



~

DJORFF PALACE THE NOVEL

~

**The story of two women,
two revolutions and one house.**

Marina Hitchen



CHAPTER TWELVE



I turned the last page of my grandmother's diary just as the muezzin was making the call to early morning prayers. So lost had I been in the story of my grandmother's life I hadn't noticed the time and I had read through the entire night without having a wink of sleep. From what I know now there was much more to Nancy Blackwell than I had first thought from reading only her prologue and I needed to collect my thoughts.

She was calculating and selfish and vain. No doubt about that; but was she really so very stupid. I no longer thought so. Her shrewdness with money and her brief sojourn with mythology and philosophy had both come as a surprise to me and her obvious interest in the architectural plans for her new house showed me there was something more to her than just a pretty face. Reading between the lines she showed a distinct lack of confidence despite all that outward bravado. As for her concerns about Simon's past life, they bordered on the paranoia. After all who hasn't got history! For all her manipulative ways and protestations that all she wanted from life was money and position I could see that she desperately wanted someone to care for her. Simon was never going to fit the bill there at all. Her commentary on what was happening in Egypt was fascinating too and I was intrigued as to why she had included so much of it in her diary. She didn't seem terribly interested in it beyond how it was going to affect her and her marriage plans and her views on it were all very naïve. Nor was she in the least concerned for the welfare of the people she was going to be living amongst.

The written content of the huge volume was not that great as most of the pages had photographs, drawings and newspaper cuttings stuck to them. In my eagerness to keep reading I had not even so much as glanced at any of them so I turned back the pages to take a closer look.

There were very few captions or notes written alongside these pictures and cuttings but it wasn't difficult to figure out exactly who was who. Nancy herself was in most of the pictures so she must have had someone to take them for her. Simon was usually seated alongside her or stood somewhere in the background so he couldn't have been the photographer either. She was right; Simon never

smiled. He was definitely handsome but he never looked relaxed. I thought he looked his age too although Nancy had said she thought he looked much younger. Maybe it was that moustache which made him appear like someone from the turn of the century rather than a man of the nineteen-fifties. There was only one grainy picture of the villa in Luxor and I couldn't tell any more from it than I could from Nancy's descriptions, but there were pages and pages of drawings for her new home. The architect's plans were there of course but there were also a number of sketches of the proposed interiors and several different designs for the gardens. She hadn't mentioned any of this in her diary so I assumed the drawings to be her own. If I was right then she certainly had a flair for interior design and landscape gardening and she was also a competent artist. Three or four pages contained swatches of materials but there was no indication as to what they might be for; curtains or upholstery by the look of it.

The photographs taken on the Nile cruise were all of her companions and there were none of the temples and monuments. That wasn't unexpected because she had written in her diary that she had only visited one of the sites and hadn't been very interested in it at all. There were several stunning photographs and a postcard of The Old Cataract Hotel which made me resolve to visit it at the earliest opportunity. I looked for one of the Winter Palace but there wasn't one unless one of the pictures of Nancy herself had been taken inside it. The two Openshaw sisters were clearly distinguishable from what must have been Lady Valentine. In every single photograph they were dressed identically as though they were twins but Julia was obviously a number of years older than Caroline. Or maybe it was the other way round. I don't know why I thought Julia was the eldest. In some of the pictures they were wearing loose fitting safari trousers but more often they were dressed in long flowing kaftans with bandannas tied round their heads and they were always dripping in jewellery. You could tell immediately that they were the eccentric spiritual type that I have always associated more with India than Egypt. Lady Valentine on the other hand appeared to be very conservative and much less interesting. There was one photograph

that must have been taken from 'The Sudan' album. It showed a young smiling Simon at dinner with a lady who definitely bore a strong resemblance to Barbara Valentine. Why my grandmother had not been sure it was her I have no idea but then again I had only the one photograph to go off and not the full album. As soon as I could contact the lawyers I would ask for the second volume of the diaries to see if it would shed any further light on Simon's life in the Sudan but for now it would have to remain as much a mystery to me as it had been to Nancy. I looked at my watch; it was almost nine. I tried my phone but I still had no signal. That didn't leave me many options for what I could do today other than sleep so I ordered a pot of coffee and after drinking only half a cup got myself into bed.

When I woke I was surprised to see it was only a little after two in the afternoon but I didn't feel in the least bit tired. I reached for the remote control and started flicking through the TV channels hoping to find a decent film. When I reached the Al Jazeera English news channel I was shocked to see they were filming what looked to be thousands of Egyptians out on the streets. The reporter was talking about one of the leaders of the protest having been placed under house arrest. As soon as the Americans had heard about it they had apparently threatened to withdraw a massive aid package they had been promising so it looked as if he was going to be released soon. Later it turned out according to Al Jazeera, he had never been arrested in the first place and he himself didn't even know anything about it. I lost all faith in Al Jazeera's version of events at that point and tried the BBC and CNN. They both said this ElBaradei guy had been under house arrest for a while and was now out but more importantly about twenty members of the Muslim Brotherhood had been detained last night and they had not been released as yet. If anything the number of protestors looked greater on the BBC than on Al Jazeera. According to one news report prisons had been opened and in some cases burned down and there were now thousands of their inmates out on the streets. It was even suggested that this had been done under the direct instructions of the Interior Minister so that these felons could go and terrorise

the protestors. I found that hard to believe.

The authorities were firing water cannons, tear gas and rubber bullets but the protestors were not moving. This was all much bigger and more serious than I had previously envisaged and I suddenly had the horrible thought that I might be trapped here in Cairo for days if not weeks. There was nothing for it but to go back to my studies so I turned off the television and opened *Oedipus Rex*. Why I chose this drama by Sophocles I don't know but the theme of him killing his father and then marrying his mother started me thinking about the god Horus. I couldn't concentrate after that so I went downstairs for afternoon tea.

The Mena House was operating almost as normal with the only difference being that all the people in the tea room were hotel residents. The tourists must have been safely locked inside their own hotels apart from the lucky few who had made their escape the previous evening. I took a small table in the centre of the room and I had just started on my cucumber sandwiches when an elderly man sat down uninvited right next to me.

"I hope you don't mind me joining you "he said, "but this revolution is making me nervous. Talking to these Egyptians only makes me feel worse. I don't have a return ticket you see and if you don't have a ticket then you cannot get to the airport. The police have checkpoints all along the airport roads and they are stopping everyone and sending them back. I think the package tours have put on extra flights but I never travel in organized groups like that. More's the pity in circumstances like these. Naturally the Embassy had to close so we won't be getting any help from them. Quite frankly I don't know where to turn."

"Well I don't think I would go so far to call it a revolution and I think you'll find you are worrying quite unnecessarily." I replied trying to sound reassuring. "Oh it is" he protested. "It is definitely a revolution. I doubt the police can control the masses now and even the army might not be able to do it. That's if they even want to. Most of the police are secretly siding with the people and probably the ordinary soldier is too. The government has imposed a curfew but no one will take any notice of it. These escaped prisoners are what concern me the most.

There is bound to be looting and although none of this has anything to do with us foreigners we are the ones they think have plenty of money. A hotel like this could be a target."

Now that was an overreaction.

"This is not the nineteen fifties" I replied sharply. "That revolution targeted the British because they were closely tied in with the ruling class at that time. It's nothing like that now. If this is a revolution, and I say if it is, we will be quite safe. In the unlikely event that any robbers turn up here we will be well protected I am sure."

"I hope you are right" he said not sounding convinced. "I am going to my room now to watch the television. We must keep abreast of the news don't you think. It's room twenty two. You are welcome to come round and watch it with me if you are at all worried about watching it on your own."

"Thank-you" I said resolving to avoid room twenty two at all costs. It was right on the other side of the hotel fortunately. After he left I happily munched my way through four scones and a Paris Brest before I also went back to watch more of the goings on from the safety of my own room. "Fancy him being in room twenty-two" I thought. "I hope that number isn't a bad omen for me as well as my father. Having that neurotic man as my only companion for days on end would definitely be unlucky."

Evening prayers were over before any more really interesting news was broadcast. Amid reports of looting, concerns were being raised about the safety of the antiquities in the museum. The rioters were perilously close to it but according to Egyptian state television both the army and some of the protesters themselves were protecting it. Apparently thieves had already managed to get inside once and although they hadn't managed to take anything they had damaged a number of small artefacts. To my horror right next to the museum I could see a large building completely engulfed in flames. Reporters were explaining that this was the National Democratic Party headquarters. Things were definitely getting out of hand. All the news channels were trying their best to give the

impression that things would soon be under control. Al Jazeera news claimed that an elite counter-terrorism force had been deployed and that Egypt's interior ministry was warning that 'decisive measures' would be taken against anyone committing criminal acts. The international news channels were showing pro-Mubarak demonstrators coming out in support of their president. Not all Egyptians were in favour of a revolution they said. Mubarak himself made a short address calling for restraint and pledging to form a new government very soon. The 'Friday of Anger' as they were calling today was being likened to the 'Black Saturday' of my grandmother's days but I couldn't see it myself. For one thing there were very few fatalities and the number of casualties was nowhere near as great as in nineteen fifty two. I went to bed confident that the worst was over. The next morning I woke to find I still had no telephone or Internet. This was now becoming more than an inconvenience. I needed to call the lawyers and book myself a ticket to Luxor so that I could start the work I had come here to do. At breakfast I spotted the man from room twenty-two at the far side of the room but happily he either didn't see me or he didn't want to speak to me again so I took a leisurely meal without any more unwelcome interruptions. As I was leaving the dining room the hotel manager stopped me.

"It was much quieter last night thank goodness" he told me, 'but you mustn't think about trying to go anywhere yet. It's far from over. The people are not going to stop now; they are no longer afraid you see. They are painting anti Mubarak slogans anywhere and everywhere they please and they are openly chanting 'down with Mubarak' and 'the tyrant must go.' Some say that the army is on the side of the protestors now. I'm not sure if that is true or not but they have definitely been exercising considerable restraint in following government orders to fire live ammunition. If Mubarak loses control of the army he's done for."

"Well that's hardly likely to happen" I said much more confidently than I actually felt. "I'm sure things will calm down soon. Let me know as soon as you get a telephone line will you; I need to call my lawyer."

"Oh we have a land line you can use. Come with me" he said guiding me into a small shabby office just off the lobby. There was no reply from the lawyer so there was nothing for it other than to spend another wasted day in my hotel room.

I was glued to the television now. I needed this debacle to be over but by lunch-time Tahrir Square was once again full of protestors. They looked confident now and many of them were in a celebratory mood as though they believed they were nearing their objective. I had no idea why they should think such a thing because I could see no concrete evidence for it. I couldn't see many police out there now but I didn't know what I should read into that. Reuters were reporting almost a hundred fatalities in total over the last few days which weren't what had been reported last night on the BBC so I didn't know whether to believe that either. The BBC seemed more interested in covering the chaotic scene at the airport which was full of stranded, terrified tourists. I could see that there would be no point trying to get a flight out of Cairo just yet so I tried to put it to the back of my mind and spent another studious day this time working my way through the Iliad.

Thousands of protesters continued to defy the curfew. There were army tanks everywhere guarding the train stations, hotels and banks and we even had two ourselves; one at the front and one at the back of the hotel. In fact the one at the back was almost directly outside my room. Apparently there were no police out on the streets so the city's residents were left having to look after their own houses, shops and businesses. There was nothing more going to happen today I decided so I turned off the television and decided to have an early night. I turned it back on again at about six next morning to see that there couldn't have been more than a couple of hundred people left in Tahrir Square. This was better news so I went down to breakfast in a more cheerful frame of mind. Unfortunately my optimism was short lived. By the time I saw the television again later in the day the numbers out there had depressingly risen back up to a few thousand. From what I could gather the people were giving their support

to ElBaradei and asking him to form a temporary government and start writing a new constitution. "Rather premature" I thought. "I haven't seen any sign of Mubarak surrendering yet."

Just before I was going to go down for dinner this ElBaradei person appeared on the news. It was the first time I had seen him and although he didn't look very prepossessing he gave quite a rousing speech.

"What we have begun we cannot take back" he said "You are the owners of this revolution. You are the future. Our key demand is the departure of the regime and the beginning of a new Egypt in which each Egyptian lives in virtue, freedom and dignity." He also added that the Egyptian opposition leaders would hold talks only with the army from now on and in fact Tantawi, the Minister of Defence and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces was at that very moment supporting the protesters in Tahrir Square. He had gone there to promise the people that the army was there only for their protection and that no protestor would be fired upon. I had to admit that things were not looking at all good for Mubarak.

For the fourth day in a row the curfew was violated without any repercussions. Security officials had announced that the curfew would start at 3:00 pm from today, which was ridiculous in my view, and they threatened to shoot on sight anyone who ignored it As far as I could see nobody took any notice of it and nobody took any action either. There didn't appear to be many security officials or army around to take action.

The next day strikes were called which I thought was a very futile gesture considering all government businesses, banks and most large factories were closed anyway. Egyptair suspended all their flights so unless I wanted to risk taking the train I was trapped in Cairo indefinitely; of course I could always engage the services of a sympathetic driver like my grandmother had done. To fill in my time I started to draw parallels between mine and my grandmother's experiences of Cairo uprisings. To complete the task I would need to read the next part of her diary to see where she was at the time of the coup and then I remembered that

Mubarak was still in power and this revolution hadn't reached its final conclusion yet either.

Towards evening Tantawi made a speech repeating more or less what ElBaradei had said.

'The armed forces will not resort to use of force against our great people. Your armed forces, who are aware of the legitimacy of your demands and who are keen to assume their responsibility in protecting the nation and the citizens, affirms that freedom of expression through peaceful means is guaranteed to everybody.'

The Minister of Antiquities also appeared briefly on the television to say that all the broken objects in the museum could be mended and that all the antiquities were being fully safeguarded.

"That's good. I might even get to see them one day" I thought.

I had now been in Egypt for more than a week and had not been outside the hotel apart from the brief journey from the Shepherd's to here. There wasn't much hope of me getting out either. The opposition leaders were calling for a 'March of Millions' now so I could see no immediate end in sight to my enforced five star incarceration. If all these protests across Egypt had not managed to unseat Mubarak I didn't hold out much hope for this so called 'March of Millions either'. I had given up predicting the outcome of what would happen when all these protests finally came to an end but come to an end they must and the sooner the better.