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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 EIGHT



January 2nd

No solution has presented itself to me thus far. If anything things look bleaker than ever. I had a terrific hangover yesterday and spent the whole day in my room refusing to think about anything. This morning Simon called in for coffee and to tell me that he has informed his father of our engagement and that he is delighted. He thinks I should tell my family as soon as possible and probably consider going back to England to start wedding preparations. I was about to tell him that I would prefer a quiet wedding in Cairo when he said, "My father has been waiting for this for so long I can't possibly deprive him of a church wedding with all the trimmings. You do understand that don't you Nancy?" This was not the time to start talking about a fast marriage at the British Embassy so I just nodded my head implying that I agreed with him. I'll bide my time. Something will come up.

Thankfully Simon turned the conversation off the wedding and round to the political situation.

"That young officers crowd are gaining a lot more support these days" he said as much to himself as to me. "They are calling themselves the Free Officers Movement now. The front man, Gamal Nasser I think his name is, definitely has charisma as well as having plenty to say for himself. King Farouk's lavish lifestyle isn't helping; not when he is paying the army a pittance and they are all practically living on the breadline. I can see where they are coming from to be honest and the British are doing nothing by way of controlling this stupid King. In fact the British and the King look as though they are working hand in hand. Either that or Farouk comes across as nothing more than a puppet on the British pay roll. I know there is corruption, no one is saying there isn't, but it's not on the grand scale that Nasser is proclaiming. This officers' group is starting to influence the police now and even some of the political parties have sympathies with them. There has always been quite a number of police with nationalist tendencies but there are more

of them every day now and they are protecting anyone who makes any kind of attack on British interests."

"Have there been many of these attacks on us then?" I asked worriedly. "Some. Mostly round the Suez area but it's spreading to Cairo now. We need the police and the army on our side though not on the side of the resistance."

"Maybe we should get out of Cairo for a while and head down to Luxor" I said suddenly seeing that the troubles in Cairo could work in my favour. "I have to see the place where I'm going to live sooner or later anyway."

Simon looked puzzled. "I thought we'd go there after we are married. I don't know why you need to see it now. Look can we talk about this another time. I have to get going."

Left alone I started looking at a range of scenarios. Ideally things would 'hot up' a bit in Cairo and I could go down to Luxor for a few months. That would save me the hotel bills here which would go a long way towards solving my financial problems. On the other hand if things got really bad and riots spread throughout the whole country Simon might try packing me off to England. There is no point making plans at the moment. I will have to see how things pan out and be prepared for all eventualities.

January 9th

I haven't seen Simon all week. He was in the hotel yesterday though. He dropped off a few books for me to read and a brief note saying he would be going to Alexandria for a few days. I consider this very strange behaviour for a fiancé. Why had he not wanted to see me or even speak to me on the telephone? It's a mystery.

I am looking at the books now. 'The Caine Mutiny'; I don't think I will read that one. 'My Cousin Rachel' might be alright; I quite enjoyed Rebecca. 'The End of the Affair' sounds as though it might be depressing

but I can give it a try. I am not a great reader and have not read anything by Graham Greene before. I have nothing better to do anyway so I may as well make a start on them.

January 17th

Simon is still in Alexandria but at least he has had the courtesy to call me a couple of times. He told me that things look like they are getting worse and I should prepare myself to go to England soon! No comment.

I have finished the two novels. The Daphne du Maurier one was a good read but the plot was highly improbable. 'The End of the Affair' scared me a bit. It's all about jealousy and a woman who won't divorce her husband to marry her lover. Does Simon relate to the hero in some way I wonder? Is that why he chose this book for me to read? Or am I imagining things? I must find a way to ask him.

January 24th

At last he is back. We had dinner together this evening but he seems distracted. I asked him directly what he thought about the Graham Greene novel he had given me and he professes not to have read it. That's a relief.

"I just picked up three of the latest new novels from that English bookshop in Kasr El Nil" he said. "I wanted to be sure I wasn't getting anything you had already read and the man in the shop said you definitely wouldn't have read any of those because they only came out towards the end of last year. To be honest I didn't pay much attention to what they were about. By the way did you ever get round to reading 'Catcher in the Rye?' he asked. "I love that book."

The less said about that the better I thought so instead of answering him I changed the subject and asked him exactly what was happening up in Alexandria.

"Nothing much is happening but you can feel the tension there" he

replied. "Not only in Alex either; it's as though the whole country is about to reach boiling point. I know we have mentioned it before but now I really want you to seriously consider leaving Egypt, at least for a while. It could get very dangerous."

"That's exactly why I am not leaving! Do you really think I am going to leave you alone in a place that could be dangerous?" I replied. "I need to be in the same country as you at least. You don't seem to understand how much I care about you Simon. I cannot simply run off back to Yorkshire not knowing what is happening out here; wondering every day if you are dead or alive." I had rehearsed this little speech many times in preparation for just such an occasion. I was hoping to appeal to Simon's vanity and unbelievably it worked.

"Oh I see" he said blushing, almost lost for words. "I never looked at it that way before. You are right. Perhaps Luxor is the more feasible option after all."

At last I am getting somewhere.

January 25th

I'm not sure what is going on but Simon called to tell me to stay in my room today. "Don't even go anywhere else inside the hotel" he said. That seems very melodramatic and I have no intention of following such a ridiculous instruction. He left me a phone number where I can reach him which is very out of character so there must be something untoward happening.

8.00pm

I have not left my room all day as it turns out; not because of Simon's orders but more because there was no point. If I go downstairs I will only be dining alone so I may as well stay here. I have called room service instead.

8.30pm

The man who brought the food to my room a couple of minutes ago seemed most distressed.

"I really think you should leave Cairo madam," he told me as he was clearing a space on the coffee table to put down the tray. "It is a dangerous place for an English lady at the moment. I'm not sure if you know but there was an attack on British shipping today close to Ismalia and several British soldiers are dead; killed by rioters. A good number of the perpetrators got away and they have reached Cairo now and I have heard they are hiding out in the police barracks. I am sure the police will never surrender them to the authorities."

"Can you put my sandwich down on the table please and bring the teapot over here. Thanks" I said completely ignoring everything he had just told me. "That will be all." I gave him a larger tip than usual though so that he would know that I had been listening.

The minute he left the room I rang Simon to see if he could confirm what the waiter had told me. He said he is coming here immediately and that I should not move so something must have happened.

9.00pm

Simon has arrived and he said we have to leave this hotel immediately. He said he will explain later but we have to get out of the city centre and he has booked us into a small guest house near to the pyramids.

"I don't want to be in a big European hotel" he said. "It's too dangerous. I will tell you everything as soon as we get checked in at the next place. Just pack your things as fast as you can and meet me downstairs"

I am on my way there now.

January 26th

1.00am

We got here to this tiny little hotel a few hours ago. I hadn't even finis-

hed unpacking when Simon came to my room. This is normally not allowed in hotel bedrooms so I knew at once that this is not a respectable place.

"I'm sorry but we will have to stay here tonight" he said. "Tomorrow or Sunday at the latest we will get out of Cairo and go down to Luxor. The trouble hasn't reached there yet and with a bit of luck it never will." "What exactly is happening?" I asked quietly. "I heard something from the waiter at the Shepherd's but I'd rather hear it from you."

"Well there was an incident in Ismalia and some people died. The trouble makers all fled over here to Cairo. We knew immediately that they were hiding out in the police barracks and we went over there but the police refused to hand them over. We sent someone in to negotiate which I never thought was a good idea. Of course he got nowhere and eventually the poor bastard managed to get himself killed. Things went from bad to worse from then on. The Free Officers are clever. They are using some army general to lead the rebellion to make sure they have the army's full support. This guy, Naguib is a big shot in the Egyptian military apparently so there is no chance of the army going against him. The last I heard fifty Egyptian police officers had been killed and at least a hundred more wounded. It seems like most of Cairo has joined in now. I saw a lot of buildings on fire as I was making my way over to the Shepherd's last night; arson most probably. I had this horrible feeling that we might be in danger so I got us straight out of there. It is looking like things could get even worse tomorrow. Look Nancy, try not to worry; there's nothing we can do right now. Get yourself a good night's sleep and we will make a plan of action tomorrow morning when we have the full picture.

As soon as he left I started dancing round the room. "I am going to Luxor; I am going to Luxor." I was practically singing with joy. This is what I have been praying for. Hopefully things won't escalate too much. I don't want this unrest to spread through the whole country.

Simon will definitely make me go back to England if that happens. He won't fall for my little ruses next time.

11.00am

Simon came to my room for breakfast this morning bringing a pile of newspapers with him. "The Shepherd's was burnt to the ground last night" he said. "I knew something bad was going to happen. Thank goodness I followed my gut instincts and got us out of there."

"Oh my God!" I exclaimed. "Was anyone hurt?"

"I don't think so. I think everyone got out in time but the hotel was gutted and I hear it is beyond saving. Half of Cairo went up with it. Looks like the Soviets and the Yanks are happy about what's going on though" he said tossing one of the papers across to me. There it was in black and white.

"Last night's fires in Cairo are only further evidence that this is now the beginning of the end for Egypt's monarch."

They seemed almost gleeful about it.

"This is only the foreign press of course" Simon explained. "Local newspapers are not allowed to publish any news of rioting or fires and things of that sort; hence the lack of pictures. I have just come off the phone to the Embassy" Simon continued, "and apparently there is a police mutiny going on now. They are protesting about the death of so many of their colleagues yesterday. We won't be able to travel today. We had better just sit tight. As soon as things calm down I promise I will get you out of the city. Try not to think about it too much. You will be perfectly safe as long as you stay in your room."

4.00pm

By noon messages reached us to say that a number of British properties have been attacked and there is no sign of things letting up. Quite the reverse in fact; it is getting worse out there. Despite my protests Simon

said he was going out and shortly afterwards he left the hotel and he is still not back.

11.00pm

Simon is now back. The bad news is that almost eight hundred foreign establishments valued into the millions have been burned to the ground. Thirty people have been killed including eleven British and some other Europeans as well. Fortunately none of them were in the Shepheard's.

"That's only the number of dead. God only knows how many people are injured" Simon said with clear venom in his voice. "The Egyptian government itself is conniving in all of this I am sure. Damned Wafd party. And where was the King while all this was going on? The King was holding yet another banquet at the palace celebrating the birth of his precious son. I wouldn't like to say how many parties have been held in that child's honour since he was born a couple of weeks ago and he makes no secret of these endless celebrations either. There are pictures in every newspaper. The joke of it is that these photos are always side by side with news stories about the resistance. Did you see that one two or three days ago where the headline read;

'A tough battle between British forces and nationals'.

It was all about fighter planes being used for the first time and there right alongside it was a photo of his majesty at a lunch banquet being held at Abdin Palace in honour of his son and heir. He'll fire that Wafd government in the morning I'm sure. He has to. The government clearly can't maintain order and if he doesn't do something to ease tensions with the British he'll have a full scale military occupation on his hands. He'll find Nahhas another job; military commander or something. He's currently the Prime Minister by the way in case you didn't know. I think he's going to appoint someone called Ali Maher to Prime Minister next. I've never heard of him myself but nobody Farouk or the

British put in office is going to be accepted now that's for sure. We will have to leave for Luxor in the morning no matter what. Make yourself ready. Pack everything. I don't know when we will be back and there's no point paying for a room just to use it as storage."

So that's the good news. Black Saturday as Simon told me everyone is calling today is more of a rosy pink day for me.

January 27th

Simon came to my room before six this morning. He has managed to get a car and a driver willing to take us to Luxor. He has brought me some clothes to wear; a long black dress and a black headscarf. He says I must try to look like an Egyptian. Ridiculous! How on earth do you try to look like an Egyptian? I have covered my hair completely but having such a pale complexion it's obvious I am not an Arab. When I got to the car Simon was already in the back seat. He is wearing dark glasses! To be honest he looks slightly more Egyptian than I do since he has dark hair and quite a deep tan. That stupid moustache he refuses to shave off actually adds to his 'disguise.' Maybe from a distance we might get away with it but I don't think either of us will be fooling anyone if they get a closer look. It's almost funny.

"We will go on the back roads" he said "to avoid any checkpoints." It's obvious on close inspection that we are foreigners" he added as if reading my mind. "We can't leave for a few minutes yet. There's a curfew in Cairo now from 6.00pm to 6.00am."

1.00pm

We are out of the city now and we haven't had to go through even one checkpoint. This driver definitely knows what he is doing. We have stopped in some hell hole that Simon calls a village and he has sent the driver off to get something for us to eat.

1.30pm

The driver is back with some inedible food. There is a bit of fruit fortunately and plenty of water so I won't starve. He told Simon that he heard the radio when he was in the shop and although it is quieter now in Cairo the problems are not going to go away. "The army is not happy at all" he told us, "and they are trying to take control of the Board of the Officers Club."

"There will have to be elections for them to do that" Simon replied appearing to find this important. I can't see how some stupid boys club can have any bearing on anything but I am not interested enough to ask.

11.45pm

Well we have reached Luxor at last and checked into a hotel. The Luxor Hotel I think it's called. How original is that! It's decent enough but a bit basic. Simon says we will go to the house tomorrow. He hasn't informed the staff yet that we are coming so nothing will be ready. I can't eat a thing. I am exhausted and all I want to do is get out of these clothes. Simon made me wear them all the way here and for no good reason in my opinion. Nothing is happening outside of the cities and the roads were completely deserted. I want some air but the window looks as though it's nailed down and there is no balcony. No view of the Nile either although the manager assured me he has given me one of the best rooms at the front of the hotel. I can only see a dirty market out there which despite the late hour is still in full swing. No curfew in Luxor it seems.

Simon went straight to the bar as soon as we arrived without even going to his room first. He didn't suggest I join him there and although I don't want to sit around in a bar all night I could murder a beer. I called reception only to find out that the room service staff has gone home for the day. I still have some water and an apple so that will have

to be my supper. Anyway as I said I am not hungry. To compound my discomfort the mattress is lumpy and the pillows are rock hard. Surely there must be somewhere better to stay in Luxor than this.