

Cut-takes + new matter

THE KEY TO REBECCA

by Ken Follett

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100,000 words

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on the door in the middle of the night ...

Vandam said: 'There's nothing to panic about, but we want you to set up a surveillance, and we need it right away.'

'Of course. Please sit down.' The detective found a notebook and pencil. 'Who is the subject?'

'Sonja el-Aram.'

'The dancer?'

'Yes. I want you to put a twenty-four hour watch on her home, which is a houseboat called Jihan in Zamalek.'

As the detective wrote down the details, Vandam wished he did not have to use the Egyptian police for this work. However, he had no choice: it was impossible, in an African country, to use conspicuous, white-skinned, English-speaking people for surveillance.

The detective said: 'And what is the nature of the crime?'

'I'm not telling you, Vandam thought. He said: 'We think she may be an associate of whoever is passing counterfeit sterling in Cairo.'

'So you want to know who comes and goes, whether they carry anything, whether meetings are held aboard the boat ... '

'Yes. And there is a particular man that we're interested in. He is Alex Wolff, the man suspected of the Assyut knife murder - you should have his description already.'

'Of course. Daily reports?'

'Yes, except that if Wolff is seen I want to know immediately. You can reach Captain Jakes or me at GHQ during the day. Give him our home phone numbers, Jakes.'

'I know these houseboats,' the detective said. 'The towpath

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is a popular evening walk, I think, especially for sweethearts.'

Jakes said: 'That's right.'

Vandam raised an eyebrow at Jakes.

The detective went on: 'A good place, perhaps, for a beggar to sit. Nobody ever sees a beggar. At night ... well, there are bushes. Also popular with sweethearts.'

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to the man who had organised the uprising. Such hard political realities were not for meetings such as this: they were too sophisticated, too calculating. Kemel was the only person with whom Sadat could discuss tactics. Kemel was a policeman, a detective with the Cairo force, a shrewd, careful man: perhaps police work had made him cynical.

The others began to talk about whether it would work. Sadat made no contribution to the discussion. Let them talk, he thought; it's what they really like to do. When it came to action they usually let him down.

As they argued, Sadat recalled the failed revolution of the previous summer. It had started with the sheik of al-Azhar, who had preached: 'We have nothing to do with the war.' Then the Egyptian parliament, in a rare display of independence, had adopted the policy: 'Save Egypt from the scourge of war.' Until then the Egyptian Army had been fighting side by side with the British Army in the desert, but now the British ordered the Egyptians to lay down their arms and withdraw. The Egyptians were happy to withdraw but did not want to be disarmed. Sadat saw a heaven-sent opportunity to foment strife. He and many other young officers refused to hand in their guns and planned to march on Cairo. To Sadat's great disappointment, the British immediately yielded and let them keep their weapons. Sadat continued to try to fan the spark of rebellion into the flame of revolution, but the British had outmanoeuvred him by giving way. The march on Cairo was a fiasco: Sadat's unit arrived at the assembly point but nobody else came. They washed their vehicles, sat down, waited a while, then went on to their camp.

Six months later Sadat had suffered another failure. This time it centred on Egypt's fat, licentious, Turkish king. The

British gave an ultimatum to King Farouk: either he was to instruct his Premier to form a new, pro-British government, or he was to abdicate. Under pressure the king ~~had~~ summoned Mustafa el-Nahas Pasha and ordered him to form a new government. Sadat was no royalist, but he was an opportunist: he announced that this was a violation of Egyptian sovereignty, and the young officers marched to the palace to salute the king in protest. Once again Sadat tried to push the rebellion farther. His plan was ~~that~~ to surround the palace in token defence of the king. Once again, he was the only one who turned up.

He had been bitterly disappointed on both occasions. He had felt like abandoning the whole rebel cause: let the Egyptians go to hell their own way, he had thought in the moments of blackest despair. Yet those moments passed, for he knew the cause was right and he knew he was smart enough to serve it well.

'But we haven't any ~~means~~ of contacting the Germans.' It was Imam speaking, one of the pilots. Sadat was pleased that they were already discussing how to do it rather than whether to.

Kemel had the answer to the question. 'Wem might send the message by plane.'

'Yes!' Imam was young and fiery. 'One of us could go up on a routine patrol and then divert from the course and land behind German lines.'

One of the older pilots said: 'On his return he would have to account for his diversion ... '

'He could not come back at all,' Imam said, his expression turning forlorn as swiftly as it had become animated.

Sadat said quietly: 'He could come back with Rommel.'

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Imam's eyes lit up again, and Sadat knew that the young pilot was seeing himself and Rommel marching into Cairo at the head of an army of liberation. Sadat decided that Imam should be the one to take the message.

'Let us agree on the text of the message,' Sadat said democratically. Nobody noticed that such a clear decision had not

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to the man who had organised the uprising. Such hard political realities were not for meetings such as this: they were too sophisticated, too calculating. Kemel was the only person with whom Sadat could discuss ~~xxxxxxx~~ tactics. Kemel was a policeman, a detective with the Cairo force, a shrewd, careful man: perhaps police work had ~~given him cynicism~~ made him cynical.

The others began to talk about whether it would work. Sadat made no contribution to the discussion. Let them talk, he thought; it's what they really like to do. When it came to action they usually let him down. Last summer he had organised a revolution which had exploded like a damp firework. Until 1941 the Egyptian Army and the British Army had fought side by side in the desert. Sadat and his rebels were not alone in resenting this: the sheikh of al-Azhar had preached: 'We have nothing to do with that war.' When the Egyptian parliament, in a rare display of independence, adopted the policy 'Save Egypt from the scourge of war,' the British ordered the Egyptians to lay down their weapons and withdraw. Sadat and many other officers refused to be disarmed, and the British were obliged to let them keep their guns. The spark of rebellion had been kindled, and Sadat tried to fan it into flame. The withdrawing units were to assemble at the end of the Alexandria-Cairo road and march into the capital to overthrow the British. Sadat and his unit arrived at the meeting point, but nobody else came. They washed their vehicles, sat down, waited a while, then went on to their camp.

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officers marched to the palace to salute the King as a protest against the violation of Egyptian sovereignty. Once again, Sadat had tried to push the rebellion farther. His plan was that all the nationalist officers would drive out to the palace and surround it, as a token of defence. Once again, Sadat was the only one who turned up.

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Wolff knocked on the door.

'Who is it?'

Wolff walked in.

She was sitting on a stool, wearing a silk robe, taking off her make-up. She saw him in the mirror and spun around to face him.

Wolff said: 'Hello, Sonja.'

She stared at him. After a long moment she said: 'You bastard.'

*

She had not changed.

She was a handsome woman. She had glossy black hair, long and thick; large, slightly protruding brown eyes with lush eyelashes; high cheekbones which saved her face from roundness and gave it shape; an arched nose, gracefully arrogant; and a full mouth with even white teeth. Her body was all smooth curves, but because she was a couple of inches taller than average she did not look plump.

Her eyes flashed with anger. 'What are you doing here? Where did you go? What happened to your face?'

Wolff put down his cases and sat on the divan. He looked up at her. She stood with her hands on her hips, her chin thrust forward, her breasts outlined in green silk. 'You're beautiful,' he said.

'Get out of here.'

He studied her carefully. He knew her too well to like or dislike her: she was part of his past, like an old friend who remains a friend, despite his faults, just because he has always been there. Wolff wondered what had happened to Sonja in the years

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since he had left Cairo. Had she got married, bought a house, fallen in love, changed her manager, had a baby? He had given a lot of thought, that afternoon in the cool, dim church, to how he should approach her; but he had reached no conclusions, for he was not sure how she would be with him. He was still not sure. She appeared angry and scornful, but did she mean it? Should he be

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Suddenly she stood up. They both stared at her. She lifted her arms then, slowly, she pulled her dress up over her head, threw it to one side, and stood there in her black underwear and stockings. She raised her left foot, planted a high-heeled shoe between Sonja's breasts, and pushed Sonja backward. Then she grasped Wolff's head and drew it to her belly.

Sonja started kissing Elene's foot.

Wolff buried his face between Elene's thighs.

Elene looked at her watch.

It was midnight.

'Yes. He wants to use your radio.'

'How does he know I've got one?' There was a threatening note in Wolff's voice.

'He doesn't,' Sonja said calmly. 'From what the British have told him he deduces that you're a spy; and he presumes a spy has a means of communicating with the Germans. The nationalists want to send a message to Rommel.'

Wolff shook his head. 'I'd rather not get involved.'

She would not have him go back on a bargain she had made. 'You've got to get involved,' she said sharply.

'I suppose I have,' he said wearily.

She felt an odd sense of power. It was as if she were taking control. She found it exhilarating.

Wolff said: 'They're closing in. I don't want any more surprises like last night. I'd like to leave this boat, but I don't know where to go. Abdullah knows my money's no good - he'd like to turn me over to the British. Damn.'

'You'll be safe here, while you string the detective along.'

'I haven't any choice.'

She sat on the edge of the bathtub, looking at his naked body. He seemed ... not defeated, but at least cornered. His face was lined with tension, and there was in his voice a faint note of panic. She guessed that for the first time he was wondering whether he could hold out until Rommel arrived. And, also for the first time, he was dependent on her. He needed her money, he needed her home, last night he had depended on her silence under interrogation, and - he now believed - he had been saved by her deal with the nationalist detective. He was slipping into her power. The thought intrigued her. She felt a little horny.

Wolff said: 'I wonder if I should keep my date with that girl,

Not like Elene.

'A pain-killer will send me to sleep,' he told her.

'And a jolly good thing, too,' she said. 'If you sleep we can be sure the stitches will be undisturbed for a few hours.'

'I'd love to, but I have some important work that won't wait.'

'You can't work. You shouldn't really walk around. You should talk as little as possible. You're weak from loss of blood, and a wound like this is mentally as well as physically traumatic - in a few hours you'll feel the backlash, and you'll be dizzy, nauseous, exhausted and confused.'

'I'll be worse if the Germans take Cairo,' he said. He stood up.

Dr Abuthnot looked cross. Vandam thought how well it suited her to be in a position to tell people what to do. She was not sure how to handle outright disobedience. 'You're a silly boy,' she said.

'No doubt. Can I eat?'

'No. Take glucose dissolved in warm water.'

I might try it in warm gin, he thought. He shook her hand. It was cold and dry.

Jakes was waiting outside the hospital with a car. 'I knew they wouldn't be able to keep you long, sir,' he said. 'Shall I drive you home?'

'No.' Vandam's watch had stopped. 'What's the time?'

'Five past two.'

'I presume Wolff wasn't dining alone.'

'No, sir. His companion is under arrest at GHQ.'

'Drive me there.'

'If you're sure ... '

'Yes.'

his bare chest.

Abdullah said: 'He doesn't need it yet. Give it to him in the morning.'

Wolff took the shirt from the woman and put it on.

Abdullah said: 'Perhaps it would be undignified for you to sleep in the house of an Arab, my friend Achmed?'

Wolff said: 'The British have a proverb: He who sups with the devil must use a long spoon.'

Abdullah grinned, showing his steel tooth. He knew that Wolff had guessed his plan. 'Almost an Arab,' he said.

'Goodbye, my friends,' said Wolff.

'Until the next time,' Abdullah replied.

Wolff went out into the cold night, wondering where he could go now.

*

In the hospital a nurse froze half of Vandam's face with a local anaesthetic, then Dr Abuthnot stitched up his cheek with her long, sensitive, clinical hands. She put on a protective dressing and secured it by a long strip of bandage tied around his head.

'I must look like a toothache cartoon,' he said.

She looked grave. She did not have a big sense of humour. She said: 'You won't be so chirpy when the anaesthetic wears off. Your face is going to hurt badly. I'm going to give you a pain-killer.'

'No, thanks,' said Vandam.

'Don't be a tough guy, Major,' she said. 'You'll regret it.'

He looked at her, in her white hospital coat and her sensible flat-heeled shoes, and wondered how he had ever found her even faintly desirable. She was pleasant enough, even pretty, but she was also cold, superior, and antiseptic. Not like -

to pick up the mystery man had had her throat cut.

And now Vandam was sending Elene in against the same man.

A corporal came in with an order. Vandam read it with mounting disbelief. All departments were to extract from their files those papers which might be dangerous in enemy hands, and burn them. Just about anything in the files of an intelligence section might be dangerous in enemy hands. We might as well burn the whole damn lot, Vandam thought. And how would departments operate afterwards? Clearly the brass thought the departments would not be operating at all for very much longer. Of course it was a precaution, but it was a very drastic one: they would not destroy the accumulated results of years of work unless they thought there was a very strong chance indeed of the Germans taking Egypt.

It's going to pieces, he thought; it's falling apart.

It was unthinkable. Vandam had given three years of his life to the defence of Egypt. Thousands of men had died in the desert. After all that, was it possible that we could lose? Actually give up, and turn and run away? It did not bear contemplating.

He called Jakes in and watched him read the order. Jakes just nodded, as if he had been expecting it. Vandam said: 'Bit drastic, isn't it?'

'It's rather like what's been happening in the desert, sir,' Jakes replied. 'We establish huge supply dumps at enormous cost, then as we retreat we blow them up to keep them out of enemy hands.'

Vandam nodded. 'All right, you'd better get on with it. Try and play it down a bit, for the sake of morale - you know, brass getting the wind up unnecessarily, that sort of thing.'

'Yes, sir. We'll have the bonfire in the yard at the back, shall we?'

'Yes. Find an old dustbin and poke holes in its bottom. Make sure the stuff burns up properly.'

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