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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 EIGHTEEN



*January 4<sup>th</sup> 1953*

I went to see the building this morning. My palace looks almost finished but Amin said it will be six months at least before it will be ready to move into. All the plumbing and the electricity still have to be done which he says all takes time. He also suggested wooden arabesque balconies and parquet flooring and I like the idea of all that wood but I didn't think Simon would agree to spending so much money especially not on some balconies. I was just wondering how I could persuade Simon to let me have the balconies when Amin said that he had already spoken to Simon a few days ago who had told him to go ahead with the floors and the balconies as well as long as I approved them.

"So I now have to communicate with Simon through Amin" I thought angrily. "I need to come here more often if I am to know what these two men are deciding for my house."

Amin seemed oblivious to my annoyance and continued showing me round and telling me what he and Simon had discussed. I would have been more cross about it had the place not been so perfect. The main salon is large but one corner has been set aside for reading and another one for small tea parties. The morning room which leads off to the right is sunny and will be absolutely ideal. The two bedrooms for the children have beautiful Nile views but also have internal windows looking down into the salon.

"Who on earth suggested that?" I asked amazed that anyone could possibly think it a good idea to provide children with a birds-eye view of whatever the adults were doing downstairs.

"I did" Amin answered looking puzzled, "and Simon approved it straightaway. You don't always want the children around when you are entertaining do you but they often feel left out of things. The harem windows that are going in there will let the children see down without anyone being able to see them. It's a twist on what we used to do with our women in the past. Don't you like the idea? Is there a problem?"

"No" I answered doubtfully. "No problem. It's just that it's a very alien way of

thinking to our culture. We usually expect to have some privacy when the children are in bed. Anyway leave it as it is. I am sure I will get used to it. Come on; let's go and have a look at the other wing."

The two dining rooms and the master bedroom with the dressing room leading off it were all exactly to the plan. I was feeling pleased with it all when I suddenly had a horrible thought. When we had originally designed the house I assumed that Simon and I would be sharing a bedroom. Now I am married to him I know that this will be impossible. I could not bear him to be in the same room as me all night every night. Why had I not realised this earlier; it was too late now. Of course Simon could take one of the guest rooms which were both equally palatial but they were quite distant from the main house (at Simon's request I might add). Until we have children there are the two rooms above the salon but they are both much smaller. In the villa the two bedrooms are directly across from each other are identical in size so there isn't a master bedroom as such. In fact the one Simon uses is the only one with a Nile view so for most people that would be the more preferable of the two. Well it has a Nile view at the moment but Simon has planted a mango tree right outside the window. In a couple of years it will block off the outside completely which is a strange idea to me but it's what Simon wants!

"Is anything wrong?" Amin asked seeing the worried look on my face. "It's all exactly according to your drawing."

"No you have done an excellent job. It's just that looking at it now I think the house might not be big enough" I replied desperately trying to think where I was going to put Simon. "We might be doing a lot of entertaining" I added feebly. To my surprise Amin agreed with me immediately.

"You are absolutely right" he said. "The whole house is just too narrow. I don't find it very pleasing to the eye. I told Simon as much but he said he thinks it looks fine but he did say I should speak to you. There is a possibility of getting an extra strip of land to the right and I told Simon he should buy it if he gets the chance. The house would look more balanced if you built three or four more

rooms off to the side and that would provide you with all the extra space you are looking for as well."

I left feeling much happier although Amin had said there was no guarantee of this woman selling her piece of land and even if she did agree to sell she would probably put a high price on it because of us being foreigners. I have decided to wait for the right time to speak to Simon about it and to say nothing at the moment.

*January 17<sup>th</sup>*

Yesterday Nasser dissolved and banned all political parties and declared a three-year transitional period during which the Revolutionary Command Council would rule. The news was in all the papers.

"They are writing some sort of provisional constitution amongst themselves" Simon told me in disgust, throwing the offending newspaper to one side. "They must think that gives them some sort of legitimacy but anyone can see it's only a veneer. These stupid Egyptians had it better under the British and definitely had more freedom when King Farouk was in power. The constitution will take another month to complete because the whole Council is supposed to approve it. They won't have much of a say in changing anything that Nasser writes. He's becoming a real little despot."

*February 10<sup>th</sup>*

The new constitution was proclaimed today. The Muslim Brotherhood has made some objections and might pose a challenge to Nasser. Simon said that even the Brotherhood would be better than Nasser but he can't be serious surely.

*February 14<sup>th</sup>*

Nasser is looking for some popular support now and has launched something called the Liberation Rally. It's a political organisation linked to the regime with Nasser heading it up and some of the other Free Officers acting as secretar-

ies-general. Are the Egyptians really that naive as to believe that this gives them some kind of say in the running of their country? Simon thinks there might be trouble.

*March 3<sup>rd</sup>*

Simon and I had an argument today about curtains of all things. He doesn't want any and Amin agrees with him. I went across to the site to tell Amin that I wasn't very happy about this new idea of theirs but I couldn't find him. His foreman said he would be there tonight and he will send someone over to get me as soon as he arrives.

*March 4<sup>th</sup>*

*2.00am*

It was after ten when Amin finally turned up and Simon insisted that he came with me. After almost an hour spent discussing the merits of stained glass over curtains I finally gave in. I saw the logic in what they were saying because every window is a different size and most of them are not of a standard shape. Curtains would look out of place Amin said and he is probably right. He usually is. I am disappointed though because after living in a house without curtains for the best part of a year I had been looking forward to being able to completely block out the light. If the worst comes to the worst and I have to share a room with Simon I definitely would have liked total blackout.

After the curtain issue was resolved Simon and Amin reverted to speaking in Arabic. Once they started on the hashish I decided it was time for me to leave.

*2.15am*

I have just heard Simon come back into the house and he has gone straight to his own room. He probably cannot handle drugs any better than he can handle alcohol.

*4.00pm*

Simon has just got out of bed now. He looks quite ill but he is trying to hide it from me.

*9.00pm*

Over dinner Simon made a slight recovery and gave one of his long boring monologues on the state of the country.

"This constitution has its good points. Nasser has some modern ideas and it's very secular so he might gain some support from the Copts. On the other hand he's lost a bit of his control which I didn't see coming and I don't think he did either. Some members of his Liberation Rally have defied all orders from the Council and have seized some property from the non-Muslim community and are sharing it out amongst their closed little network of friends. Of course this has incensed the Christians so maybe he won't get support from the Copts after all. It could go either way with the Christians but the Brotherhood is furious about being cut out of their share of not only the political spoils but the economic ones as well. They are saying that nothing has changed since the days of Farouk and it's only the names of the people at the top that are different. If this sort of corruption continues I can see another uprising on the horizon. The Muslim Brotherhood is starting to rally its street units now and there are plenty of them. Egypt could be in for a few more riots yet. Without the support of the army and the police the Brotherhood's little tantrum will all come to nothing in the end but I imagine they will cause a fair bit of damage in the meantime. If you are planning any trips to Cairo in the near future let me know and I will come with you. I don't want you getting yourself killed up there."

I haven't got anything planned but I suppose I will have to go up to Cairo soon to buy furniture. There is nothing suitable in Luxor.

*April 27<sup>th</sup>*

Nothing is happening in Luxor and I am getting bored. I want to go to Cairo to

get the furniture but the place is ravaged by street riots these days. Every morning I am reading stories about clashes, arson, and civil unrest; the newspapers are full of it. The regime is in a constant battle with the Muslim Brotherhood with both of them fighting for popular support. If you ask me it's impossible to say who has the upper hand but Simon says that it's very clearly Nasser who is gaining the most ground.

*June 18<sup>th</sup>*

The Revolutionary Command Council has declared Egypt a republic today and abolished the monarchy. Having been deposed in his absence the baby King Fuad is moving to Switzerland. I don't know if that's because Italy is not safe for him anymore or simply because they have better schools in Switzerland. I think the former because Fuad is only just one and is still a bit too young for school. Simon is horrified that they have got rid of the King practically overnight and without consulting anyone. I have no idea who he thinks they should have consulted.

*June 19<sup>th</sup>*

General Naguib will be formally sworn in as the first president of Egypt soon and Nasser is to be his deputy as well as being the Minister of the Interior. A 'Revolutionary Tribunal' of which Sadat is to be a member has been set up to try politicians from the old regime. Neither I nor Simon is expecting much impartiality or justice coming from that quarter so God help them.

*July 20<sup>th</sup>*

It's our wedding anniversary today. Simon won't remember of course. He nearly forgot to come to the wedding this time last year.

*9.30pm*

Simon had not forgotten after all. He took me to that same duck restaurant he



took me to when I first came to Luxor. Not exactly the Winter Palace but at least he remembered. The only thing that has changed in the duck café is that they now serve coffee. The duck is just as inedible. When I was on my second Turkish coffee and Simon was half way through his fourth beer he suddenly put his hand in his pocket and produced the most delicate, beautifully engraved, gold wedding band.

"I never did get you a ring" he said, "and this one was my mothers. It's yours now." He took my hand just like in the movies and slid it onto my finger. It fits perfectly. "My mother had beautiful hands too" he said almost in tears. I was quite touched to see that Simon has a sentimental side.

*July 21<sup>st</sup>*

When Simon came to me last night I tried my best not to make it quite so obvious how much I hate this entire performance. I must not have been very successful because Simon muttered something about me hurrying up with getting pregnant so both of us could stop going through this ridiculous charade every night. It never crossed my mind before that Simon didn't enjoy intercourse with me any more than I did with him. Not that this information is any consolation to me but it has come as a surprise. Aren't men supposed to like sex? Perhaps I am doing something wrong.

*August 17<sup>th</sup>*

I have started going over to my palace most nights now to see Amin. Occasionally Simon will join us but more often than not we are alone. I can talk to Amin. I mean really talk to him; discuss things with him that I could never talk to Simon about. I am not saying that I find him in any way attractive but there is something about him that makes me feel safe. He listens to me for one thing which is something Simon seldom does. Neither of us is really interested in the political situation in Egypt and he is passionate about his work which is something else we have in common. I have discussed all the furnishings with

him and he has some fabulous ideas. He says I should try to find some antique pieces and that there are plenty of them for sale up in Cairo now the foreigners have left and the aristocracy is short of money. I am going to try and get to Cairo soon and search some out. Simon thinks it is safe enough to go there now but he still wants to come with me.

*September 4<sup>th</sup>*

This is my third day in Cairo and I have already found almost everything I need. Many of the Europeans who left Egypt last year left their furniture behind, especially the bigger pieces. It has now turned up in every souk in Cairo and can be purchased very reasonably. The old elite are selling things off too; mainly silverware and paintings. I have bought almost twenty pictures and a couple of silver trays, an ice bucket and three ornate coffee pots. I told Simon that I had bought all these with my own money because I am sure he would not approve of such an extravagance. He has no idea what all the furniture cost so by adding a few pounds on to the price of each piece he will be none the wiser. The only thing I can't find is a light fitting for that huge dome. I don't know what I can do about that. Simon is not in the least interested and I have to wonder why he bothered to come with me at all. I have hardly seen him and he left all the purchasing to me. He says I have excellent taste and am much better at bargaining than he is. He doesn't really believe that; it's just an excuse for him to go out with his drinking pals every day. His professed concerns over my safety are not serious enough to keep him away from the bars and nightclubs apparently. At least he is organising the transportation of all my things back down to Luxor so he has his uses.

*September 7<sup>th</sup>*

I am back but Simon has gone up to Alexandria supposedly to work but more likely to meet up with Valentine. The furniture arrived today and Amin says I have made some excellent choices. At least he is interested and especially

approves of my taste in art. He said not to worry about the dome light. He will have one made for me by the people who make light fittings for the mosques.

*September 12<sup>th</sup>*

Simon has arrived and even he is impressed with how I have furnished the palace. The dome light came today and it will need almost eighty bulbs. Simon said it was extortionate and Amin must have made plenty of commission out of me. I don't believe him. He was the one who said Amin could be trusted implicitly so I have no idea why he is saying such nonsense now. I have a sneaking feeling he is jealous.

*October 1<sup>st</sup>*

My palace is almost finished. It's not fully habitable yet but I am desperate to move into it. Amin said to stay where I am for another week and he will try his best to have it ready.

*October 8<sup>th</sup>*

Simon is refusing to move to the palace yet and he says I can't go either.

*October 15<sup>th</sup>*

Simon is working in Minya for a whole month. He leaves today. As soon as he goes I am moving.

*October 16<sup>th</sup>*

At last I am living in my palace. Mamdouh has moved in with me although he is not very happy about it. His wife will be working for us as well but he is refusing to bring her until everything is working properly. I think the biggest problem is the water; it keeps cutting off. There are some issues with the lights as well. The worst thing is that it is unbearably hot but I am determined to stay here. I am sure it won't take long for Amin to sort out these minor issues.

October 30th

Most things are working perfectly now although the problem with the water seems to be getting worse. There is some good news. Amin called round this morning to say that the woman who has the piece of land to the right is willing to sell as long as we also buy the piece on the left-hand side that I have just found out belongs to her sister. I called Simon and he said he already knows about it and they are asking for far too much money and I should forget about it.

*November 1<sup>st</sup>*

Amin has a solution. He has a piece of land further back from the river which he is willing to sell to us at a very reasonable price. Simon can buy this plot from Amin and these two sisters will then exchange their two pieces for this one. The only reason they wanted to sell their land in the first place is because it's split into two by our house and makes farming it difficult for them. Amin's piece of land is slightly bigger so they are getting a very good deal. Like this everyone will be happy and Amin said he will call Simon himself to make sure he doesn't miss this opportunity.

*10.00pm*

It is all agreed and Simon will call the lawyer tomorrow. Amin and I have spent so much time talking about what we would do if we ever got this extra piece of land on the right that we don't need to bring an architect. The bit to the left was never in our plan and we didn't actually want it so I said we should leave it for parking. He didn't say anything so I don't know if he thinks that is a good idea or not.

*November 12<sup>th</sup>*

Simon is here and he says I must move back into the villa immediately. The palace is nowhere near habitable according to him. Now there is to be all this extra building work I have reluctantly had to agree with him. I am going back

tomorrow.

*November 13<sup>th</sup>*

I am now back in the villa. Simon is very angry that Amin and I decided what we were going to do with the extra land without consulting him. We are to have a meeting this afternoon to discuss it.

*5.00pm*

Amin said it would be preferable if he met with Simon alone. He knows better than me how to deal with him when he is angry he said. I let the two of them get on with it and I spent the whole afternoon sitting in the library with my fingers crossed.

*11.00pm*

Tonight Amin told me that he had explained to Simon that the plan was to build two more guest rooms next to the original ones and a huge extra bedroom for him next to the children with a staff flat for a nanny below that. The land to the left would be left for parking. Simon agreed to it all immediately Amin said so I don't know what he was making all the fuss about. The bad news is that all this will take around six months to complete and Simon is insisting that I stay in the villa until it's done. Amin is supporting him in this so I have no other option but to stay put. Mamdouh has also moved out of the palace and gone back to his own house. He seems happy to be out of there. The water problem must have been upsetting him more than I thought.

*November 28<sup>th</sup>*

Simon thinks all the troubles in Egypt will come to a head soon. He told me as much over breakfast this morning.

"Nasser is accusing Naguib of supporting the Brotherhood. I did tell you that Nasser completely outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt recently didn't

I?" he asked.

He hadn't but I nodded my head as if to say that I knew all about it. I wasn't in the mood for one of his long stories about that.

"I think Nasser is exaggerating as Naguib has never been a big lover of the Brotherhood but Nasser is also saying that Naguib is harbouring dictatorial ambitions. That's a good one coming from Nasser but there might be some truth in it. There is going to be a power struggle between the two of them now; first for control of the military and ultimately for control of the country. Of course Naguib still has his support base within the army but it's not the same as it was a year ago. There's no doubt in my mind that Nasser will come out of this the winner. I knew this was going to happen sooner or later. I think I told you as much a long time ago. Nasser has got rid of everyone who was standing in his way and there is only Naguib left now."

"I think it was Lord Valentine who first said that if I remember correctly" I replied irritated by Simon's smugness;"not you at all. You only agreed with him. It was in the bar at the Windsor the day after the revolution. I remember it perfectly."

"Yes I know he said that to you then but that was after I told him that's what would happen. I was the one who put it into his head in the first place long before the coup even took place" Simon argued refusing to be in the wrong as usual. Quite frankly Nasser and Naguib are both the same to me. I much preferred King Farouk.

*December 31<sup>st</sup>*

Another year over and it hasn't been at all bad despite the inauspicious start.