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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 SIX



January 2nd 1960

Lord Valentine is dead. His heart finally gave out on him last night. Most embarrassingly he was not at home when this happened. He was at the house of his long term mistress who is the wife of someone in the French Embassy. It seems as though everyone including Barbara had known about Valentine's affair but Simon never bothered to mention it to me; perhaps he thought I already knew about it. Simon is going to the funeral which will be held in a church in Alexandria but I don't want to go. I liked Valentine but I don't really want to have to deal with Barbara.

8.00pm

Simon has left for the funeral which will be tomorrow.

January 4th

Simon is on his way home and he is bringing Barbara with him. She needs the company he says. I thought she had plenty of friends up there and she doesn't think much of my company anyway. She must be coming so she can spend time with Simon. I am not happy about this at all.

January 5th

Barbara is here and she and Simon are planning a first birthday celebration for my son this afternoon! Words fail me; they have not even consulted me. For someone who is supposed to be in mourning Barbara is behaving very badly. I have insisted on inviting Amin along to this silly party.

8.00pm

It was just a small party with the four of us and the nanny. Even so anyone would have thought Barbara was Julius's mother not me. She brought him lots of presents and she and Simon played with him down in the summerhouse all afternoon leaving me to spend the whole day alone with Amin. I told the nanny

to take the rest of the afternoon off as she clearly wasn't required either. If things carry on like this I will have to speak to Barbara about what she thinks she is playing at. I won't get any sense out of Simon.

January 12th

Every evening after Julius has had his tea the nanny brings him to the summerhouse to play with me and Amin. The poor child must think he has two sets of parents now. Amin is very good with him but I am hopeless. I am not cut out to be a mother. On top of all this Simon says he wants another child so after spending almost the whole day with Barbara he turns up in my room every night.

January 25th

After almost three weeks of torturing myself I have had a long conversation with Barbara today and it seems I have paid her a great disservice. It all came out after breakfast this morning when we were together in the summerhouse and after she made yet another of her snide references to Amin

"You two seem closer than ever. It's not my business Nancy but I think you are playing a very dangerous game there."

"If you would leave my husband alone then you might have some room to talk."

I was angry and the words poured out of my mouth without me even thinking what I was saying. "Now Valentine is dead I suppose you think you can pick up your affair with Simon where you left it back in the Sudan. You might be free to marry him now Barbara but you are going to have a big fight on your hands with me."

To my surprise Barbara burst out laughing.

"Whatever are you talking about Nancy? I have never even been to the Sudan, I told you that a long time ago, and I certainly have never had an affair with your husband. It's my sister Hermione who was working in the Sudan and it is her that's in all those photographs. She's a couple of years older than me and we do look a bit alike. We looked even more alike when we were younger. Maybe

that's why you got confused. For your information she didn't have a relationship with Simon either but not from want of trying on his part. Are you happy now that you know that?"

I was stunned into a most uncomfortable silence. After a few minutes Barbara spoke again.

"Do you want me to tell you about it or would you rather not know?" she asked. "No tell me" I replied finding it difficult to get the words out.

"Very well I will tell you everything although what good it will do you I don't know. Back in the early thirties my sister Hermione was engaged to a very handsome young man called George Riverton. He was posted out in the Sudan in the same regiment as Simon. In fact Simon was his General out there. Hermione couldn't stand to be away from George for one minute and as the wedding was still two years away she couldn't join him in the Sudan as an army wife. Instead she found a job at a little Christian school out there where she even had to pretend to be a missionary to secure the post. That's how much she loved George Riverton. She went out there in 1932 and had rooms inside the school. Khartoum isn't a big place and everyone knows everyone so it wasn't long before she was introduced to Simon. It was at the Sudan Club if I remember rightly. As soon as Simon saw her he wanted her and he didn't seem to care that she was engaged to George. It was an awkward situation and Hermione did her best to ward off Simon's advances without being directly rude to him. She was worried how it would affect George's position you see. This situation carried on for a year or more until one night Simon turned up at the school very drunk and forced his way in there. What exactly happened I don't know because Hermione wouldn't speak about it but the next day Hermione booked her passage back to England. When she arrived she was badly shaken and we tried to contact George to ask if he had any idea what had happened. Before we got our answer Simon turned up. It was a dreadful scene with Simon swearing that Hermione had led him to believe she was going to break off her engagement to George and marry him. I knew this was all lies without Hermione having to say anything.

She had been madly in love with George for years. It was my father who eventually got rid of Simon and found George another posting in Kenya. Hermione brought her wedding forward and moved to Kenya with him.

That still wasn't the end of Simon. He followed her to Kenya saying he had been invited there by Hemingway; you know Ernest Hemingway the writer, although Hemingway always said Simon just turned up there with Bror Blixen without any invite. Hermione was petrified so my father and I both went out to Kenya to try and sort it out. I don't know what my father said to Simon but he managed to get rid of him for a second time; and this time for good. I stayed on for about another six months and that is where I met Valentine. That was at another one of Hemingway's parties. I had insisted on going to it because I was desperate to meet someone as famous as him. He was a bit of a disappointment to tell you the truth. He was with his second wife, Pauline and he was not doing any writing or doing anything much at all apart from drinking. Pauline was ghastly by the way and we all used to call her the devil in Dior. No wonder he was bored and he had been ill as well. He had been laid up with dysentery in Nairobi and was only just recovering. Anyway I have gone completely off the point; sorry. There were always lots of interesting people at those parties of Hemingway's; Bror and Karen Blixen were quite often there although they were divorced by then, Eva Dickson the aviator and of course Valentine. Valentine and I hit it off straight away and we were married in England a year later. It was only when we got to Egypt that I found out that Valentine knew Simon. They weren't exactly friends but they met quite often through work. As soon as Simon saw me he wanted to get me on my own to talk to me about Hermione. He said he would never bother her again; he just wanted to know what she was doing and was she alright. I tried to avoid him at first but he threatened if I wouldn't tell him what he wanted to know he would go back to Kenya and see for himself. That was the start of our many meetings. I couldn't ignore him although I never really liked him.

Then you came along. I felt sorry for you at first. I tried to give you the worst

possible picture of Simon so that you might take the hint and change your mind and go home. Then I saw what you were after. You didn't love Simon anymore than he loved you and this marriage of yours was a sham. It was for convenience on your part as well as his. Once I knew that I kept out of your way as much as I could unless Valentine absolutely forced me to meet you.

I had my own problems by then. Valentine and I had never had a very good sexual relationship although I don't know why because we did love each other. I think I was more like a sister to him than a wife and he soon stopped sleeping with me altogether. When he met this French woman, Justine and fell passionately in love with her I wasn't surprised. I took myself off to Kenya for a while and thought about getting a divorce. Interestingly enough Hemingway was there again at the same time as me. He had changed for the worse and was drinking more than ever. I was so depressed that I started going round to his house most afternoons to drink with him. That's how I became a close friend of Mary's, his fourth wife. It was her who put me off the idea of divorce. She had been married three times herself and said that she was going to try to hang on to Ernest. She said Hemingway's last marriage to Martha Gellhorn had fallen apart because Martha was too ambitious and too competitive and made far too many demands. Mary was a journalist as well but she said that she wasn't going to be like Martha; she was happy to sit back and let Hemingway bask in all the limelight. She told me about his affairs and despite them being hurtful she said she wasn't going to lose her marriage over them. Apart from his sexual infidelities they had a good life together and there was more to life than sex she said. I decided she was right and came back home to Alexandria.

You probably know that when Valentine died last month he was with his mistress. I couldn't face anyone after that so I was happy to disappear down here to Luxor until I decided what to do. I sometimes wish I had had a child. You are so lucky to have Julius. Don't lose everything you have Nancy; not for your Egyptian builder anyway. Simon might not love you like he loves my sister but he does care about you in his own way. At least he sleeps with you which Val-

entine never did with me and the only time Simon strays it's with prostitutes. It might not be very pleasant to think of him sleeping with all those whores but at least you have nothing to fear from them. I was always terrified of Valentine leaving me for Justine and I am sure he would have done if she had been prepared to leave her husband which fortunately for me she wasn't. Now you know everything Nancy. If I had thought for one minute you suspected I was in love with Simon myself I would have told you all this years ago."

Neither of us said anything for a while and it was Barbara who eventually spoke again.

"I have decided to go back to England. The Openshaw sisters have offered me a home with them. Those two turned out to be the only real friends I have and even if they are eccentric at least they are interesting. I am leaving next week."

Without giving me chance to say anything Barbara got up and left me alone. I realised that I have a lot of making up to do with Barbara and I have promised myself to be extra nice to her until she leaves. I had better take her advice as well and be more careful when I am with Amin.

January 28th

Louis Armstrong has been in Cairo performing at an orphanage. The Americans are always arranging what they call these goodwill tours all over the world. I believe the idea is to show the underdeveloped world the cultural freedoms of America in an attempt to stop the rise of Communism. I doubt it works but it's a nice idea. There is a photograph in the paper of him today blowing his trumpet into the face of the Sphinx with his wife sat next to it and the Great Pyramid in the background. I almost cried when I saw this picture; it is so romantic.

February 3rd

Barbara left today. We became much closer over the last few days and I was sorry to see her go. Who would have thought that I would ever have said that about Barbara? Before she left I had a brief conversation with Simon just letting him

know that I knew all about his past without referring to it directly.

"I didn't know you were a friend of Ernest Hemingway's" I said. "I would have loved to have met him."

"I'm not" he replied. "I only met him the once at a party in Kenya. Blor Blixen took me. He was the one who was a friend of Hemingway's not me."

I told Barbara what he had said so that she would know that she had been right and Simon had never been invited to that party.

"It hardly matters does it?" she answered almost disinterestedly. "Blor would have invited Simon to Kenya anyway and he would have found some way to see Hermione even if it wasn't at that party. Blor was a terrible man; a real womaniser. I felt sorry for Karen and his second wife Jacqueline too. He cheated on the two of them. He and Simon made a good pair. Forget about it. Simon knows that you know everything now which is what you wanted. Don't keep bringing it up after I have gone for God's sake."

February 8th

Nasser has declared that he is expecting an Israeli attack any minute. Simon says this is all in his head. He thinks the eighteen hour days Nasser puts in and the chain smoking is affecting his judgement not only his health.

February 12th

I have taken every bit of Barbara's advice apart from not seeing Amin. Simon has not left Luxor since Valentine's funeral and Amin and I have only managed one night together. I won't do that again while Simon is on the premises. I am too afraid of getting caught and to be perfectly honest I don't think I want to end my marriage. I am perfectly happy as I am; at least for now.

February 18th

The Russians are supplying Nasser with all sorts of intelligence which Simon says is all false. They are trying to convince Nasser that the Israelis are about to

attack Syria so that Nasser will make some sort of move on Israel first. I don't understand all this game playing or even what the Soviets really want. Nasser appears to believe it though and has sent extra troops into Sinai. There has been nothing on the news about all this so I don't know if it's right or not. Simon says Nasser has imposed a 'radio silence' and it is correct that he is deploying his troops in Sinai and along the Syrian borders. I hope this isn't going to be the start of another of their silly wars.

February 24th

America has warned Israel what the Egyptians are up to.

March 10th

Absolutely nothing came of any of this show of strength by Egypt. In fact Simon told me that Egypt started withdrawing from the borders yesterday.

March 12th

The Al-Ahram has published the whole story; well the Egyptian version that is. From their perspective this Egyptian deployment of troops prevented Israel from attacking Syria. They are describing the outcome as a brilliant victory for the Egyptian army. I have to laugh. Nothing happened or was even about to happen but once again Nasser is putting out propoganda declaring himself to be a military genius.

June 5th

Nasser is upsetting Syria now. He is trying to bring in economic reforms that will bring the Syrian economy more in line with the Egyptian public sector. Simon said we should expect a big backlash from the Syrian business community and he is not expecting this Arab Republic of theirs to last out the year.

December 31st

The year has ended with the United Arab Republic still intact. The Syrian economy is in bad shape though and Simon is sticking with his prediction that the republic will eventually fall apart but he said it might take another six months to a year.

Nasser has nationalised the Egyptian press although I have no idea why. They have always been on his side and pump out any old propaganda for him.

July 5th 1961

I just realised that I have written nothing in my diary for over six months. To be honest I have had nothing to write about. My life is the same and everything in Egypt looks to have quietened down. Nasser is carrying on with his nationalisation programme in Syria and it looks like they are not happy but aren't doing anything about it.

Simon told me that Nasser would like to merge socialist and Islamic ways of thinking and he believes this would be a good thing.

"Nasser is trying to modernise al-Azhar which is the leading authority here for Sunni Islam. If he is successful this will curb the power of all the more conservative forms of Islam including the Brotherhood. He is going right down as far as changing the school syllabus and introducing co-educational schools. He has already merged the religious courts with the civilian courts and he is demanding that Shia Muslims and even the Druze are accepted into mainstream Islam. Of course this is all going to upset the Saudis but in my opinion Nasser is doing a good job."

I can't believe Simon even said that but he did.

September 20th

Sarraj the Syrian head has been sacked. I don't think what Nasser is doing in Egypt is working out the same for him in Syria. The Syrians have a different way of thinking to the Egyptians.

September 28th

They have launched a coup in Damascus, declaring Syria's secession from the United Arab Republic. There are pro-Nasser protests going on in a lot of Syrian cities but I don't think it will make any difference. The army in Syria want Nasser out.

September 29th

Egyptian Special Forces have been sent to Syria.

September 30th

Nasser has withdrawn his troops from Syria. He says he doesn't want any inter-Arab fighting and he would prefer to leave Syria rather than let that happen.

October 5th

Nasser made a speech on the radio today taking full responsibility for what happened in Syria. He said that Egypt will recognise an elected Syrian government if that's what they want. He also said that a nationalisation programme such as he has implemented in Egypt would have worked just as well in Syria if they had only given it time. Simon told me that privately Nasser doesn't blame himself at all but blames all the Arab governments that went against him like Iraq and Saudi and that he is very upset. Simon's sources have told him that Nasser is almost having a nervous breakdown about all this. How you almost have a breakdown I don't know; you either have one or you don't in my opinion.

October 22nd

I had a long lecture from Simon today about the pros and cons of the Nasser regime and what everyone really thinks about him as a leader and what he is going to do about it.

"Nasser needs to make sure he holds on to his support base in Egypt because the army have far more influence now than he would like. One thing he is

going to do is widen the canal to bring in more business and I have heard he is preparing a new constitution which includes a lot of social reforms such as better health care and more affordable housing. It's all very well but people are getting fed up with the tight controls on the media and the opening of mail and tapping of telephones. It's too much now. He seems to have some influence in the international media so maybe they will help him. I read in Time magazine only the other day that the sense of national pride and personal worth he has given to the Egyptian people balances out all his flaws. I'm not sure that will be enough though. On the other side there are many inside the country who say he is nothing more than a terrible dictator who has stopped any move towards democracy by his blatant violation of all human rights. That novelist Tawfiq al-Hakim is the most vocal. He openly describes Nasser as a 'confused Sultan' who despite all his stirring rhetoric has no actual plan to achieve any of the goals he speaks about. He says Nasser is both irrational and irresponsible and it's only due to his tight control on the media that any information that attests to his infallibility gets filtered out."

By the end of this little speech I was almost asleep and woke up only when I heard Simon say he is going to be away in Assuit for the next six weeks. At last I will be able to spend some nights with Amin. The thought of this made what Simon did to me tonight almost bearable.

November 4th

Simon has gone to Assuit and Amin and I have picked up from where we left off. He comes to me most nights now and he often stays until dawn. Sometimes I can still feel him moving inside of me hours after he has left. It is almost unreal.