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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 NINE



January 28th

I woke late and Simon was at breakfast before me looking annoyingly alert for someone who had spent a late night in the bar. I sat down opposite him and launched into a harangue about what a dreadful night I had endured in a very noisy room with hardly any air and worse still no room service. I demanded to know if this really was the best hotel in Luxor and he had the audacity to say "No there is the Winter Palace which is much better but it's full of tourists and anyway all of my friends drink in this bar here." So Simon had been more bothered about his drinking cronies than my comfort. What cheek! I have a sneaking suspicion that given half a chance Simon will always put himself first and I wonder what I am going to do about that! Still the coffee here is excellent.

1.30pm.

Well I am now ensconced in Simon's Luxor house. We came across to it on a boat which is apparently the only way to get here. It takes less than ten minutes to cross the Nile and it's a most pleasant trip. When the boat docked we had to walk up a steep dusty path and my shoes are absolutely ruined now. I will need to buy some sturdier footwear if I am to be using this path on a regular basis.

From the exterior the house is imposing. It is built in an Islamic style with five large domes. To the front of the house there is a small badly kept garden with a distasteful fountain to the left side which takes up an unnecessarily large space. The house is surrounded by the most beautiful palm trees but the wooded setting unfortunately attracts a large number of insects and according to Simon some snakes and scorpions as well.

The main entrance is very grand with a large beautifully carved door surrounded by Islamic art work. The problem arises when you get inside. It is a most impractical dwelling even for one person let alone two

and it would be impossible to bring up a family here. The main reception is large but sparsely furnished with three other rooms leading off it; a kitchen, an office and a small library. Despite its size the main room is of an irregular shape with arches here and there which preclude one from being able to see the whole room from any one place. Upstairs is worse. There are only two enormous identical bedrooms, each with its own bathroom and the rest of the space is taken up by a huge 'majlis' complete with Arabic seating. The entrance to it is guarded by two big granite dogs or as Simon prefers to call them "Anubis". This is clearly meant for large groups of men to sit around drinking tea and smoking god only knows what. All in all it is a most uncomfortable house.

"Where do the servants live?" I queried.

"They don't. They come in on a daily basis. Only a guard is here at night and he stays outside."

Well that is going to pose another problem. What happens if I want something at night? Presumably I will have to get it for myself.

"Here comes Mamdouh now" Simon announced as a young poorly attired Egyptian boy strolled casually into the reception room via the front door. "Mamdouh is officially employed as a cleaner but he will do almost anything you ask him to do. He is an excellent cook and he can go shopping for you as well. He is very honest so you need have no fears on that score. He will take good care of you and I am sure you will be very happy with him."

I am quite sure that I will not.

"I hope he cooks better than he cleans; the place is filthy." I mumbled crossly under my breath and then addressing myself more to Mamdouh than Simon I asked why he was allowed to use the main entrance. "Shouldn't he go round the back?"

"Shut up" Simon reprimanded me rudely. "The boy can hear you. He is not an idiot you know and he can speak some English. The place is dusty not filthy. We are living on the edge of the desert here. As to why

he enters through the main door well you need to know that Mamdouh is like part of the family and I will not have him going round the back." This is clearly a sensitive subject with Simon so I will leave it for now and see about Mamdouh later. There are bigger things to worry about than him.

"We can't both stay in this house together; well not until we are married" I said stating what I hoped was obvious.

"I am very well aware of that" Simon replied looking at me as though I am completely stupid. "You will stay here alone and I will stay just up the road with some friends of mine. They live quite close by. I won't be in Luxor for more than a few days anyway so you may as well get used to coping on your own."

This is all very unexpected and I need time to take it all in.

8.00pm

Some improvement in my day. Mamdouh cooked us fish for dinner and it was surprisingly good. After dinner Simon took me along the narrow dusty lane outside the house and after walking a few yards to the left he stopped and pointed towards the river.

"See that piece of land there; the one going right to the edge of the Nile. Well it's ours. We will build our family home there. I will let you design it yourself if you like."

I was shocked: firstly because he referred to the land as 'ours' and not 'his' and secondly because he is leaving things to me. My moment of glory did not last long.

"What I mean to say is that I will bring an architect and you can make your suggestions to him. After I have approved the drawings I will send my builder over. He built the house we are living in now and you have to agree he did an excellent job."

So Simon is not relinquishing complete control to me after all. Still I am determined to have my say. At least he's aware that we need a new

house so that's definite progress.

January 29th

I had an excellent night's sleep. At least the beds are comfortable. There are neither curtains nor shutters on the upstairs windows so I woke at five in the morning to the sound of the call to prayers and with the light streaming in directly onto my bed. I tried to go back to sleep but there was a rooster crowing almost directly outside the house and when I sat up in bed I saw that birds were flying around inside my bedroom. I looked to see where they were coming in because I was sure I had closed all the windows before going to bed last night. I spotted some tiny holes in the domes that have no covering on them and they are plenty big enough for small birds to fly through. As I looked up I saw that some of the birds have even built a nest on top of one of the chandeliers. I am waiting for Mamdouh now. He should be here at seven. I will let him solve this bird problem.

9.00am

Mamdouh has only just this minute arrived. He seems surprised that I expect him to come on time and follow set working hours. He has informed me that he can do nothing about the birds living in my house because they have already laid eggs in their nests on the light fittings. "More than one nest?" I asked him. "Yes" he confirmed without enlightening me as to exactly how many.

8.00pm

Simon has been with me for most of the day. We went to the East bank where he showed me all the stores where he has an account. He says I can go to any of them and pay for nothing. He will pay everything monthly. All I need money for is my personal expenses. He even has an account at Aboudi bookshop! Unfortunately he has no such tab at

the Winter Palace. We went there for afternoon tea and I love it there. If I come here I will have to use my own money so I won't be a regular visitor; it's very expensive.

Mamdouh has made roast beef. Overdone but tender enough. His chocolate mousse though is perfection. If I can just get him to clean the place properly I will be a bit happier with him.

January 31st

After two full days cleaning the house it is now spotless. The birds are still here though. Mamdouh now comes at eight in the morning. He will never get here at seven and I don't want to be cross every day so I have changed his hours.

February 1st

No sign of Mamdouh. I was alone in the house until well after midday when Simon showed up.

"Where on earth is Mamdouh?" I asked. "I haven't even had any breakfast."

"It's Friday" Simon answered disinterestedly. "He doesn't work on Fridays."

I wish I had known that earlier. I will be prepared in future.

"We will eat out tonight" he continued. "We have things we need to discuss."

"Obviously we will be eating out. We have no choice." I said. I left it at that. There is no point arguing with Simon.

February 2nd

Last night Simon took me to what he described as a 'quaint little tourist restaurant' close to one of the lesser known temples. Madinet Habu it's called; the temple I mean. I don't think the restaurant has a name. I wouldn't even describe it as a restaurant. It's more of an open air café serving beer and duck. Yes duck is the only thing they have on

the menu and I dread to think how they cook it. Boil it most probably. Even when I smothered it in the excellent orange sauce that came with it I could hardly eat it. There was no dessert and no coffee on offer so Simon simply ordered more beers.

"I will be leaving for Cairo in the morning" he told me after we had finished our meal. "There is some talk of the British being evacuated and I need to find out what is going on."

"What does that mean exactly?" I asked

"I don't know; that's why I am going up there to find out" he responded impatiently. "I assume it means everyone not in a reserved occupation will be leaving."

"Does that mean you? Will you be leaving Egypt?"

"No nothing like that" he laughed reassuringly. "Being an expert in antiquities I am definitely in a reserved occupation."

"They must have their own experts surely" I said astounded at his arrogance.

"Of course they do. There are Egyptians who know far more about all these artifacts than I do but the problem is that they are not honest. If you leave an Egyptian in charge he will spirit away all the best pieces for himself. I imagine that I will be working for an Egyptian Ministry very soon though instead of a British supervisory board but I have no doubt at all that my position is secure."

I could see the logic in that and started to relax.

"You are the problem Nancy not me" Simon sounded serious now.

"There is no good reason for you to be in Egypt and the Embassy will want you out. The only solution I can think of is to bring the wedding forward. Look I'm not saying this will happen but you need to be prepared in case it does. There is a possibility that we might have to get married in the Embassy in Cairo. It will just be a legal contract of course and we can go home and have a big wedding later on. I hope you are not going to be too disappointed if that happens."

Disappointed! I am over the moon.

I tried very hard to look disappointed. My acting must be improving because Simon was most attentive for the rest of the evening.

February 7th

I received my first phone call from Cairo this morning. As Simon had predicted his job is safe. He doesn't have much information on the proposed evacuation as yet he told me, so he thinks that if we are lucky, there will be no need to change our wedding plans. He's not sure though so I am keeping my fingers crossed that we will not be quite so lucky.

"The Foreign Office is still fuming over the riots last month" he went on to tell me. As though I'm in the least bit interested in that! Nevertheless I listened politely without interruption. "The Ambassador has sent an official memorandum to the prime minister accusing the Wafd government of not only incompetence for failing to maintain law and order, but saying they actively encouraged criminal exploits. He is sure that the fires which destroyed so many businesses in Cairo were the work of organized gangs. The Prime Minister is countering that argument by saying the whole debacle was provoked by the British, especially after the murder of Egyptian citizens in the Canal Zone."

These political games are a matter of no importance to me. I'm enjoying myself at the moment. Mamdouh has turned out to be a real treasure apart from his erratic timekeeping. I am teaching him a few new dishes and showing him how to cook beef so that it's still pink in the middle. He doesn't appear to be very happy about that and keeps asking me if I'm sure it's not raw. He can clean quite well too as long as I keep an eye on him

To be quite frank I feel like I am on vacation and I can see that I will become bored here quite soon if I don't find some friends or at least have a project to work on. Designing a home for myself might amuse

me for a while but I can't exactly start building a new house when I'm not even married yet.

February 10th

I have received an invitation to a party at the Winter Palace tomorrow to celebrate the King's birthday. It's just a printed invitation card and it doesn't say who sent it but at least someone knows of my presence here.

February 11th

Simon doesn't want me to go to the party tonight. He says it is in bad taste for the King to celebrate his birthday when his country is in such a shambles.

"It's a national holiday" I reminded him" and there are flags flying all over Luxor and I think I heard some cannons firing about an hour ago. The Egyptians seem happy enough to celebrate so I'm sure it will be no problem for me to do the same."

"Very well; go if you want" he acquiesced. "You can judge the situation in Luxor better than me. There aren't any street parties in Cairo this year despite Farouk having cancelled the curfew for the day. He's donated a bit of money to victims of the riots as a present from him to the people but nobody's impressed; the Egyptians up here hate him now. He doesn't seem to see it. The atmosphere in Cairo is more tense than ever and Farouk just carries on as normal. Mark my words this is the quiet before the storm. Anyway you go along to your party and have a good time."

February 12th

I didn't stay long last night. The only people at the party were tourists. Every foreigner living in Luxor receives an invitation one of the waiters told me. "They send them out every year but hardly anyone ever

comes" he added. To tell the truth I enjoyed it but I won't be going again next year myself. There was an Egyptian singer and two belly dancers who weren't very good but I suppose they had to be there to entertain the tourists. Only canapés and fruit punch were served which was disappointing. I was expecting a full dinner and maybe even some decent wine.

The newspapers today show some photographs of the King celebrating in his palace with his family but they are also full of pictures showing burnt out shops in Cairo. They have lifted the ban on printing reports of last month's riots now according to a journalist from the Al Ahram. I looked to see if there was a picture of the Shepheard's but I couldn't find one. I did find a small article tucked away on the back page about the planned evacuation of the British. They don't seem to be getting any further with that.

February 20th

My life is becoming monotonous. I don't know anyone here and the only person I have spoken to in a week is Mamdouh.

February 21st

I found an old photograph album today. There are lots of pictures of Simon with a woman who looks a lot like a young Barbara Valentine. I can't swear it's her though. There is something different about her if it is her. Simon is smiling in every picture which he isn't in even one of the photographs I have of him taken with me. I won't mention to Simon that I have seen them but I don't know if I should ask Barbara about these pictures or not. They are all taken in the Sudan and I have never heard Barbara speak about having been there. That doesn't necessarily mean she wasn't there at one time or another though.

February 25th

The Prime Minister made a speech today. Mamdouh was listening to it on the radio and he tried to translate it for me. From what I can understand, if Mamdouh translated correctly, the Prime Minister has made a kind of pledge to the people. He said that the principle of evacuation is not negotiable, and that his other goal is unity of the whole Nile Valley. It wasn't a very rousing speech in my opinion but Mamdouh seemed to like it.

March 2nd

Simon is home at last. He will be at the house within the hour.

4.00pm

With a bit of luck we will be getting married quite soon and in the Embassy in Cairo. Simon thinks this is almost inevitable now. What fantastic news! Simon told me that negotiations between the British and Egyptians were breaking down and there have still been no formal arrangements for evacuation.

"It's coming though" he said. "No doubt about that. Even Churchill is getting involved now. Maher, the Prime Minister had a meeting set up for yesterday with the Ambassador but it got cancelled at the last minute. Around ten in the morning the Ambassador cried off claiming he had influenza or some such nonsense but it turned out that someone had already been to see him, someone from the Royal Cabinet most likely, to say the meeting would be a waste of time because Ali Maher's days as Prime Minister were numbered. About half an hour later the cabinet held an emergency meeting. It turns out there was some undated decree from King Farouk saying he was suspending parliament. Maher had known about it and decided not to say anything because he thought Farouk wasn't going to do it. Of course it all came out as these things do and a couple of the top ministers resigned on the spot. Maher

tried to see the King at that juncture but he only got as far as the Royal Cabinet. He resigned immediately after that and said he felt his duty now lies with the masses and their common struggle."

Simon paused there and I asked him if this had any bearing on evacuation. He doesn't know. There is a new Prime Minister starting today. Ahmed Naguib El-Hilali: a difficult name to remember so I have recorded it here for reference.

Simon said he will be in Luxor for a few days yet and then he is going somewhere called Assuit.

"I have to get back to my work" he explained. "Valentine is finishing off his excavation in Assuit and I think he will retire after that. There's no money in antiquities for foreigners these days. The Egyptians want it all for themselves."

An interesting snippet of news! If Lord Valentine does retire then he might go back to England taking his wife with him. That would get her out of the way. I didn't dare press Simon for more information. For one thing he might not know anything else and for another I don't want to look as though I am interested.