with the idea of consorting with any of them; well not any more. Maybe he used to sample what was on offer at one time but I am sure it's nothing more than a drinking den for him these days

with perhaps a little bit of voyeurism thrown in. A single man of his age has to take pleasure from somewhere. Anyway if it's left up to Simon he won't be single for long. He's made his decision and now it's all up to you Nancy. I do understand your hesitation. It won't be easy being married to a man like Simon. He's been living alone too long and he's become very set in his ways. Being holed up in Luxor won't be much fun for a girl your age either. I couldn't live there myself. Of course it's very picturesque and is full of tombs and temples but that's about it. No social life and definitely no decent shops but Simon says that you are a big fan of Egyptology so maybe you'll like it down there."

I had the distinct impression that Barbara was trying her hardest to put me off the idea of marrying Simon and a chill went down my spine. Had Barbara and Simon been in a previous relationship, or even worse were they still in one? Is she the woman he said he had once loved? My thoughts were running away with me and I tried hard to control them. Most likely I was being irrational and jumping to the wrong conclusion as usual.

"Nancy wherever are you? The waiter has been standing here for almost five minutes waiting to take your order and I don't think you have even seen him." Barbara was tapping me on my shoulder as she spoke.

"Oh sorry" I said trying to pay attention to what she was saying. "I was miles away there. Just tea and a scone for me please waiter."

As soon as the waiter had scurried off with our order I turned back to Barbara and with all the sincerity I could muster I tried to give her the impression that I needed her advice. "I was just thinking that I hardly know Simon at all and if I am only going to see him every now and then I don't see how I will ever get to know him properly. You are his friend and know him much better than me. Have you any advice you can give me?"

"Oh take no notice of me" she said looking very smug, patting me on the knee this time. "I am sure Simon will change his ways once he is married. There's nothing much wrong with him that a good woman won't cure. Valentine was just the same before I married him; apart from not having the same fascination

for ladies of the night that is. No, Valentine never did any of that sort of thing. These adventurers are always so romantic sounding in novels don't you think but believe me they are quite a different thing to live with. As long as you can keep yourself amused or better still if you have an interest, like Egyptology for example, you will be fine. Simon will be working out in the field most of the time and you will be left very much to your own devices. I'm sure you'll hardly see him. It's not so bad for me because Valentine is based in Cairo. There is always plenty to do up here. Then again I never wanted children and Simon says that you do. Children take up a lot of one's time I hear."

It seemed as though Simon had been telling Barbara a lot of things about me including things that aren't exactly true. I have about as much interest in Ancient Egypt as I have in watching paint dry and as for children I wouldn't say I am overflowing with maternal impulses. Simon has made it clear that having children is part of the deal but I hardly relish the thought; it is just something I will have to do.

The tea arrived then and Barbara changed the subject to the social scene in Cairo. I only half listened because after all I was never going to be a part of it if I was to be living in Luxor. She continued rambling on for nearly an hour and seemed oblivious to the fact that I wasn't paying her much attention. Quite frankly I was glad to see the back of her when she finally made her excuses and left. I much prefer my own company to that of sanctimonious women like her. I just hope Simon makes an appearance soon.

November 17th

A whole week has gone by without any word from Simon but I have just this minute received a message from the concierge to say that I should be in the hotel lobby at six this evening. "Don't dress up" was thrown in almost as an afterthought.

11.00pm

Simon strolled into the hotel at almost seven without any word of apology. Despite having told me not to dress up he was wearing a smart suit with a waistcoat and cravat. "Sorry I'm late" he mumbled not sounding in the least bit sorry. "Change of plan. I was going to take you to the Windsor which is pretty informal but at the last minute I got an invite to the opera. You will have to get changed I'm afraid. That black dress you had on the other night will be appropriate I think."

So Simon is now telling me what to wear. Despite being affronted by his controlling nature I was quite glad because I have no other dress fit for a night at the opera. At least this time I have some jewellery to match my outfit. When I got back downstairs I found Simon in the long bar and he was already half way through a bottle of that dreadful Egyptian wine.

"Drink?" he asked pouring me a glass without waiting for my reply. "The opera is very near to here so we can walk and we have about an hour to kill I think. That ring looks good" he said taking my hand and examining his present as though he had never seen it before.

I took a gulp of the wine; red this time. If anything it is even worse than the white.

"Where have you been all week?" I asked trying to sound interested rather than accusing.

"Here and there; working mostly. A few nights out with a couple of chums; nothing special. You?"

I resisted the temptation to tell him I had spent the whole week sitting around the hotel waiting for him to show up and instead regaled him with an account of my afternoon with Barbara as though it was one of the most scintillating experiences of my life. By the time we had finished the wine it was still not time for the opera.

"Do you know why this is called the long bar" Simon asked me completely out of the blue.

"Yes I do actually. Its proper name is the American bar but because it gets very crowded and you have to wait so long for a drink most people call it the long bar now. The waiter told me the story on my first day in the hotel."

For once I could answer one of Simon's obscure questions and I was feeling quite pleased with myself when he asked me another one that I couldn't answer. "Well done. Now tell me what cocktail was invented right here in this bar."

I had to admit that I hadn't the slightest idea.

"Well it's called a Suffering Bastard and the bartender, Joe made it as a hangover cure during the war. Its gin and brandy, a dash of Angostura another dash of lime all topped up with ginger beer. A slice of orange and a little sprig of mint finishes it off nicely."

It sounded revolting but to my consternation Simon insisted that I try one.

"Barman, bring two Suffering Bastards over here will you."

"We call them Suffering Stewards when there are ladies present" the barman shouted back. "Do you want brandy or bourbon?"

"Brandy of course. I think if you change the brandy for bourbon it becomes a Dying Bastard. Am I right?"

You certainly are sir" the barman laughed, "and if you add rum to it as well it's a Dead Bastard."

Two of these disgusting drinks were brought to the table and Simon downed his almost in one gulp. I sipped on mine nervously and I was only half way through it when it was time to set off for the short walk to the opera.

Once we got there I discovered that we didn't have a box. In fact we were sitting in some of the worst seats in the house. We were joined by a group of middle-aged men who Simon introduced me to as 'our fellow countrymen with a fascination for all things Egypt.' There was no time for conversation thank goodness because the curtain was already going up for the first act of *Rigoletto*. I had never been to the opera before and if I have my way I won't be going again. I couldn't understand what was going on at all and the music wasn't to my taste. It clearly wasn't to the taste of Simon's friends either because they left after the

first act. Simon on the other hand sat there enraptured throughout the entire performance while it was all I could do to stay awake. The end did come eventually of course and Simon grabbed my hand and almost dragged me out of the theatre with the applause still ringing in my ears.

"Good to get out before the crowds" he explained when we reached the pavement. "I hate all that jostling."

We came back to the hotel and Simon left me in the foyer promising to see me in a couple of days and this time we would definitely be going to the Windsor. I know nothing more about Simon than I did yesterday other than that he likes opera.

November 20th

True to his word Simon called to say he will take me to the Windsor tonight.

November 21st

Last night was almost enjoyable. The Windsor Hotel Bar is a charming old place full of young men and their girlfriends. No airs and graces but somewhere any respectable person would be happy to be seen. Simon was at his best; relaxed and very attentive. At his suggestion I drank arak and I have decided that I like it. Simon said its better if you drink it with food but there was none in the offing. The Windsor it seems is a place only for drinking. Assuming that we would be dining I hadn't eaten a thing since breakfast and was quite heady after only my second glass of the arak. Simon must have noticed because he told me to slow down. "This Egyptian arak is stronger than the Lebanese you are probably used to" he remarked as though I am a connoisseur of the stuff. We didn't stay late. At the end of the evening Simon got into an altercation with the barman over the bill and I can see that he has quite a nasty temper. He calmed down immediately we left the place so he mustn't have been all that angry. To my surprise he hailed a taxi cab and deposited me in it.

"I have to get going" he said by way of explanation. "I am leaving for Assuit

early in the morning. The driver knows where to take you. I will be out of Cairo for the next couple of weeks so you will have to entertain yourself I'm afraid. Sorry."

I was surprised that he hadn't mentioned this earlier in the evening and rather disappointed that he didn't want to escort me home especially as we wouldn't be seeing each other for a while. I am not looking forward to two weeks of isolation. Anyway I am determined to do something valuable with my time. This morning I spotted a copy of 'Catcher in the Rye' in the Anglo-Egyptian book shop so I have bought it and I am going to read it before Simon gets back. That will do for a start.

December 5th

Simon should be back in Cairo today. I certainly hope so. There is some unrest on the streets and I am feeling more than a little nervous. I heard that something has happened to upset the Egyptians. From what I understand the British want to clear a road somewhere or other to get a water supply to the army and they have had to knock down a few houses that were standing in the way. Well about fifty actually but they were only mud huts so I don't know what all the fuss is about. Some young Egyptian officers have got together and are starting some kind of resistance movement against the British. The hotel manager said it is only a 'small' movement and there is nothing at all to worry about. I wish Simon were here then I could ask him.

December 8th

Simon is still not back and I am feeling very uncomfortable in Cairo at the moment. Nothing tangible has happened to make me feel this way and I can't explain it. It's just the atmosphere. The hotel is almost empty and not many foreigners come here anymore for dinner like they used to or even for afternoon tea. The manager tells me that all non-essential personnel have started to leave the country. He even asked me if I had any plans to leave earlier myself.

December 12th

Simon is back. He came to the hotel tonight for dinner. I was shocked to hear from his own lips that he has been in Cairo for two days already. I told him that he was most un-chivalrous leaving me alone like this when the whole city could break into full scale riots at any moment. He did nothing but laugh.

"Things haven't reached that stage yet Nancy" he said reaching out for my hand. "I would never put you in any danger you know that."

"No I don't know that" I said crossly. "So why have all the non-essential staff left then if there's nothing to worry about?" I demanded, and without giving him a chance to reply I continued on with my tirade. "There are hardly any foreign women left in Cairo. There must be a reason for that and don't try to pretend there isn't"

It was the first time I had ever shown Simon that I was angry with him and he stopped laughing immediately.

"Oh Nancy" he said gently, as soon as I let him get a word in. "Foreign Missions always overreact and none more so than the British Embassy. They have everyone out at the first sound of gunfire. That's diplomats for you. Business is carrying on as usual. I haven't heard of one foreign company closing its doors in Cairo yet. It's coming up to Christmas and lots of people go home around now, especially the women. That's normal. We should plan something special for Christmas ourselves. My father would like me to go home but I have told him I am too busy. I am busy of course but not so busy that I can't take a couple of days off to be with you. Would you like that? Think about what you want to do. I promise I will call the hotel every day from now on to make sure that you are alright and I will try to see you more often. Do you feel better now?"

Actually I did. Just having a man around was comforting even if he never stays around for long. We ate the rest of our dinner in a companionable silence. I forgot to tell him that I have read 'The Catcher in the Rye' at last which was probably a good thing because I didn't enjoy the book at all. A rather silly story I thought about a boy going through puberty and his stupid opinions of adults

and children. A lot of tasteless talk about sex in there too. I have no idea why it's so popular. I think the hero is writing from a lunatic asylum or somewhere like that and if I've got that wrong and he isn't in one then he certainly ought to be. I'll choose my own reading material from now on.

December 19th

I have seen neither hide nor hair of Simon nor have I spoken to him on the telephone but the hotel manager tells me that he calls every day 'to see if I have calmed down yet.' If marriage to Simon is going to be like this I will have to find ways to amuse myself just like Barbara Valentine said I would. At least I'll have the money to do it with.

December 20th

I spoke with Simon this morning. He has booked us two nights over Christmas in a hotel in a place called Fayoum. He says there is a lake there and it's very peaceful. He is sure I will like it. So much for him asking me what I want to do! After being holed up in this damned hotel on my own for so long I would have preferred to spend Christmas in a place with a little bit more life. I have no idea what to pack. The hotel manager says I won't need anything 'dressy' because there is nowhere to go in Fayoum. At least I won't have to spend any money on clothes.

December 24th

Simon collected me at 4.00pm today and drove me to Fayoum himself. He said he had borrowed the car from work. I was wondering why he didn't have a car of his own when, as if reading my thoughts he said "My car is down in Luxor. I usually come up to Cairo on the train and use the work's car when I'm here. I don't drive in the city much anyway; too much traffic and nowhere to park." It took us only a couple of hours to reach Fayoum and another fifteen minutes to get to where we are staying. The hotel is very simple but I have a stunning

view over the lake. Putting it kindly the food is basic. They have put on nothing special for Christmas and I can see why; we are the only guests in the place. Simon went up to his room early because he is going fishing first thing in the morning. He didn't ask me if I wanted to go fishing with him, which I don't, but I would have liked to have been asked.

December 25th

Christmas Day and I have spent almost all of it alone. Simon got back from fishing just after one in the afternoon and went straight back to bed. The chef informed me that Simon had caught 'a whopper' which he will be cooking for us this evening after we get back from our evening sail. This proposed boat trip is yet another thing Simon hasn't bothered to tell me about.

10.00pm

The sunset over the lake was incredible. Simon said that he had wanted to surprise me so I shouldn't be too angry with him for not telling me about it beforehand. The chef grilled Simon's catch and it wasn't exactly 'the whopper' he had claimed it to be. Not only that, it was full of small bones. That together with the inevitable bottles of Egyptian white wine was my Christmas dinner.

Half way through the second bottle Simon came over all romantic, or at least as romantic as Simon can be. He told me that for him the marriage was a definite 'goer' and he hoped I felt the same way. To be honest I have some doubts but when I think back to the alternatives of Samuel Lovage and Jack Trevallion my mind suddenly finds itself well and truly made up.

"You will just have to wait until New Year's Eve to find out" I teased him but seeing Simon's crestfallen face I quickly added "but you may as well have the ring ready just in case."

Back in my room I am starting to examine my life. "Is this what I want?" I ask myself: "not exactly" has to be the answer to that one. I keep reminding myself that this is akin to a business relationship. I will provide Simon with

a family and in return he will provide me with a home and money. Despite all this soul searching I still feel uneasy. Marriage was always going to be a business arrangement for me but I had never dreamt that it would be a business agreement for my husband as well. I had always assumed that my husband would be totally besotted with me and the business part of it would be coming from my side only. "Is this selfish of me?" I thought. "Isn't it better this way?" Still I feel insulted that someone wants to marry me without loving me or even really caring for me at all. This is all completely one-sided of course. I mean do I love Simon? Definitely not.

December 26th

This morning we looked around the town. There is nothing in Fayoum apart from an overrated old water wheel and a couple of tourist stalls selling postcards. I wanted a souvenir, something to remember my first Christmas with Simon by. The only thing I liked was an oil painting of a carpet seller I found in a small shop just off the main street.

"I don't know why you want that as a souvenir; it's not local to the area" Simon complained, "and I doubt it has even been painted by an Egyptian."

"You are quite right, it's hasn't" the shopkeeper agreed coming over, nodding his head. "The artist is an Iraqi. He was passing through and being short of funds he sold that painting to me. It's rather good don't you think? I like it myself" he said smiling at me "and I've turned away quite a number of customers who wanted to buy it. I see you have fallen for it young lady and I am sure you will give it a good home. Let's see if we can persuade your father to buy it for you." I saw Simon's face darken but neither of us said anything to put the shopkeeper straight. Simon handed over the money for the painting without discussing the price or making any attempt to bargain.

"Robbing bastard" he muttered as we left the shop. "If I had remembered to buy you a Christmas present I would never have paid that much for it."

I didn't know whether to be pleased at his extravagance or upset that he had not

even thought to buy me anything for Christmas. Then I remembered I hadn't bought him anything either.

It was after six when we reached Cairo and Simon dropped me at the hotel door explaining that he had to get the car back and he was already late. I have come to my room and am now admiring my painting. This will be the first of many I hope. I'd like to have a grand collection of Middle Eastern art in my home someday. That horrible Lily Johnson has a house full of paintings and I am sure I can do better than her if I start now.

December 31st

Simon went back to his old self and in the week following Christmas he called neither me nor the hotel manager. I just received a message about ten minutes ago to say that we will be celebrating the New Year at the British Embassy tonight so I should make sure I look my best.

I counted my money. I have been careful and am still doing very well financially. Then again I have no idea how long Simon intends our engagement to go on for. I will naturally press for a quick wedding and hope Simon agrees. Whether I have money or not I will have to splash out and buy a new dress for tonight. I have to look good for Simon in front of all his British friends and I have only two decent dresses to my name both of which I have worn to death. I will go into town this afternoon and get something special.

6.00pm

The dress shops in Cairo have nothing in them that is in the least bit modern. I have had to go for another one of those timeless black cocktail dresses which, now I come to look at it, isn't that different from my mother's old one. Well it is slightly. It has a lower neckline and a bit of silver trim. My Yemeni fish pendant goes admirably with this one.

Simon has just called to say he will be delayed and that I should eat in the hotel before we go. He will be here at ten 'hopefully.'

January 1st 1952

2.00am

Well I am now officially engaged. Simon came early; around nine thirty and we set off for the party straightaway. When we reached the Embassy I was surprised to see so many Egyptians there. I didn't question as to why there were so few white people at a British Embassy function because I know perfectly well why. Cairo is no longer a safe place for Europeans.

The party was tedious. The band was out of tune and the dance floor was too small. At least they had some decent wine. As we toasted in the New Year Simon whispered in my ear "Will you marry me?"

I had barely got the word "yes" out of my mouth when he pulled out a small box from his pocket. Inside it was the most hideous ring I have ever seen. A huge badly cut diamond placed awkwardly into a claw setting on a wide gold band. It had clearly cost a fortune but it is in complete bad taste; the word vulgar springs to mind. Anyway Simon placed it on my finger and to my surprise it fits perfectly. The stone reaches almost to my knuckle and the whole appearance is quite unsuitable for my poor delicate hands.

"Now you have some real jewellery to wear you can throw away that ridiculous cheap pendant" he said pointing at my Yemeni fish. "It makes you look like a Bedouin's whore" he laughed. "Any wife of mine will wear only the best" he went on leading me to believe that he thinks he has somehow purchased me with his vulgar tasteless piece of gold.

I can't sleep. I am most perplexed. Simon wants to wait a year and then get married in England! The whole idea is preposterous. England of all places! It's impossible. I cannot wait a full year and under no circumstances do I want to be married in England. I mean who could I invite; my parents? Simon would see immediately that I am from a totally different walk of life to him. No; my plan is to be married here in Egypt and as soon as possible. I will think about what I can do about this problem in the morning. It's far too late at night to worry about it now and I am not feeling one hundred percent sober either.