

Watch out for the Elephants!

A “ROYAL” THANSGIVING



It was time for Norma and Jim to begin plans and preparations for their first Thanksgiving away from home. A verbal invitation had been made aboard ship, now formal invitations must be sent. The invites had to go out in early November. Some shipmates were living as far away as Lebanon.

A family Thanksgiving in the United States is a joyful gathering of loved ones, but there was a lot of preparation to be done: menu planning, food shopping, table settings and the like. In Cairo, since it was to be a sit down affair, they also had to arrange for place settings. Abdul, it was decided, would need some help with the serving and cleanup so he arranged for two assistants for the evening. It was to be a team effort. One servant would work in the kitchen keeping up with the dishes and making sure the food was presentable, while the other two would serve. The Thursday afternoon of the event, my folks received a last minute response from one more guest, which increased the group from twelve to thirteen. Norma relayed this to Abdul and he immediately looked concerned. “What is wrong Abdul?” she asked.

“It is a big problem, since we only have matching service settings for twelve people,” he said. Mom figured she had a solution and instructed Abdul to place the mis-matched setting at either the head or foot of the table, where she and my Dad would be seated. Abdul was not happy! The local people at that time considered it bad luck to have an odd number of guests and mismatched table settings. Norma told Abdul not to worry about it and concentrated on arrangements for dessert and coffee.

The guests began arriving from early in the evening. Some traveled far and arrived with suitcases. By 6pm the last of the guests arrived and everyone was enjoying hors d’oeuvres and beverages in the living room. My guess is that they sipped on a sherbet-like lime punch that was Mom’s favorite drink to serve, and homemade pizza squares. Throughout the years, I loved having my own samplings of these treats, when Ann and I would have our own “cocktail parties” in our room before the real guests arrived.



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The conversation was lively. Everyone shared their stories of adjusting to life in the region, resulting in much camaraderie and a lot of laughter.

For Norma and Jim the joyous reunion with their shipmates felt like a warm family gathering. At about 8pm, rivaling a peacock in splendor, decked out in a gold, maroon and purple brocade uniform, Abdul quietly approached my father to advise that dinner was ready. Jim stood up and announced that dinner was served. He then led the procession of guests through to the dining area while Mom brought up the rear. He opened the double doors leading to the dining room let out a gasp and stopped dead in his tracks. The line began backing up as one guest after another bumped into the person in front of them. Thinking that my Dad had temporarily lost his mind, Mom went to the front of the line to see what was wrong. All Dad could do was point at the dining room. (I sure wish I had been around to see what they saw but they described it so many times Ann and I felt as though we actually had been there.).

The table was literally glowing! There were lead crystal water and wine goblets sparkling as the chandelier lights reflected off them! The dishes (gold plated) appeared to shimmer. The silverware, also gold plated was accented by brass trays, which served as placemats at each position. The tablecloth was heavy linen of deep purple with a maroon border, matching Abdul's uniform. Each place setting had a linen napkin placed on the main dish, folded in the shape of a bird-Egypt's version of *Origami*¹! Around the table, standing at attention, were seven servants all dressed in crisp regal uniforms matching Abdul. Their function, my folks soon found out was for each of them to be attentive to the two guests between whom they were placed. Yes, one servant for every two guests, not to mention Abdul, who was in charge. There was also, (later to be learned), a full kitchen staff for the evening. Wow! To my Dad it seemed right out of a fairy tale. He just stood in front of it all with his mouth wide open! Equally amazed but not fazed, Mom thought first of her guests comfort; they would discover later how the magic wand had been waved. She casually remarked how lovely everything looked and ushered the guests in to dine. (This sure was going to be a different feast than my folks had last Thanksgiving at Aunt Connie and Uncle Lonnie's house in Philadelphia!) Yes indeed "DINNER was served!"

After the initial OOHs! and AAHs! were over, the guests proceeded to enjoy a taste of American tradition, including roast turkey, stuffing, candied yams, green beans, corn, cranberry sauce and hot rolls. Lively conversation ensued. People shared more of their experiences in the Middle East, and stories from Thanksgivings past. Everyone seemed to be enjoying the evening, but my father was worried about where the fancy extra place settings and uniforms had come from. Across the table, Norma signaled him, "Never mind! Relax! Enjoy! Smile!" But every time a guest hit a knife against a goblet or dropped a piece of silverware on the floor Dad would cringe!

Apple pie a la mode was served with coffee and tea in the living room around 10 p.m. and the evening began

¹ The Japanese art of paper folding





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to wind down. When the guests had all left or retired, my folks looked for some answers to the questions that had plagued my father all evening.

Abdul explained “*Matt’mann-Nash Souu El-Hadd LeI Eelah Dea*” (“I did not want bad luck brought to this family”). He said he had taken the serious matter of the mismatched place settings into his own hands. He had gone over to the next-door neighbor’s and borrowed matching sets for 13 diners. The extra help was offered as part of the package, not to mention the uniforms. The real shocker was that their neighbor was a Princess! That’s right, she was the sister of the reigning King of Egypt, King Farouk! Dad’s mouth was wide open again for the second time in one night. As for Mom, (as usual) she was matter of fact about it all and said “Never mind Jimmy, I will go over to the Princess’ tomorrow to thank her personally!”

The following afternoon my mother asked to meet with the Princess and was greeted very graciously and invited to tea. The Princess apologized for not coming over to introduce herself sooner and was glad that Mom had come. Norma explained the nature of her visit and apologized for the use of the Princess’ servants and table settings. To my mother’s astonishment, the Princess replied “Really, the use of all that stuff and the servants was no problem. After all my servants are always over at your place borrowing your Pyrex dishes!” Can you imagine? Pyrex dishes for lead crystal goblets! This was the beginning of an official borrowing agreement, and another friendship that was to last many years. Needless to say, that was a Thanksgiving to remember!

