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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 SEVENTEEN



July 28th

We got back to Luxor yesterday and Simon has now moved into the house with me taking the second bedroom. He spends most of his time in the office so I have relocated myself to the library in the daytime where I now have a small sofa.

We went across to look at the building work today and it's coming along famously. The long side of the 'L' which houses the dining rooms and master bedroom is almost complete. Amin explained that this was the easier part to build and it's going to take much longer to complete the rest. The digging out of the massive basement and the clearing of the land leading down to the two guest bedrooms will be more than a month's work he says. The four domes that are already in place are all different sizes with the highest one being above the staircase. It is a big improvement on the original plan and Simon professes to be very pleased with the alterations.

August 3rd

Simon is going back to work at last. Tomorrow he is going to Minya.

August 8th

Simon is back from Minya now and seems much happier. It is something to do with the new regime in Egypt I think. He told me today that Ali Maher has been asked to form a civilian government which according to Simon is a good thing because Maher still has a lot of sympathy for the British. I thought that they would have chosen Naguib or Nasser but Simon said that they are both on the Revolutionary Command Council which he says are the ones wielding the real power in the country and Maher will be only a figurehead. Naguib is the chairman of the Council and is above both Maher and Nasser in the hierarchy although Nasser still seems to be the man in control.

August 9th

Simon has been called to Cairo to a meeting of all the British people who own land in Egypt. There are some new land reforms being proposed that might result in all foreigners losing their property. I am very worried.

August 10th

I was right to be worried. Simon called this morning to say that the plan is for the Egyptians to seize all foreign owned land and redistribute it amongst themselves. We could even lose the house we are living in let alone the new one. Simon is coming back tomorrow and he has asked me to arrange a meeting with Amin in the morning. I don't understand why he wants to meet the builder because there is no point continuing with any work until this mess is sorted out.

August 11th

Simon had a long meeting with Amin this morning. Afterwards he told me that everything will be fine and that I shouldn't be worried but I don't like to be fobbed off in this way. I want to know exactly what is going on; every detail.

4.00pm

I am going to make a dinner for Simon tonight; well to be honest Mamdouh will be making it not me. He will cook all Simon's favourite dishes and set up a small table near to the garden window. I am not letting Simon escape until he tells me everything.

11.00pm

I see now why Simon didn't want me to know what is going on. He has some bizarre plan of putting all our land in Amin's name.

"Do you trust him?" I asked.

"It's not a matter of whether I trust him or not. We are going to lose everything to the government anyway so it has to be worth a try. Look Nancy I have

appealed to my bosses for special consideration. After all I am working for the government now and have to live somewhere. They might not understand why I need two houses though! Even if they agree to us keeping even one of the houses all this is going to take time and these land reforms are due to be passed any day now. As soon as they are made law the government won't waste any time in grabbing the land off the foreigners. I am going to my lawyer tomorrow to change all the deeds over to Amin and there is no point you arguing about it." "There must be an alternative. Surely Ali Maher can help" I reasoned. "You told me he is very supportive of the British."

"Yes he is but I don't think he's going to last long. Nasser is getting rid of anyone who stands in his way. He has already started on all the Soviet sympathisers and the Brotherhood will be next. I told you I didn't want to hear another word from you about this land issue so can you please be quiet now."

It seems like Simon is determined to give our land away without much of a fight and there is no point talking to him about it. It's another one of his gut instincts and who am I to argue with that.

August 12th

There were some riots today in the Delta. Simon told me that they had been instigated by the communists and that Nasser had the ringleaders in custody within an hour of the trouble starting. It looks like Simon was right when he said Nasser can deal with anyone in front of him but I am still not happy about losing our land like this.

August 17th

It's done. Amin now holds the title deeds to all our property and on paper we are his tenants. Simon promised me that we are not actually going to pay him any rent.

August 26th

I went over to look at the building work today for the first time in weeks. It's coming on beautifully but I have lost all my enthusiasm for it now. No doubt Amin will let Simon pay for all the work and then take our palace off us. I like Amin and don't like to think he would do such a terrible thing but I have to remember that he is an Egyptian and as such cannot be trusted. I think Simon is stupid to keep on spending so much money on a building that will almost certainly end up housing Amin's family.

September 7th

Ali Maher, our last hope for protection has resigned. I believe it's mainly because of these stupid land reforms. Naguib has become prime minister, with Nasser as his deputy. I thought it would have been the other way round but Simon, who absolutely hates Nasser, says all this is part of a long term plan. He thinks Nasser will let Naguib stay in power until they can finish off the Brotherhood and the Communist party and then Nasser will somehow get rid of Naguib and assume absolute power. That sounds very farfetched to me. Simon has been listening to too many conspiracy theories coming out from the British Embassy in my opinion.

September 9th

Something called the Agrarian Reform Law has been passed today but we don't know the details yet. Simon has gone up to Cairo to find out.

September 11th

Simon is back and he says he will tell me all about the land reforms later on today but right now he has to see the lawyer. Before he went out he did say that the government has already started seizing European owned land which he thinks they are going to offer for sale to peasant farmers.

"So it's a good job we don't have any land left to be seized" he said; a comment

clearly aimed at me and my stupid idea of hanging on to our land and hoping for the best.

3.00pm

I now know everything there is to know about land reform laws. As usual Simon felt he had to tell me every little boring detail.

"Well the foreigners have lost everything of course" he said, which was the only thing I really needed to know. "The regime has placed a limit of two hundred feddans per person unless you have more than two children then you can own three hundred feddans. They are trying to stop concentration of land ownership you see."

I did see but I have no idea what a feddan is so I don't know if that is a lot of land or not.

"A limit on the rental rate for land has been set at a maximum of seven times the value of each plot and all land leases have to run for a minimum of three years. That's good; at least Amin won't be able to kick us out or put the rent up" he laughed.

I didn't think that was very funny.

"Everyone who is affected will receive compensation in government bonds. Well the Egyptians will; not the foreigners. We are to get nothing but what would we have done with government bonds anyway. They pay less than three percent interest and don't mature for thirty years. Anyone buying land from the government can get a loan to be paid back over thirty years with an interest rate of fifteen percent. That will make it affordable for most of the farmers round here." Simon paused there and I thought he had finished his tedious diatribe but a few minutes later he started on it again.

"The idea of these land reforms is to abolish the political influence of major land owners but in my opinion Nasser hasn't thought this through properly. Apart from the fact that everybody will be thinking of ways round it like we did I calculated that in the end only about fifteen or twenty percent of agricultural land

will get redistributed anyway."

"Why did you go to see the lawyer?" I asked hoping to change the subject.

"I thought Amin might be over his limit on land ownership himself and that would have given us another headache. I know he owns a fair bit of land but it turns out he has a big family so they have shared it all out between themselves. Don't look so worried Nancy. I haven't given up hope of eventually getting our property back. The Antiquities Minister is looking into it for me and he sounded quite hopeful. In the meantime it is in safe hands."

September 30th

No news about getting our houses back yet but the basement of the new house has now been dug out and the building of the main section of what I now call Amin's Palace will start tomorrow.

October 20th

Most of the structural work on the main building is complete. I hadn't realised just how big a twenty metre high dome would be but it is enormous. Simon was very cross at first that I hadn't told him about such a major change to the original plan and he was furious about all the extra expense this dome has incurred. Once he had seen it though he went quiet. What else could he do; it's absolutely awe-inspiring.

November 3rd

The topic of our wedding came up today. I had almost forgotten that I have to get married all over again and I can't say that I am looking forward to it.

November 15th

Josiah, Simon's father is dead. What a piece of luck! He was run over by a tram in Leeds yesterday and killed instantly. I almost laughed when Simon told me. I mean who gets run over by a tram. I'm surprised trams are even still oper-

ating in England. I thought that all the big cities would have moved over to trolleybuses by now but Simon said that Leeds and Sheffield still operate trams although not Bradford. How he knows all this useless information is a mystery. Naturally Simon is going back for the funeral but he doesn't want me there. He is calling our second wedding off now so I won't be going to England in the New Year either. I can't say I am sorry. He is going to pay my mother her money back while he is over there and he reminded me that I had promised to cut my family off once that has been done. I shouldn't even write to her he told me.

November 30th

Simon called me this morning to tell me that the funeral went off well whatever that means. My mother cried a bit when she heard I didn't want to see her again but Simon said the money went a long way to cheering her up. He has given her extra on top of what I borrowed. I don't know how much extra but he implied it was a substantial amount. He also told her that that was all she was getting and not to bother even trying to ask for any more; ever. He placed great emphasis on the word ever so I doubt I will hear from my parents again. Simon will be home later this week.

December 8th

I was not at home when Simon returned today. He was very cross about that but it's hardly my fault when he hadn't let me know the exact time of his arrival. He didn't tell me anything much about my family or even about his own father's funeral. He seemed far more interested in how we were going to benefit from it all and he sounded almost happy that his father was dead.

"My father has left us very well provided for Nancy. The factories will go for a lot of money. I intend to sell them because there is no possible way I can oversee the running of them from over here and I have no intention of moving back home. The old house is not in good repair and I have left some money there that should cover the cost of all the major repairs. Call me sentimental but I don't

want to sell Extwistle Hall. I have some fond memories of my childhood there especially from the days when my mother was alive. I have kept the staff on as well. My father only had five of them left and the young housemaid wanted to go anyway. That leaves the housekeeper, the butler, the gardener and the chauffeur. Obviously I don't need a driver but he's an old man and I didn't have the heart to fire him. Of course I won't replace him when he retires although he's more likely to die on the job than retire I think."

I was just contemplating on this husband of mine who had suddenly found a heart when I was brought back down to earth with a bump.

"Our children might want to go back and live in England someday" he said. "That's if you ever manage to give me any children. It's been almost six months and I thought you would have fallen pregnant by now."

"I think you have to sleep with me for that to happen" I replied sharply.

It has been more than two months since Simon last visited me in my bedroom. I had been happy about his lack of attention towards his conjugal rights but it was always at the back of my mind that I would have to produce a child sooner or later.

"Yes you are quite correct" Simon agreed. "Don't worry; I will remedy that starting today."

I know I wasn't going to mention sex again in this diary but tonight I had a particularly merciless two hours of intercourse with my selfish, unromantic and totally unaffectionate brute of a husband. If I have conceived tonight I am sure our child will be a monster.

December 9th

I spent all morning in bed. I got up to find a very cheerful Simon sitting on my sofa in the library reading 'The Interpretation of Dreams'.

"Dream a lot do you?" he asked sardonically. "You won't find any answers in here. I think Freud is a bit above you intellectually my dear. Anyway let's put your dreams aside for now; I might have some good news. The Antiquities Min-

ister has called me up to Cairo. I can't see him for a few days because he is busy at the moment. It seems that the Revolutionary Command Council has got rid of the constitution. It dated back to the twenties and in it most of the power still rested with the monarchy so by rights they should have changed it months ago. Nasser said he has done this in the name of the people but I believe he's done it more in the name of Nasser himself. I'll leave for Cairo tonight which should give me some time for a few drinks with the Embassy chaps and a night out with Valentine. He's down from Alex at the moment; and without Barbara. She's over in Kenya visiting her sister. As soon as I have any news I will call you and let you know. Oh and I have dug those old wedding photos out. I'll put one of them in the paper with an announcement while I am up in Cairo. There are still a lot of people who don't know that we are married. They must think we are living in sin down here."

I had completely forgotten that our marriage had been kept secret because of his father and agreed that we needed to make it public now. I even helped Simon choose the best picture for the newspapers. I wondered when he had had that film developed and why he hadn't shown me the photographs before today but then again that's so typical of Simon. He never thinks of anyone but himself.

December 24th

We have been allowed to own our own land. I am so pleased. We can keep both properties for now but we might lose the original villa when my palace is finished and we move over there. That is nothing other than a minor consideration to me but Simon is annoyed about the future prospect of losing this villa and he said he might leave it in Amin's name 'just in case.'

December 25th

To my amazement Amin handed all our properties back to us without a murmur of dissent. Simon has just returned from the lawyer and he says Amin wouldn't take even one penny in commission for all his trouble. He insisted that we take

the villa back too because he is having some issues of his own over land. He has more than he is legally entitled too and had told the authorities he had three children when in reality he only has one. They have caught up with him and he has paid a small bribe but he doesn't want to keep any of our land in his name if he doesn't have to.

I'm not certain but I think I might be pregnant. I hope so. Simon has been coming to my room practically every night since our little talk.

December 31st

Just after midnight of the New Year

It was a false alarm. I got my period today. Its well over a week late and I had already mentioned to Simon that I might be pregnant. He is furious. He kept away from me all last week but he is back with a vengeance now. I think I brought the New Year in with Simon's penis inside of me which is not only a horrible thought but most likely will be a bad omen for the coming year.