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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 FOUR



January 2nd 1957

Simon has suggested installing a swimming pool. There is to be a small gazebo to the right of it. I am thrilled at such an unexpected gesture from Simon who detests swimming himself.

January 4th

I have now resumed a cordial relationship with Amin. Of course things can never go back to what they were but at least there is no longer an atmosphere between us.

January 5th

Today Eisenhower asked Congress for authorisation to use military force if any Middle Eastern country needs help from America in stopping any 'colonial' aggression against them. Congress not only agreed to this but also set aside a huge amount of money for aid to the Middle East. I don't know exactly how much but Simon said it runs into the hundreds of millions. Obviously America has aligned itself to Arab nationalism which is very foolish and what they hope to gain by it I have no idea. It was only because of their financial pressure that we had to pull out of Suez and Nasser still hasn't publicly thanked Eisenhower or America. The Russians who did absolutely nothing are the ones taking all the accolades. Eisenhower will learn about Arabs in time. We in Britain are still reeling from what America did to us. It makes me so mad. Simon said that it is a tactic by Eisenhower to stop the spread of Communism but he thinks that instead he will end up with more Arab Nationalism so it's not a very good strategy.

January 9th

Eden has had to resign over this Suez fiasco. Even his own party accused him of misleading them. I have no idea where all this sympathy for the Arabs has suddenly come from. The only ones who have gained anything from the whole mess

are the Russians. They are big friends of the Arabs all of a sudden. Even Jordan is making some kind of agreement with Egypt now because they are scared of what the Soviets might do.

January 12th

That radio station still won't shut up about the glories of Nasser and half the newspapers are getting as bad at spreading all this Arab nationalism nonsense.

January 15th

The Shepheard's Hotel is to re-open next month, albeit in a different location, and Simon and I have been invited to the official opening. At last something is happening in Egypt that has nothing to do with the Russians, the Suez or Israel.

February 3rd

We have just checked into the new Shepheard's Hotel and I can't say I am impressed. It is on the corniche so all the rooms have excellent Nile views but there is no garden and no terrace. The garden and terrace with the orchestra playing every evening were what made the old Shepheard's what it was. This place has no focal point and is completely lacking in atmosphere. I am very disappointed.

February 4th

2.00am

I have just got back to my room now. What a fabulous party. What this hotel lacks in soul it makes up for with professional service and excellent food. Such a pity the ballroom is so enclosed.

We all went into dinner at 8.00pm and after the stunning array of mezzes, asparagus soup, lobster and a champagne sorbet a man got up to give a speech about the hotel. Nobody bothered to formally introduce him so I still have no idea who he was. Anyway his speech was fascinating. He told us about how Samuel

Shepherd had opened his hotel back in 1841 which he originally named 'Hotel des Anglais' but from the very beginning everyone referred to it as Shepherd's. I was amazed to learn that this Samuel Shepherd was only a pastry chef before and his Egyptian partner was only a coachman. The Egyptian sold out after only four years and by 1861 the hotel was so valuable due to its popularity amongst the world's rich and famous that Mr. Shepherd also cashed in and went back to England to retire. The speaker then read out a list of names of people who had stayed there and I can't begin to remember them all but I was most impressed to hear the names of Kitchener, Stanley, T.E. Lawrence, the Aga Khan and of course Churchill. He said the present location is only about half a mile from the original site but I don't think that's quite right; it must be over a mile away. By the time he had finished his speech we were all hungry again and I for one was delighted by the roast quail and the chocolate roulade. We were sat with the Ambassador and his wife and they were both excellent company. She is about as tactful and discreet as her husband but terribly funny. When I said I was surprised not to see the Valentines there she said "Surprised are you sure you don't mean pleased?" and then started giggling uncontrollably. After that we spent the rest of the time over dinner swapping stories about some of our worst experiences with Barbara!

After the dinner there was a band and a singer as well as the traditional orchestra. I was not lacking in dance partners either. Before finally retiring I sat down with the Ambassador's wife again for a nightcap and found myself confessing to her all my superstitions regarding the bracelet.

"Do you think there is any truth in the power of such talismans?" I asked her.

"I really have no idea Nancy. All I can say to you is that everyone is always searching to find rational reasons for believing in the absurd. Why don't you stop searching and just believe."

Wise words coming from someone I had hitherto thought to be a superficial and frivolous woman.

February 5th

I was sorry to leave Cairo today. I half wished I had booked in for longer but I do need to get back home to oversee the building work.

February 8th

The pool itself is finished but Amin is still working on the stone patio around it and the gazebo. There is a delay because the stone he is using comes from Aswan and there is none available in Luxor at the moment.

March 15th

The Israelis have just withdrawn their last troops from Sinai today. Since they were ordered out by the UN they have done an enormous amount of damage on the peninsula. They have completely destroyed a number of villages as well as vandalising roads, railways and telephone lines. There was no need for any of that and I told Simon so. They behaved just like petulant children.

April 8th

The canal reopened today and with it a repeat performance from Nasser about his great conquest of the West. He is almost a god to the Arabs now.

April 15th

Soviet warships are sailing up and down the canal for the first time since World War One. Simon says they are making the most of their new friendship with Nasser and have started negotiating with Egypt to acquire some bases for themselves in the Med. The Russians are even purporting to be supporting the Palestinian cause now. Nasser is so full of anti-Israel rhetoric since they made that mess in the Sinai that it's even too much for the Palestinians to bear. I think they believe they would have more chance of getting on with their Israeli neighbours if Nasser would be quiet and stop leading the Israelis to think all the Arabs are like him.

April 24th

They are saying on the radio that from today the canal will be fully operational. I thought it already was.

April 27th

Jordan has fallen out with Egypt again. Simon always said that the relationship between those two wouldn't last long and he was right. King Hussein has implicated Nasser in two coup attempts against him although on what basis no one seems to know. Nasser was on the Voice of the Arabs radio station today calling King Hussein 'a tool of the imperialists'. I don't think the Saudi Royal family think much of Nasser either but I only heard that from Simon via the Ambassador.

June 3rd

Amin has completed all his work now and before he leaves us he has asked if I can meet him tonight at the summerhouse. I have no idea what he wants but I will go out of politeness.

June 4th

Amin is completely denying that anything happened between him and Caroline.

"It's over a year now that you have been behaving differently with me" Amin said coming straight to the point of why he had asked to see me. "I put it down to your pregnancy and miscarriage at first but I think it's more than that. Is there something bothering you Nancy; something I've done to upset you?"

How ridiculous. He knew very well what he had done. I didn't say anything.

"Come on Nancy; out with it" he continued still feigning ignorance.

"I don't think that spending the night with one of my house guests was a very acceptable way to behave even if Simon did give you his blessing. Taking advantage of an eccentric old woman like that was bad enough but laughing about her

with Simon was beyond reproach. What on earth came over you? It was such a cheap thing to do. Caroline never said a thing to us about it so you should have at least shown the same amount of discretion to her as she did to you. I don't feel safe inviting any of my friends here now. It really was too much Amin."

To my surprise he started laughing.

"Nothing of the sort happened Nancy although I must admit I might have allowed Simon to think it did. The poor woman was flirting with me in the most blatant way and I was doing my best to pretend I hadn't noticed when all at once I found myself alone with her. You all disappeared and on his way out Simon whispered something about it being perfectly fine to go back to her room with her if I wanted. He didn't give me the chance to answer him. I spent about another twenty minutes there before making my excuses and heading off home. Next morning Simon came to me and started saying things like 'you old dog' and 'these older women know how to give a man a good time' and other things I would not like to repeat in front of a lady. I should have told him straight-away that nothing had happened but I didn't. I let him go on believing what he wanted to believe and as the ladies had left I didn't see any harm in it. To be perfectly honest I thought you knew me well enough to know that I would never do anything of that nature let alone with one of your friends and in your own home too. My goodness Nancy do you mean to say that this has been on your mind for over a year now and you never said a thing to me up until today. You do surprise me."

I feel very foolish now. I should have known better. Whatever had got into me believing Simon like that? The loss of my bracelet must have affected my mind. I made a hasty apology and Amin said we should forget all about it and he will never bring it up again.

July 12th

The pool and gazebo are both finished but Amin still comes to see me every night. It's as though the past year never happened. I think I am in love with him

although I am not really sure what that means. Someone told me it's a feeling of extreme sensuality that defies all intellectual reasoning. If they are correct in that then this is definitely love.

July 30th

I cannot control my emotions. I read somewhere that love is the only feeling we can't control unlike anger, fear or even jealousy and hatred. I think about Amin almost every waking moment and at night I dream about him. Not the dreams of the past but tender loving dreams where we share a life together.

December 20th

More British have left the country now since Nasser nationalised all our remaining assets in Egypt. That's the tobacco company gone as well as the pharmaceutical companies. He's nationalised some of the big Egyptian companies as well although Simon said it's not that many. The new steel company in Helwan has created thousands of jobs and although Simon doesn't like to admit it Egypt is doing very well economically. Nasser's new friends, the Russians are thinking about investing in the Aswan Dam so Egypt no longer need either us or the Americans to help them out.

January 1st 1958

I no longer feel the need to write in my diary as often as before. I have a life outside the written word now.

February 2nd

Nasser has heard of a possible communist takeover starting with Syria. I knew the Russians would try this eventually. Egypt has joined hands with Syria to form a state called the United Arab Republic and I think Nasser is hoping more of the Arabs will join. This takes him another step nearer to being the official ruler of the Middle East although he already is that unofficially in the minds of

many of the Arabs. There has been a crackdown on communists in both countries and they are not allowed to hold any governmental posts.

February 24th

Nasser is in Damascus to celebrate the union between the two countries and there looks to be thousands there. I think Yemen wants to join with Egypt and Syria now.

March 5th

There has been an assassination attempt on Nasser and it has created a huge scandal amongst the Arabs. King Saud planned to shoot Nasser's plane down when he was on his way back to Cairo from Syria. Somebody found out about the plot somehow so the Saudi royal family are out of favour again. King Saud is going to let his brother Faisal have most of the say over there from now on which Simon thinks is very dangerous because this Faisal would like to see Islamic unity rather than Arab nationalism. This according to Simon would be a terrible thing. I don't actually know the difference and I have no intention of asking Simon to explain it to me.

March 6th

Nasser has a new joint constitution and joint Assembly with Syria. I doubt Syria will get much of a say in anything as Nasser has already banned all political parties over there. There has been another one of those elections where Nasser was the only candidate and he was voted in for another term in office. I think this makes him the President of Syria now as well as Egypt.

March 19th

Nasser has been to Moscow to meet with Khrushchev. The Soviets want Nasser to lift the ban on the Communist Party but that's not going to happen. Khrushchev isn't that friendly with Nasser that Nasser would go so far as to do that for him.

May 25th

I am pregnant. To make sure nothing untoward happens I am now wearing the bracelet all the time.

July 14th

The Iraqi monarchy was overthrown today.

July 15th

All the Iraqi family have been killed and their bodies mutilated and dragged through Baghdad. These Arabs really are barbaric. Nasser's number one enemy, the Prime Minister of Iraq has also been murdered and there is now a new regime over there which Nasser is supporting.

US marines have gone to Lebanon, and British Special Forces have landed in Jordan to prevent their governments from also falling prey to pro-Nasser supporters.

July 19th

Nasser must see this revolution in Iraq as his big chance and he said on the radio today that he wants a full Arab union. I don't think that's what the Iraqi revolutionaries have in mind. They want independence and don't want any interference from Nasser. Iraq won't be a pushover like Syria was.

November 15th

Simon still doesn't think this United Arab Republic is going to last. He said that since Egypt imposed their same land reforms in Syria and imprisoned or exiled all the landholders who objected Syria is virtually a police state now. I told Simon that even if that is the case the Lebanese might join the Republic soon because their new leader is in favour of it. Simon was clearly shocked that I am so aware of what is going on. I'm in bed nearly the whole time these days with nothing else to do but listen to the radio but I didn't tell Simon that.

December 31st

A most uneventful year from a British standpoint. We have re-established ourselves to some extent and have regained some influence in the region but it will never go back to what it was. It's interesting how they always call on Britain in times of crisis though. We intervened successfully in Jordan to put down riots that threatened the rule of King Hussein so he still likes us although we are still very unpopular with the Egyptians.

I will have my baby early next month.

January 5th 1959

I am now the mother of a healthy son. Simon is thrilled but all I can feel is relief that I have finally produced an heir. We had an argument over names. We never discussed what we were going to call our child beforehand because Simon assumed that I would be happy with Josiah, like his father. I am not happy with such an old fashioned name and also refused to call my child Joseph or Jacob either. Finally we have agreed on Julius. He's a very pretty baby with a fair complexion and pale grey eyes. I tried breast feeding but I am not going to try again. I will get a wet nurse from the village.

January 15th

At last Simon has agreed to have a party. I wanted it to be in February if it is to be a celebration for the birth of our son but Simon will be away working for practically the whole of that month so it is looking like it will be in March.

January 21st

Amin and Simon have decided we need a much better entrance to the palace. Most people come in through the salon which Amin says is really the back door and that is not at all suitable for guests. He says they need to enter from the river. We only have a small landing jetty for motor boats at what Amin and Simon are now referring to as the front of the house and it's only meant for deliveries. We

are now going to build a new gateway on the Nile with a proper mooring place and steps leading up from it. This means we will need a better wall all along the front but Simon says that a wooden balustrade would look more prestigious. He is having some samples made. All this is going to take months to complete and my party is being postponed until June. It's more of a midsummer ball than a christening now so Simon and I will go and christen Julius on our own.

February 3rd

Julius is christened, Simon has left and the gateway is complete but not the balustrade. We are still waiting for the wood. I think it all looks more Indian than Arabian but I daren't say anything. A new stone pathway had to be laid across the garden but that is finished now.

March 10th

There is a lot of trouble between Egypt and Iraq and I thought it might lead to another war but Simon says he is sure Nasser won't go that far.

May 5th

Simon is hardly ever here and has left all the arrangements for the ball to me. Amin has been most helpful and is here every night to talk over the arrangements.

May 12th

After our usual nightly discussion yesterday Amin left as normal but came back about an hour or so later. I heard a soft tapping on my bedroom door and when I answered it I found Amin standing there. He came into my room and what happened next is exactly like what used to happen in all my dreams. He went home in the early hours of the morning and when he came back around lunch time today neither of us spoke a word about what happened last night.

May 30th

Simon is coming home today and will be here until after the ball. Amin who has been visiting my room almost every night will not be able to come again until Simon leaves. Amin and I still don't talk about his nightly visits because we don't want any of the servants to overhear anything.

June 10th

All the invitations have been sent. Most of the guests are Simon's friends and their wives but the Ambassador's wife has invited some other people as well so that it doesn't look as though I have no one. Simon is very disappointed that Valentine is ill and will not be able to come. He and Barbara have gone back to England to consult what they refer to as a 'proper' doctor.

June 21st

Everything is ready. The food will be served outside around the pool and then we will go down to the ballroom where Simon has arranged for a small orchestra to play. The only problem I have is the salmon in aspic which has started wilting in the heat. This was meant to be the centre piece of the buffet but it looks terrible now. I will have to put the cake in the middle of the table which is such a common thing to do. I wanted something different and anyway the cake was meant to be served in the ballroom later.

2.00pm

Surprisingly it was the nanny who came to the rescue. She suggested a 'live cooking corner' which is something I have not seen before in Egypt.

There will be fresh prawns, lobster and squid on offer there but unfortunately the crab is already cooked and dressed so will just have to go on the main table with the salads. The nanny also saved the salmon by slicing it very thinly and arranging it on a big circular plate. Some of it can't be saved but the chef will turn that into a terrine; another one of nanny's ideas.

6.00pm

The guests who are staying overnight are already here and I haven't even had a chance to go and welcome them. My hair has suddenly started to frizz, the dress I want to wear is too tight and I have broken one of my nails.

June 22nd

4.00am

Everything was just perfect. I found something to wear in the end and everyone commented on how lovely I looked. The food was excellent especially the 'live cooking corner' which was a huge success. The only disappointment was that Amin did not come. Simon said that was only to be expected and what was I thinking of inviting one of his workers to a function like this. I have never thought of Amin as one of the workers but I suppose he must be.

4.00pm

Everyone has left and Mamdouh is supervising a huge cleanup operation. The ballroom is in the worst state because we forgot to put rubbish bins in there.

December 1st

Simon is spending a lot of time in Luxor and has started coming to me most nights. I hate it. I can hardly compare what I do with Simon to what Amin and I do together. The procedure is the same but it feels completely different somehow.

Egypt's relationship with Syria is deteriorating and Nasser sent that stupid General Amer over there to help. Honestly will Nasser ever learn that this man is hopeless? Half Syria's government resigned before Amer even got there and Nasser responded by making a silly announcement saying that he is the 'elected' president of the Arab Republic and everyone had jolly well better accept that. This kind of arrogance isn't going to work. I don't see this republic lasting very long and if it does they may try to find another president. Simon says Nasser

will dissolve his relationship with the other Arab countries before letting that happen.

Lord Valentine is back in Egypt now but Simon says he is no better. There is something wrong with his heart. Simon has lost his drinking companion now so maybe that's why he is spending so much time in Luxor. I wish Valentine would hurry up and get better.