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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 ELEVEN



April 24th

Home at last. The train journey was surprisingly efficient and I was very comfortable in the first class compartment where we were. It would be impossible to travel on any other part of the train as the rest of it is full of peasant farmers complete with their animals. I must remember that for the future when I am organising train tickets.

I arrived back in Luxor almost on schedule and in plenty of time for dinner. So here I am back into the routine, listening to the day to day chatter from Mamdouh about the goings on in the village. I can't stop thinking about those two sisters and their strange outlook on life. I am going to go Aboudi's tomorrow to get some books on Egyptology and see if I can find anything on philosophy or theology.

April 29th

I now have quite a library of my own. The books I got on mythology all have differing versions of the Horus story and all of them are equally improbable. I have lost interest in it already. As for the books on philosophy they are virtually incomprehensible to me even when I apply my full concentration. None of these philosophers seems to know anything for certain so what's the point of it all anyway? I couldn't find anything about Horus or any other Egyptian god for that matter in any of those books. What did surprise me was that the question of what is a dream and what is reality has been asked by several philosophers over the years so it wasn't Julia's own idea at all. All this reading kept me busy for the last three days but that's the end of it now; philosophy won't be something I am going to take up seriously. I wish Simon would come home. I need to know what is happening about our wedding.

May 4th

Simon has arrived and he will be staying here for a while this time. He has some work in Luxor that he thinks could take as long as a month. He has lost interest

in politics for the moment he says because nothing is happening. All he can tell me is that the British Ambassador has been in London for consultations with the government but whatever they said over there doesn't seem to suit the Egyptians. Apparently the Egyptians are talking to the Americans now about what they think about the title 'King of Egypt and the Sudan'. The American Ambassador up in Cairo puts his nose into everything according to Simon. I don't know why there is all this fuss about a silly title.

May 10th

There is an article in the Al-Ahram today saying that the British are point blank refusing to recognise the title of 'King of Egypt and the Sudan' until the Sudanese agree. The article then goes on to say that the British have no problem with a gradual evacuation of the Suez Canal Zone and in fact evacuation from the rest of the country has already started. I asked Simon if this is true but he says he doesn't think that any evacuation from anywhere has even been spoken about yet let alone started.

Tomorrow we are meeting with an architect! This is the first one of three that Simon has lined up.

May 11th

I didn't like the architect Simon brought today. He has not one original idea in his head. The house he designed is a square two-storey block in the Edwardian style with terraced gardens leading down to the river. It doesn't suit the place at all. Another one is coming tomorrow.

May 12th

Another English looking design! I told Simon to bring someone who could combine European comfort with something a little more traditionally Egyptian in style. He asked me if I wanted something like the house we are living in now because he was under the impression I didn't like that kind of design and that is

why he keeps bringing these European trained people.

"No, that's not true. I love the exterior of your house Simon." I explained, "It's just that inside it is totally impractical. You have a lot of wasted space and there is not one room that is comfortable enough to sit in. I spend most days in the office because it's the only room that has any proper seating. The garden is another dead area. There is no shade and that fountain is a real eyesore!"

I think I offended him.

"You must understand I built the house for me to live in Nancy. I never thought about having a wife or a family when I designed it. I didn't want guests staying the night so I saw no need to have a lot of extra bedrooms. The salon upstairs is quite adequate for entertaining; you just need to get used to the concept of the low seating. It's meant to be a place for Egyptian men to sit so I take your point about you not really having anywhere comfortable enough. You have to remember that I spend most of my working life outdoors so the last place I want to sit when I come home is a garden. I didn't want to have to employ a gardener either. Anyway that's by the by; if you like the Islamic façade that makes things a lot easier. I can bring the architect I used before. He's good but to be honest the builders changed a lot of things and the finished product is quite different from the original plans."

"Yes bring him" I agreed "and bring the same builders as well. Just explain that we want more rooms and they don't all have to be so large. One big salon for entertaining and a decent sized dining room and then the other rooms can all be much smaller. When can he come?"

"I don't know. He's not one of the architects I originally approached so I need to meet him first to give him the basic idea and after that he needs to come and see the land. That will all take time so give me a couple of weeks at least."

Hopefully I am going to get what I want eventually.

May 22nd

It has only been a little over a week and the plans are ready. The architect is

coming tomorrow to show us his drawings.

May 23rd

The architect is very young yet he has produced something far superior to either of those two old chaps Simon brought the other week. He came to the house this morning and he explained everything to us in detail.

"I have tried to combine European practicality without losing the Arabic design and also give you what you want Nancy without upsetting Simon too much. As you probably know he values his privacy. As you can see" he said spreading the drawings out on the desk in front of us, "the house is built on two levels. The top section is the main house comprising of a large salon with a small morning room off to the right. Above that are two bedrooms for the children. The main house is L-shaped and you have to cross a small courtyard to reach the other rooms. There is a large dining room over there with a smaller breakfast room next to it and above that is a master bedroom with a good sized dressing room off that. Guests stay in the lower section in the two bedrooms down there."

"It looks perfect" I said "but what about the servants? I really need somewhere for them. I can't have them coming in on a daily basis and have no one there at night. I don't see a kitchen on your drawing either. Where will that be?"

"That's the beauty of it" the architect went on. "The kitchen and the servants' quarters are all housed underground; underneath the main salon. There is a store and a laundry and bedrooms and a bathroom for staff down there. They have their own entrance and as you can see here" he said pointing at the plan of the basement, "I have made one bedroom superior to the others in case you want a butler or nanny to have a room of their own."

I love it. The six domes make it look palatial and there is plenty of space left for beautiful gardens which will run right down to the Nile. Simon is also happy with the design. We agreed to call the builder and start building straightaway.

May 29th

The builder has other work on and can't start until the middle of next month. I agree with Simon that it is better to wait for a builder we trust rather than get another one who can start now but I am very disappointed.

2.30pm

Simon has been summoned to Cairo. There is a meeting with the Ambassador tomorrow for diplomats and other important members of the British community. It's something to do with the King and the government but Simon doesn't know any more than that.

May 31st

Simon is back and he told me he is worried about what is happening in Egypt. "The King is listening to his press advisor these days instead of the Ambassador. This is very dangerous. His press advisor has told him that the economy is in a shambles and the political situation is starting to become critical. I could have told him that myself! Anyone can see that the so called Egyptian ruling class is incapable of ruling and if none of the political parties are strong enough to control the situation that will leave a vacuum which could give a chance to the Free Officers to make a move. Nobody wants that and this is not the time for making hasty decisions. We need to exercise some caution and work with what we have right now. This stupid press secretary of the Kings thinks otherwise and he is advocating sacking El-Hilali. At the meeting yesterday we discussed what might happen if the King decides to listen to him and go ahead and take such a foolish step."

"And what might happen if he does do that?" I asked. "Do you know?"

"Well the King could bring Nahhas back but I don't think that's very likely. It's only four months since he sacked him along with his Wafd government so it wouldn't be very appropriate to do that. There is another young politician, I can't remember his name right now, that could come in with a whole new

cabinet but they are very inexperienced so I don't think that's really an option either. Then there is Hussein Serri Pasha. Now he is someone who could probably form a neutral government while we wait for general elections in say October or November. That would be the most feasible thing to do if we have to do anything. None of these options are ideal so we agreed at the meeting yesterday to send the Ambassador over to meet the King to tell him that this is all a lot of nonsense and ask him what he has got against the current government anyway. After all they were his choice and in our opinion they are doing a reasonable job. They are doing their best to clean up the corruption and they are working hard to establish this new party. Basically the British are advising the King to stick with them until the elections."

"And if he doesn't take your advice?" I asked.

"Well then that could lead to serious trouble. If the King refuses to listen and goes ahead regardless and sacks his government the Free Officers might stage a coup. Don't look so worried Nancy; I don't think anything as bad as that is on the cards right now. In my opinion Farouk will take the Ambassador's advice but to be honest anything is possible. Just as a precaution I spoke to the Ambassador about our wedding. He told me that the Embassy is advising anyone who doesn't have to be in Egypt to get out and if they don't follow this advice they will be here at their own risk and shouldn't expect to get any help from the British government if there are problems. I can't leave at the moment and as my wife they would have to give you some protection as well as me so he is advising us to get married as soon as possible. Personally I think he is panicking unnecessarily and it isn't as urgent as he is making out but nevertheless I have fixed a date; the twentieth of July with an option to bring it forward if anything untoward happens."

"Simon that's almost two months away! What are we waiting for? Why not make it earlier? It doesn't make any difference to us if we get married next week or next month."

"I know I'm not being logical but I have never been happy with this contractual

marriage idea. I still have hope that something will happen to change everything to the good and we can leave our wedding until the New Year after all. You might think I'm clutching at straws but I want to make sure that this is really necessary and that I'm not depriving you of a proper wedding. The Ambassador says that I am burying my head in the sand and he is sure that our Cairo marriage will be inevitable and I should be prepared for it. With this date I feel I have prepared for either eventuality."

Let's hope it's the Ambassador who is right. If nothing happens soon and Simon keeps delaying I won't be able to hold out financially. As it is I am almost out of money and even July is too far away for my liking.

June 12th

The King has not made any move to sack the El-Hilali's government and today it was announced that there will be elections in October. I think this is a sign that things are calming down but Simon says that the King is still giving half an ear to those in the palace who want to replace El-Hilali with this Serri person. "El-Hilali's anti- corruption policies are working too well" he told me, "and they are now beginning to affect some very high up people. These people have a lot of influence over the King and are not willing to give up their lavish lifestyles too easily. It's all about individual greed rather than the good of the country. That's Arabs for you."

I didn't like to remind him that it's not only the Arabs who put themselves first; he is also one of the people who wasn't too happy with this government's purge on corruption.

June 14th

The builder will be delayed for another three weeks. I am disappointed (again) but have become accustomed to Egyptian 'delays' by now.

June 28th

Simon got a message from the Embassy this morning. El-Hilali has resigned and Hussein Serri Pasha is forming a new government. The King's press secretary has been appointed as a special minister to liaise between the government and the palace. That sounds like pure nepotism to me. For some peculiar reason all this is still top secret at the moment.

July 2nd

The newspapers are now announcing the news of El-Hilali's resignation and are saying that Hussein Serri Pasha's government will be sworn in later today. As soon as Simon heard the confirmation of what he had already been told four days ago he came rushing round to the house and told me to get ready to go to Cairo. We will be travelling in a few days time and our wedding will take place on the twentieth as scheduled. What a relief.

July 5th

Simon is going to Cairo today. He has some meeting or other he has to attend. I have to stay here because the builder is coming tomorrow. Simon told me that I only need to give him the drawings and a brief run through of what each room is going to be and let him get on with it from there.

July 6th

The builder came just after two o'clock this afternoon; more than two hours late for his noon appointment. Mamdouh knows him very well and told me that although he is an excellent builder he is a terrible timekeeper. Fine words coming from Mamdouh who still comes late almost every morning!

Mamdouh showed him into the office and my first reaction was that he is far too young to take on a big project like this. Once he started talking I saw at once that I was mistaken.

"The plan is good" he said after studying the drawings for less than five minutes

"but the design is uninspiring. Why has he made all the domes identical like that? I will follow the layout of the rooms but I want to improve on the look of the exterior. I think the main salon should have a very high dome to give some grandeur to the place. I think twenty metres high and about eight metres in diameter will make the kind of statement you are looking for. I will step the sizes of all the other domes in proportion to that one. With this small change your house will give the appearance of an old colonial palace. That's what I believe you are looking for isn't it."

This is exciting. I don't have the faintest idea about metres so I can't say if that is a good size for the main dome or not. I will just go along with the builder because he seems to know what he is talking about. I won't tell Simon anything about the changes yet.

When we had finished talking about the plans he insisted that we both went out to the land and sit there for a while to take in the atmosphere and see if anything else comes to mind. He instructed Mamdouh to bring tea out there for us.

As I sat sipping my tea I was able to get a better look at my builder who has finally told me his name; Amin Fawy. He looks to be a few years older than me and he told me that he is married with a young son. He is handsome for an Egyptian although a little too short and a little too portly for my taste. He has the most amazing eyes. Whenever he talks about the palace he is going to build for me they sparkle as though there are lights behind them. As we sat there he started planning out the small courtyard and he even has some ideas for the gardens. Despite the heat and the flies we stayed there almost two hours.

10.00pm

Simon called.

"What did you think of Amin?" he asked. "He's quite something isn't he? It's hard to find someone in this country as passionate about his work as he is."

"Yes I'm sure it is" I replied. "I like him."

"Does he have any suggestions to make? Any big alterations?"

"Some suggestions yes, but nothing very major" I lied. I didn't want a lot of questions or any more delays to the work. "He's going to start on the foundations next week. There is nothing more I can do here so I am coming up to Cairo tomorrow. I have decided to take the night train so I should be there by lunchtime."

"Good idea" Simon agreed. "I will send someone from the hotel to collect you from Ramses. We are staying in the Windsor. The rooms are quite small but I remember that you said you liked it here. I know it's in the city centre but I think it's safe enough; definitely safer than last time we were here."

July 7th

The train leaves at ten tonight. I have booked a sleeping car which I had to pay more for. I now have only twelve Egyptian pounds left to my name.

July 8th

The train like everything else in Egypt is running late. My compartment is comfortable but the food is inedible. If I do this again I will bring a picnic hamper with me.

2.00pm

I arrived here at the hotel two hours ago to learn that Simon has gone out and has left no message as to where he has gone or when he will be back. My room is on the third floor and has an adjoining door into Simon's room. I tried it and it is firmly locked.

10.00pm

No sign of Simon. I had an early dinner and am now on my way to bed. I shall not wait up for him. Tomorrow I will blow the last of my money on a new dress for my wedding.

July 9th

Simon met me for breakfast and he said he was very upset that I hadn't waited up for him yesterday. I made no excuse for that. He does exactly as he pleases so I see no reason for me not to do the same.

I went into town to find that nothing has improved since the last time I was here. The dress shops still have only the same dreary old clothes. Eventually I found a white suit in the same shop where I got the black cocktail dress and I am going to wear it with a peach blouse I bought in the souk of all places; I won't be telling anyone that. It was difficult to find peach shoes and a hand-bag to match and when I did find them I didn't have enough money. I almost cried. When I told the shopkeeper my problem he made me a small discount on the shoes and found a cheaper bag in exactly the same colour. It's not as nice as the other one but it will have to do. I now have precisely nothing and in fact I couldn't even afford a taxi back to the hotel.

July 12th

Simon asked me today why I never go out. He said he has no problem with me going to Groppi's if I want to. (Good of him!) I told him that I had seen everything I needed to see in Cairo last time I was here and preferred to stay in my room.

July 16th

I had dinner with Simon this evening. This is only the second time since I arrived in Cairo that we have shared a meal together. Goodness knows where he goes every night. The conversation was dominated entirely by Simon who showed not the slightest interest in what I have been doing over the last few days.

"The King annulled the elections for the Board of the Officers Club today. He's appointed some of his own supporters instead. This is an attempt to regain control of the army but I'm sure it is much too late for that now."

"So that boys' club issue is still going on" I thought.

Simon carried on talking oblivious as to whether I was listening or not.

"This new government is faring no better than the others. Corruption is as rife as ever and there is no confidence at all in the monarchy. We came here just at the right time. Tension is starting to mount again and I heard that the Free Officers are planning to stage a coup at the beginning of August. At least we will be married and out of here by then. A month ago I would have said that it couldn't happen but the atmosphere is different now and I'm not as confident as I was."

He went on in this vein for over an hour. I can't believe that we are getting married in four days time and he didn't once mention our wedding plans.

July 19th

11.00am

Finally I have found out what time the ceremony will take place; 2.00pm. tomorrow. He has arranged two witnesses he told me so I have no need to worry about that. To be honest it never even crossed my mind that we would need witnesses. He says he is going out tonight for a bachelor evening at the Auberge. He is going with Valentine so Barbara must have lifted her ban on him going there. Where is Barbara I wonder? If she is in Cairo she has made no attempt to contact me so she's probably not here. I don't think even she would be that rude.

9.00pm

The hotel manager told me this evening that when we leave for the wedding tomorrow he will open up the adjoining door between our rooms.

"No I don't think that will be necessary" I informed him. "I am sure Simon will be moving us to that suite you have on the top floor for our wedding night."

"I have been given no such instruction madam" he replied looking at me sympathetically. "On the contrary; Mr. Paramour confirmed with me only this afternoon that I should open the door between your two rooms and make sure there

are clean sheets on the beds."

Why am I surprised? The point is I am. I am surprised. I feel that I still don't really know the man I am marrying tomorrow and maybe I shouldn't be marrying him at all. I am trying to put this thought right to the back of my mind. "Every bride has cold feet the night before their wedding" I reasoned. "It's probably nothing more than last minute wedding nerves. I need to keep my mind focused on the fact that this time tomorrow I will be married to a very rich man. That's what I always wanted isn't it?"