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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 FIVE



It has been exactly four weeks since I last told myself I needed to finish the second volume of the diaries and I have still not done it. There are not many pages left but I really should have finished it by now. It's not entirely my fault because my tutor sent me another reading list which he says is very important so I had to leave the diary to concentrate on that. I read *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus first which I found difficult and tedious since the main character is chained up throughout the entire play and can't move a muscle. This put a stop to any action there might have been in the play and the reader is left with only a string of speeches. I discovered from the Internet that this very dull play is actually the first part of a trilogy and as the other two parts have never been found it is hard to tell what the author is really getting at. I suppose I should be grateful that parts two and three of this dreadful drama have never been unearthed or no doubt I would have had to read them as well. My final task was to compare the two 'Electra' plays; the one by Sophocles and the one by Euripides. The two plays have the same plot and were written at virtually the same time so must have been in competition with each other back then. I loved the beginning of the story because Electra is so passionate. Once she convinced her brother that they had to avenge their father's death by killing both their mother and their step father and after they went ahead and did it I lost all interest in the story. I didn't have much patience with their guilt trip and saw no point to all those silly tasks their uncles set them to do to atone for their deeds especially as none of them made them feel any better. The two plays are similar and although the Euripides version is much more dramatic after reading both of them twice over I decided I preferred the Sophocles. It goes into much more detail about the murders and it is so much better written. I have always thought Sophocles to be the better writer of the two anyway.

With all this compulsory reading matter I had no inclination to read anything else and as this studying took up the best part of a fortnight I felt I deserved some time for myself. As my reward I gave myself three full days to explore some of the sites in Luxor. I went to the museum one day and then spent another two

days exploring the Valley of the Kings. The more I see of these antiquities the more I am determined to study for my Masters in Egyptology; it is so fascinating.

I have been watching a lot of television as well; a couple of films but mainly the news. Although not much has been happening down here the revolution up in Cairo is still going on. The people have been promised elections and a referendum on a new constitution and the prime minister, Ahmed Shafik, stepped down the day before a big demonstration was going to be held against him so I don't know what more they are looking for. Someone called Essam Sharaf has taken over but as far as I can see this hasn't satisfied them either and there are still protests going on in Tahrir Square. Possibly they are looking for some kind of revenge because hundreds of protestors raided State Security Intelligence buildings all across the country last week purporting to be looking for documents that would prove beyond doubt that State Security committed crimes against the people during the Mubarak era. I believe they did find something about vote-rigging but that's about it although they did say that most of the documents had been shredded or burned long before they got there.

Not feeling I had rewarded myself enough for ploughing through this latest list of Greek tragedies I decided to take myself off to Aswan. To make myself feel better I told myself that I would read the final part of the diary in the comfort of the Old Cataract Hotel. On reaching the hotel I discovered that Islam had handed me the wrong suitcase when I was getting into the taxi. I have two identical cases and he had mistakenly picked up the wrong one. The one I had with me was full of winter clothes and of course no diary. I had to go shopping to buy two or three new dresses and a swimsuit but fortunately my underclothes and toiletries were all in the smaller bag I had been carrying myself. Anyway that dispensed with any guilt I might have felt for not reading at least some of the diary while I was down there.

Unlike the Winter Palace the Old Cataract fully lived up to all my expectations and by that I also include the food. It cost me a small fortune to stay there but

I couldn't find fault with anything. The highlight was afternoon tea on the terrace overlooking Khnum Temple and Elephantine Island where it was not difficult to imagine Agatha Christie sitting there at work writing *Death on the Nile* all those years ago.

I'm not sure if I actually like Aswan that much. The corniche and the river are definitely more beautiful there than in Luxor so my first impression was that Aswan is the better place but once I explored the town itself I changed my mind. Up on the hills beyond the Nile there are some of the most horrible houses I have ever seen set amongst a lot of factories all pumping out what appears to be toxic fumes. The souk in Aswan is worse than the one in Luxor if that's possible and I will stop complaining about the supermarkets in Luxor as there didn't seem to be one at all in Aswan. All in all the town has little to offer beyond the tourist sites.

There is a lot to see for a tourist I must admit and after all that reading about the dam I made that my first stop. I don't know what I was expecting but I was very disappointed. Although you can see Lake Nasser on one side and the Nile on the other it is still very ugly, which when I think about it, is not all that surprising seeing as the Russians had a hand in it. My next visit was to Philae temple which is beautiful but as it has been moved due to flooding caused by the dam and is no longer in its original place I didn't find it that interesting. I don't know why but I hate anything that has been moved like that. On my second day I went to Kitchener's island and the Aga Khan's mausoleum which were both well worth the trip out. It took some explaining to the felucca driver where I meant by Kitchener's Island because it seems like everyone apart from the British now calls it the Botanical Island but I did get there eventually.

Having seen what I came to see in Aswan I spent my last two days there floating about in a felucca and my evenings drinking in the hotel bar where even the Bloody Marys are better than the ones in the Winter Palace.

All this free time left me with ample opportunity for contemplating on what I had read about my grandmother so far. I have changed my mind now and

decided that she was not a stupid woman all but I do believe her to have been quite fanciful. Her knowledge of what was going on in the Middle East might have been extensive but her analysis of it was totally biased towards the British standpoint. Simon didn't appear to be any more objective either. Despite the diary having been written almost entirely from a European angle I think a lot of what was said in there about Nasser must be correct. It rings true somehow and I like him less and less the more I read about him. My grandmother's perceptions of women seem accurate enough but I fear her judgement on Amin was totally clouded by her infatuation with him. I refuse to call what she felt for him love because as far as I can see she knew nothing about him beyond his work. I cannot at all accept that bullshit he came out with about not sleeping with Caroline and find it hard to believe my grandmother fell for it but they do say love is blind. As to his affair with my grandmother it was most peculiar. But for the fact they had a child together I would say the affair never happened and was purely a figment of my grandmother's imagination. Surely they could have said something to each other. The stories pertaining to her relationship with Simon read very amusingly but the reality of living with a boor like him must have been far from funny. It's not that I think he was cruel to her or anything like that but he was so dismissive, scathing and patronising. She must have felt very alone when she miscarried her first child and I'm not surprised she didn't elaborate too much on that.

Having said that, she doesn't write much about the birth of her son. I know not everyone is maternal but I thought she would have had more to say about my Uncle Julius than she did. She had waited all those years to have a baby and yet once she had him she showed absolutely no interest in him at all. My poor uncle seems to have been virtually ignored from the very day he was born. She wrote more about her midsummer ball than she did about her son and the only reference to his nanny is in conjunction with her party. I won't let on to my uncle anything about that.

I wish she had written more about life in Egypt during the fifties. What she

did write such as her description of Alexandria and the events surrounding the opening of the new Shepheard's hotel are the most interesting bits of the whole diary. The parts that refer to the building work would have been more useful if she had gone into detail but I suppose I will manage since I have all the drawings and a couple of photographs. I do wonder why she didn't take more pictures though and why there isn't even one of Amin. It's disappointing that she hasn't included any details about the gardens but I don't suppose it will be too difficult to recreate something similar because I have at least one photograph. The diary has been of some help; at least I know now that I have to decorate the summer-house with a kind of 'Out of Africa' theme.

Her obsession with the bracelet was bizarre and totally irrational. She must have known it herself deep down and I presume that was why she asked for some sort of validation for her superstitions from the Ambassador's wife. She didn't get much help there. Of course the Openshaws only fuelled her silly belief that this piece of stone had the power to somehow influence her life. My grandmother did appear to have a habit of believing whatever she wanted to believe whether there was any proof or logic in it or not. For one thing she didn't have any real evidence that it was Barbara in those photographs although I must admit it does look like it probably was her. I can agree that Barbara must have been an annoying kind of person but my grandmother's antipathy towards her went beyond that and seemed to be based on this previous relationship she believed Barbara had had with Simon. I hope in the end that that turns out to be justified.

All this daydreaming did nothing to help me fulfil my objective of finishing the diary before the end of the month so on my fifth day in Aswan I decided I had better make a move back home. I had come down by car but I had a sudden urge to experience the train going back. I really wish I hadn't; things have changed a lot since my grandmother's day. It was hot, filthy and slow with the only redeeming feature being the ridiculously low cost.

While I was away the referendum on the constitution passed with over a two thirds majority and it reminded me of all those elections during my grandmoth-

er's day. It all seems very familiar and it's as though the Egyptians have learnt nothing from their past. I doubt most of the people today have any better idea what is actually going on than they did back then. When the Interior Ministry building caught fire during a demonstration earlier this week a law was immediately brought out criminalising all protests and strikes at public establishments. Under this new law anyone organising such protests will be subject to imprisonment or a fine so big that nobody will be able to afford to pay it anyway. This all has a *déjà-vu* feel about it. To be perfectly honest I'm not exactly sure what there is to demonstrate about now but they had better make the most of it while they are still allowed to do it because if it is anything like before it will all be brought to a halt very soon.

As soon as I got back I went to see Carlo who had promised to find me a decent builder. True to his word he had done as he said he would and had one lined up for me but unfortunately the builder he had found was not the one I had wanted him to find.

"Everyone is saying the only reliable, honest and competent person round here is Mohamed Fawy" he told me looking very pleased with himself. "He owns that big steel company up in the village; you must have seen it. You are very lucky to find him because his grandfather Amin was the same Amin who originally built the palace for your grandmother and I think this Mohamed chap still has a lot of the original plans and wiring diagrams. Even if he doesn't have them all he most likely has some inside knowledge of the place. What do you think Gloria? Do you want me to speak to him for you?"

"Not yet thanks" I replied rather too quickly, "and don't worry about finding someone who is familiar with the building because I have all the old plans myself." I must have sounded very ungrateful as poor Carlo hadn't the slightest idea why I might not want this Mohamed he was suggesting. I had never discussed with either him or Carmen that the grandfather of this Mohamed was also my own grandfather as I hadn't wanted to go raking all that up to someone I barely knew. When I finish the diaries hopefully I will have a better idea what

my relationship with that side of my family is likely to be but until then I want to keep well away from them.

After this rather rude rebuffal of mine conversation became a little bit strained between us, at least until we had all downed three or four more araks. By that point I was feeling so bad that I poured out the whole story about my Egyptian ancestry. I stopped short of telling them about my mother's disappearance and my father's suicide though and shamefully let them think my parents had been killed in a car crash or something of that sort. I will no doubt enlighten them in the future but I had had enough of home truths for one day. Carlo said he understood and would look for another builder but he wasn't very optimistic. Carmen said she didn't know what all the fuss was about and probably my long lost family would welcome me with open arms. Personally I don't think everyone is happy to hear about infidelity and betrayal in their family even if it was two generations ago but not wanting to upset her again I kept my opinions to myself.

I went home very drunk resolving to do absolutely nothing until I have finished reading this damn diary and had my initial look round the palace. Of course this is not the first time I have made such a resolution but I am determined to keep to it this time. April the first is my final final deadline.