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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 TWENTY TWO



January 3rd 1956

We arrived in Alexandria just after lunch and are now settled in the Cecil Hotel. I asked for two adjoining rooms but they were all taken so I am now stuck sharing one big room with Simon. We are only here for four nights so I suppose I will manage. Probably Simon will be out most of the time anyway.

11.00pm

Barbara came round this afternoon and invited me out for dinner. Valentine and Simon have other plans she said so we may as well have a girls' night out. She came back for me just after eight and we went to the Greek Club which is nothing like the Greek Club in Cairo. This one is a proper restaurant at the very end of the corniche with stunning views across the bay. The food was the same though right down to the retsina. Barbara as usual did most of the talking.

"Goodness knows why you are staying in the Cecil" she said and thinking she meant we should have stayed with her I mumbled some excuse about not wanting to put her to any trouble.

"Yes I know that" she replied impatiently, "but I was surprised you picked the Cecil. There are better hotels."

"Really; I thought the Cecil was supposed to be the best. Winston Churchill always stays there and Simon said the Embassy use it."

"Used to use it Nancy; used to."

Barbara always knows something I don't and once again she made me feel like an ignorant little schoolgirl.

"The British had a suite there for years supposedly for diplomats but in actual fact they kept it for the secret service. When the Egyptian government seized the hotel in fifty two they moved out and I don't know where they stay now; probably the Windsor Palace or the Metropole. We were all furious when the regime turned up and literally snatched the hotel from the Metzgers. They are half Egyptian so we hadn't expected anything like that to happen. Valentine says it's because their other half is French but I think it's more likely because

they are Jews. There is a big court case going on about it and until the Metzger family gets their hotel back we are all refusing to stay there. Everyone stays in the Windsor now. It is more or less the same standard as the Cecil and it has better views. We could go there for afternoon tea tomorrow if you want."

I didn't want. I had my own plans that didn't involve Barbara and I had no intention of spending four days with her when I could be out shopping for antiques.

"I think Simon has something planned for tomorrow" I lied. I really should have thought of a better excuse than that. Barbara jumped on it immediately.

"The only thing Simon has planned for tomorrow is a boozy afternoon in the Cap D'Or" she laughed.

"Maybe that's where he's taking me." I stuttered trying desperately to keep up the pretence of being busy but Barbara was having none of it.

"I very much doubt it" she replied. "The owner of the Cap D'Or may profess his establishment is along the lines of Café Riche but it's much more down market. The food isn't very good there either. It's a drinking den Nancy; full of men. I'm not saying that women don't go there but not the kind of women we would want to associate with."

"Well maybe he is taking me somewhere else" I said still continuing with my lie although I knew it was pointless.

"Simon only goes there and the Metropole" she replied dismissively, "and the Metropole is definitely men only; mainly soldiers. Oh, there is the Spitfire bar, I forgot about that, but I'm not sure that's even open during the day. Now that is a hole. It's full of drunken locals watching third rate Lebanese belly dancers. I think that's Simon's favourite place and he will no doubt drag my poor Valentine down there at least once while you're up here. I would forget about Simon while you are in Alex Nancy and make your own arrangements. Shall we say four then at the Windsor Palace?"

I had run out of excuses by then so that's tomorrow afternoon gone. At least I still have the morning.

January 4th

I found so many things I like today but they are all terribly expensive and I was too distracted to be at my best with the bargaining. It was always at the back of my mind that I had to meet up with Barbara later and that rather spoilt my morning. In the end I bought only a small metal console with a beautifully carved matching mirror.

In spite of thinking about my rendezvous practically all day I still managed to be late. I thought I would have time to walk to it from where I was but it turned out to be much further away than I had imagined. Barbara was already there and had ordered for me which I consider extremely presumptuous. She had managed to secure a corner table with a full view of the dining room and everyone in it which meant that I could have a good look round whilst pretending to listen to Barbara's prattle. I saw immediately that the Windsor Palace is nowhere near as good a hotel as the Cecil. I don't think they have done any refurbishment since John Windsor built it fifty years ago and any grace and style it might have once had disappeared a long time ago. I must admit they did have excellent scones. Barbara talked non-stop mainly about her social circle which has apparently become much smaller since the threat of war. I don't like the sound of any of the people she mentioned so if I am going follow up on my plan of finding myself some friends I will almost certainly have to look elsewhere.

Barbara professes to be fully engaged for the next two days. How marvellous. I don't think she wants to spend any more time with me any more than I do with her.

January 7th

We are leaving today and I have hardly bought anything. It's far too expensive up here and the shopkeepers don't bargain like they do in Cairo. It's the European's influence I think. Alexandria is nothing like the rest of Egypt. Sometimes I have to remind myself that I am not in Italy or Greece.

11.00pm

On the way home on the train Simon couldn't stop talking about the war which he says is imminent. He told me about the Americans sending an envoy to Nasser and offering another one of their money for peace deals but Nasser wouldn't even listen to him. He is demanding that the Palestinian refugees be allowed to return home and Egypt be officially given Gaza and some other bits of Palestine. It seems to be perfectly fine for Arabs to take Palestinian territory just as long as it's not the Israelis doing it!

January 16th

Nasser held a rally today and announced his new constitution. There is to be a one-party system, his party, and this party will nominate a candidate for president, most likely him, and the people will be then asked to approve that candidate. Once the president is elected he can appoint and dismiss ministers at will. This doesn't sound very much like democracy to me. Nasser is trying to fool the people into thinking they have some say in things by setting up another one of his movements like the Liberation Rally but this one is called the National Union. Nothing has changed.

February 3rd

I have persuaded Simon to let me build a summerhouse. It will be at the top of the wasteland just a little bit to the right of the main house. Amin said that we have to start working on the lower garden soon otherwise my summerhouse will be looking onto a big stretch of barren land. Amin is very happy about the new work; probably because he will now have a reason to visit me every night.

February 20th

America sent the same envoy for the same talks a few days ago; another failure. Amin has started on the summerhouse which is going to be much bigger than either I or Simon had envisaged. It's more like a pavilion with three big arches

leading to a private garden and then three or four steps down to what is still spare land.

March 3rd

Women are going to be allowed to vote. I think this is a good thing but both Amin and Simon don't agree. Women they say are not aware of what is going on as most of them can't read the newspapers. I did point out that they can listen to the radio but I was still not taken seriously.

March 10th

The French are having problems with Egypt now mainly because of that radio station that is supporting the Algerians with some sort of rebellion against their French governors.

March 12th

The French President has been to London for talks with Anthony Eden, our Prime minister. Simon gets all the inside information from the Ambassador who is totally indiscreet and can't keep his mouth shut.

"That French chap, Mollet told Eden that we are all being faced with an Islamic threat from Nasser who is still being supported by the Russians."

Simon informed me of this with great authority but if it is coming from the Ambassador it's bound to be exaggerated. There is no point telling Simon that who sets great store by whatever the Ambassador tells him. The Ambassador says the French President is likening Nasser to Hitler and the British have to take their fair share of responsibility because along with all the other countries in the West we have been building Nasser up and flattering him far too much. If this really is the French President's own opinion I think he is getting a bit carried away.

March 13th

There were some riots today over Britain trying to draw Jordan into the Baghdad Pact again. That radio station instigated the demonstrations as usual. There were some protests in Amman too scaring King Hussein half to death.

March 15th

King Hussein has dismissed the British Commander Glubb Pasha in response to demands from the people. He called the British Ambassador in Cairo to tell him that he is still committed to continuing Jordan's alliance with Britain and that his sacking of Glubb Pasha and all the other British officers in the Arab Legion was just a gesture to appease the rioters. If that was meant to be confidential he should not have told the Ambassador. Everybody knows about it now.

March 16th

Today Simon proudly regaled me with all his information on what is going on back in Britain.

"Eden is very upset about this sacking of Glubb Pasha and he says it's the last straw. He has declared Nasser to be our number one enemy who has to be destroyed before he alienates all our friends in the Middle East and we lose the last bit of influence we have left over here. It's become quite a personal issue with Eden apparently who is likening Nasser to Mussolini now. Anglo-Egyptian relationships are really suffering because of this vendetta between Nasser and Eden. Eden says we must get Nasser under control immediately and ideally get rid of him and he has approached America for support but he's wasting his time there because Eisenhower wants to keep Nasser in power. The Ambassador told me that Eden is very volatile and could do anything. He also told me in complete confidence that Eden is addicted to amphetamines and can be highly irrational and that's a big worry."

That Ambassador should be more careful what he says and who he says it to. Simon shares all this information with Valentine as well as me.

March 20th

I read an article in the Herald Tribune today. Eisenhower is saying that if Egypt is relying on the Soviets to help them with their dam they are making a mistake because it is beyond their capabilities. What Eisenhower wrote comes across as very arrogant and I think he's another one who needs to be careful.

'If Egypt finds herself thus isolated from the rest of the Arab world, and with no ally in sight except Soviet Russia, she would very quickly get sick of the prospect and would join us in the search for a just and decent peace in the region' he says. The Soviets are justifiably unimpressed.

April 10th

France and Israel are getting very friendly with each other these days. Peres has been to Paris and made an agreement with the French to supply Israel with more weapons. This is in complete contravention of all the international regulations but I don't think there is anyone left who is honouring these UN policies these days. According to Simon's 'sources' Peres informed the French that Israel has decided to go to war with Egypt because they believe Nasser to be a genocidal maniac intent upon destroying not only Israel but all the people in it. The war must be started soon before Egypt acquires any more weapons from the Soviets because only then can the Jews be assured of victory. I think Peres is expecting the French to wage war alongside him which I have no doubt they will. I am not concerned what the French decide to do just as long as they don't drag us into it.

May 8th

The French are making no secret of what they are up to now. Yesterday at a veteran's gathering another one of the French big-wigs gave a strong anti-Nasser speech likening him to Hitler again and saying he is trying to take over Algeria now. He said that France must form an alliance with Israel in order to stop 'this monster.' I am getting rather fed up of the French now who always over react to everything.

3.00pm

I have just received a telegram from Julia and Caroline Openshaw who are in Cairo but will be coming to Luxor in two days time. They want to stay at the palace if I am amenable because they have heard it is unparalleled in the whole of Egypt. I am so thrilled to have visitors at last and very flattered that word has somehow got out about my home. I am going to the summerhouse now to see what is happening down there. Last time I looked at it was two or three days ago and it was almost finished.

7.00pm

There are only a few finishing touches needed on the summerhouse and Amin promised me he will finish them by tomorrow even if it means he has to work all night. He winked at me when he said that which I took as a message for me to come and meet him later.

May 9th

I spent most of the night with Amin putting up the lights and arranging the furniture. I have bought simple bamboo chairs for the summerhouse which are available everywhere in Luxor. The whole place is decorated in an African style because I needed somewhere to put all the things Simon brought back from down there when he was on his travels. They looked completely out of place in the main house and look much better here. I left Amin just before six this morning to try and get a few hours sleep. I still have a lot to do preparing the guest rooms and stocking up with food and some decent wine.

1.00pm

Simon is not happy. The wine merchant just called him about my order. "Am I to assume that your friends drink nothing only Chablis Grand Cru and Chateau Lafite? That was the wine shop on the telephone checking to see if I really want to spend so much on five bottles of wine as he has other wines

equally as good at a much cheaper price. Not wishing to embarrass you I told him to leave your order as it is. I would like an explanation for this outrageous extravagance of yours Nancy."

"They are not my friends Simon they are friends of your friends the Valentines" I replied huffily, quite annoyed that the wine merchant had had the audacity to report on me to my husband. "That's what they drank on the cruise so I can hardly offer them Omar Khayyam. The man in the shop never recommended any cheaper wines to me because if he had I would probably have taken his advice and bought them."

"What are these silly women doing coming on holiday at a time like this anyway?" Simon asked getting off the topic of wine which was a good thing considering I had lied about what we drank on the cruise.

"I don't know; as I said they are not my friends and I am not privy to why they are here. Why don't you ask them yourself?"

10.00pm

Everything is ready for my guests who are arriving in the morning.

May 10th

Julia and Caroline are here but I was disappointed to find out they will only be with us for two nights. They are here to see a little known temple of Horus up on a hill somewhere near to the monkey valley and then they are going on to Edfu to have another look at that temple there.

11.00pm

I showed the sisters my bracelet tonight. Julia said it would be better if I were to wear it rather than keeping it in my bag then I would be sure of getting all the luck I had been promised. I put it on and will wear it until they leave but I will have to put it back in my bag after that; it really is hideous. I toyed with the idea of asking Julia about my dreams but I found it too embarrassing so

didn't bother in the end.

May 11th

Simon came to my room last night almost as soon as I had finished writing my diary. I just managed to hide it under the mattress before he had a chance to see it. I don't know what he would say if he ever got his hands on it. Anyway I was still dressed and without even touching me he demanded that I lift my skirt and remove my under garments. Apart from the embarrassment of it all the intercourse was no worse than usual.

9.00pm

Caroline asked me about Amin today. She said she had been talking to him this morning and had the impression that he found her attractive and she wanted to know if I minded if she took him to her room tonight. I was dumbstruck. I think she has been imagining herself as Isis again. I told her it was up to her but I thought she was mistaken because Amin is a happily married man who as far as I was aware never looked at other women.

"Come on Nancy" she laughed. "These Egyptian men can't wait to get their hands on a European woman, even an older one like me. Their own women are brought up to think sex is only for the procreation of children and have no idea how to give their men a good time. I am surprised Amin hasn't tried something on with you but I guess he would have Simon to answer to if he did. Anyway since you don't mind I will let things take their course as they say."

After dinner when we were having drinks in the summerhouse I noticed Caroline flirting with Amin in the most outrageous manner. Julia took herself off to bed early probably disgusted by her sister's behaviour. Amin seemed oblivious to it all but Simon spotted it.

"I think we need to get an early night Nancy" he said taking me by the hand and making gestures with his eyes for me to leave. I had no other option but to follow him although I was not happy to leave Amin prey to that lecherous

woman.

"Couldn't you see what was going on out there?" Simon asked me once we were out of earshot. "Julia did, that's why she left early. Amin at least had the good manners to ask me if I had any objection to his copulating with one of our guests in my house and I said for him to go right ahead. She wouldn't be my type I told him but each to his own."

Simon left me then so at least I have some time alone to think about this. Why would Amin do such a thing right under my nose? I am deeply hurt.

May 12th

Over breakfast Julia tried to draw Caroline into a conversation about what happened last night. Caroline would only say 'a lady never tells' so I think nothing happened after all. I am very happy that the two of them are leaving today.

4.00pm

Simon gave me a full account over lunch of what Amin had disclosed to him about last night. Simon being Simon had to go into every lurid detail and all I could do was sit there and listen. I never touched my lunch. Despite Simon seeing my consternation he refused to let the subject drop.

"Amin's a young man Nancy and Caroline is obviously a woman of the world. Make no mistake these highbrow women are dirtier than half the tarts in Cairo. To make them sound respectable men usually refer to women like Caroline as courtesans but everybody knows that they are no better than prostitutes. There's nothing wrong in it Nancy so don't go all prim and proper on me. I find it quite uplifting that an old lady like her can still enjoy herself and she gave Amin a hell of a time according to what he told me this morning. I don't expect we will be getting much work out of him today."

June 13th

The last British troops left Suez today.

Unless I absolutely had to I haven't spoken to Amin since the incident with Caroline. I am ashamed to say that my dreams are back and I don't know why they should be because I have no feelings left for Amin now other than complete contempt.

June 18th

Nasser raised the Egyptian flag over the Canal Zone today. Simon was very quiet and looked upset so I avoided talking to him about it.

June 19th

I am pregnant! I made absolutely sure of it before I told Simon or even wrote anything in my diary. I don't want to tempt fate. What I find hard to believe is that I must have conceived on the night I was wearing the bracelet. I have been through it hundreds of times and there is no other night it could have been. Simon doesn't come to me as frequently as he once did so it wasn't that hard to work out. Maybe the bracelet really is a lucky charm. I have never seen Simon so happy as when I told him the news this afternoon. He is actually smiling.

June 23rd

Nasser has been elected president. I think as he was the sole candidate it is called a plebiscite rather than an election. There was another vote to approve the constitution which was ratified by an overwhelming majority. Good job really because if they hadn't voted in favour of the constitution their vote for president would have been null and void. The constitution should have been voted on first by rights but Egyptians never question anything. Nasser is claiming near unanimous support. He now officially and legally holds all the governing power in the country which means nothing has changed other than he has managed to legitimise himself.

July 14th

Nasser has held another one of his fake elections in which he was proud to say women were allowed to vote. They were voting for a National Assembly but Nasser still had to approve all the candidates himself. Looking at the names of all the men who got the top jobs it looks like he has elevated all his friends to these positions and sidelined all his rivals. So that Nasser can call this a civilian government the Council has been dissolved and all its members, who are nearly all members of the National Assembly now, have resigned from the military. My dreams have stopped again now that I am pregnant.

July 19th

American and Britain simultaneously withdrew their offers of financing the Aswan Dam today. They are both saying that Egypt's economy would be overwhelmed by the project which might be a genuine enough excuse in Britain's case but Eisenhower's real reason for withdrawing his support is his annoyance with Nasser for trying to play America off against the Russians. Nasser found out about losing his money when he was on a plane coming back from Belgrade and to all accounts he is very angry.

July 26th

Nasser was speaking up in Alexandria today and for once Simon was listening to the broadcast live on the radio. Completely out of the blue Nasser suddenly announced he was nationalising the Suez Canal Company. He said he is going to use the money to fund the Aswan Dam project now that the British and the Americans have pulled out. In the speech he couldn't resist another snipe at what he called British Imperialism saying that it was totally unfair that the British had had control over the canal company's profits for so long. "After all" he said, "the Egyptian people have a right to sovereignty over the waterway, especially since so many of them died building it." He concluded by saying that a Nationalisation Law will be published tomorrow and although all the assets of

the Suez Canal Company are currently frozen all existing shareholders will be paid off at today's closing price on the Paris Stock Exchange.

Egypt shut down the canal to all Israeli shipping immediately after the announcement.

The announcement was greeted very emotionally by the audience but that came as no surprise; it's the Egyptian way to shout and scream or even cry at the slightest thing. It seems like the entire Arab world is out on the streets celebrating.

The American Ambassador gave an interview later in the day in which he stated, 'I cannot overemphasise the popularity of the Canal Company nationalisation within Egypt, even among Nasser's enemies.' He was reluctant to express his own views on it though.

Simon is speechless and is going to Cairo to speak with the Ambassador. It seems we have, or should I say had, a number of shares in the canal company ourselves.

July 27th

Nasser's picture is on the front page of every newspaper. The Arabs and other third world countries have nothing but praise for him whilst the Western nations are all vilifying him. I think it was a journalist for the Al-Ahram who wrote 'Nasser has now gained near-total popular legitimacy and firmly established himself as the charismatic leader and spokesman for the masses not only in Egypt, but all over the Third World'.

In one newspaper Nasser was accused of making a snap decision immediately he heard about losing the backing for his dam. 'Probably before the plane he was on when he heard the news even landed in Cairo' the article said. In another it said 'Nasser studied the issue for three or four days, consulting his advisors, before finally making his decision'.

July 28th

It has now come out via a leak in the cabinet that the majority of the government was unaware of the nationalisation scheme until only minutes before Nasser's public announcement. They are also saying that Nasser took the decision alone without consultation or advice from anyone.

July 29th

Simon is back full of tales of woe from the Embassy. Tonight I was subjected to hours of it.

"Eden was hosting a dinner for the King of Iraq and his Prime Minister when the news came through that the canal had been nationalised. They both unequivocally advised Eden to 'hit Nasser hard, hit him soon, and hit him by yourself.' The Ambassador told me that those were the King's exact words. I think the vast majority of the British people would go along with that. Even the opposition leader who was also at this dinner thinks that military action will be inevitable but he's all for keeping the Americans on side. I don't see how that will work. The House of Commons met two days ago and expressed their anger so Eden is expecting Parliament's full support. The French Prime Minister, Mollet, is not unsurprisingly outraged and is determined that Nasser shouldn't get away with it. There are a lot of people Nancy who think Mollet hasn't the guts to go to war with Nasser but I'm not so sure. I watched an interview with him yesterday where he held up a copy of Nasser's book 'The Philosophy of the Revolution' and said: 'This is Nasser's *Mein Kampf*. If we're too stupid not to read it, understand it and draw the obvious conclusions, then so much the worse for us'. That doesn't sound like a man without guts to me.

The entire Commonwealth is horrified and most of them agree there needs to be military intervention against Egypt otherwise British prestige in the Middle East will be in tatters. Nasser knows its coming but thinks that we won't be ready to do anything for at least two months and he is dismissing any Israeli action as impossible. I think Nasser is in for a shock.

Everyone agrees that Nasser took this stupid decision alone. No one would have advised him that such an action would be a good idea. It's hardly the decision of a rational, responsible leader and for that reason alone we need to do something. The man's a lunatic."

I had nothing to add to all that and took myself off to bed as soon as I got the chance.

July 30th

From what I understand Eden has begun planning for an invasion of Egypt. One plan is for a parachute brigade to seize the canal but Simon said our neglect of parachute training will make an airborne assault impossible. Another plan is for the Royal Marines to take Port Said and then British soldiers can overrun the Canal Zone from there. The Israeli Defence Force have some plans of their own to attack the Sinai but Simon thinks they won't go in without the French. I hope these governments and armies make a move soon. For one thing I don't want to have my baby in the middle of a war zone but more importantly I can't stand listening to Simon every night. He wants to discuss every possible strategy with me and expects me to have an opinion on each one. I told him last night that he was wasting his time asking me.

"How do I know if it's better to attack Port Said from the air the land or the sea" I said speaking quite abruptly. "Do you think I am some sort of strategist? Well I'm not. I'm just a woman trying to cope with being pregnant in unbearable heat with a lot of silly men round me fighting over a bit of water. I know it's an important bit of water but if everyone would behave reasonably and discuss it instead of fighting over it we might all get somewhere."

I could see Simon was displeased with this remark but if it stops these torrents of vituperation coming out of his mouth every night then I will be more than happy.