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THE DERVISH ALWAROG

(Continued from XXI, 26)

"YOU are the great general my lady is expecting?" asked the door-man as he dismounted. Handing his horse over to another servant, he replied "As to great, I do not know, but a general, by grace of His Majesty, I certainly am." "This way, sir," said the doorman, leading up the steps to an ample tiled verandah, "Your honour will forgive me, but you are dressed in civilian clothes, and those of so simple a style, that I had to make sure." From beyond the verandah came a commanding female voice, "Old man, what are you arguing about? Do you not recognise the family face?" As he reached the verandah, a garland of small, crimson, very fragrant roses went round his neck, and he looked up to see a tall, well-preserved matron of about sixty, smiling at him and saying "Welcome, son."

Bowing low to touch her feet in respect, a strong pair of arms went round him in a tight embrace, and the lady said, "Come in, come in, I have waited long for this day." Something melted in the heart of the veteran of many battles, and he stood there helplessly weeping in great sobs. Leading him into an inner room, she seated him on some high cushions, and holding his hands, said gently, "weep on, son, don't try to stop; there's nothing to be ashamed of in such weeping. I understand, I understand how you feel, you poor boy who've never had a mother's tenderness since the age of five or a father's loving clasp. A ward of the king's, yes a fine education, and then soldiering and battle, that's been your life." With a great effort, he regained control over his emotion and said, "Forgive me for being such a ninny, dear and honoured lady, but your great kindness, your sympathetic smile and words, quite overcame me. I thank you very much for receiving me so kindly." "Don't talk about it. Here wipe your eyes and drink this hot milk kaweh. Then the bath, and your hazari, at which we shall talk after you have eaten something." So he bathed and put on the white silk robes and purple cummerband that had been put out for him, and was led to a small chamber where a refection had been set out for him. Eating heartily, he looked up to see his hostess seated by the window. She smiled and asked him if he found anything strange in the food. Yes he said, this very appetising cheese he had never encountered before. It was not of the country, was it, he asked. Yes and no, she said, it was made in her own dairy, but the recipe came from her own land, and was not known in this. Her

own land, he repeated wonderingly: How came she here then, how meet his father? he enquired eagerly.

"It's quite a tale," she said "better come out on the lawn, and I'll tell you about it all." So they sat down on carpets spread on the velvety lawn, and leaning back upon a rounded pillow, she began her story. "You will notice that I have not the soft, round face that characterises the beauties of this country. My cheek-bones are higher, my mouth larger, my nose juts out more than is common here. Were I to put on men's clothes and carry arms, I could easily pass off for one of those barbarians from the North, as you call them, who have been a thorn in your side for over the last fifty years. We pour in, we ravage and pillage, gather together loot and return. Despite much fighting and many cantonments along the borders, even to this day as you know well, you haven't been able to deal with us finally. After a big defeat, we are quiet for a couple of years. Then hey-presto, we're back again. Invasions by regular armies have failed to pacify us, and by God's grace our land is so poor that no one is tempted to occupy it. About twenty-five years ago, our neighbours on the East at great cost occupied it and held sway for a year. Then one night, many were slaughtered in their strong places as they slept and the rest were compelled to beat a bloody retreat. I tell you all this not out of vainglory, but to show you what kind of stock I come from. Being a small chief's elder daughter—my three brothers were from another mother and many years younger—I took to arms and was soon a skilled axeman both on foot and from the back of a horse.

"I was just eighteen, when one of our periodical forays was decided on. The target was this rich land to the south, which had just had an excellent harvest and was likely to provide much booty. At first, all went well. We fought, we won, we looted, we sent back our loot. Then, I think we got over-extended, or perhaps there were changes in your higher command. On two occasions, our mad rushes couldn't break your lines and soon we were in retreat. One day, gloomy and dull, as I remember it, I was with our rearguard, when your cavalry charged us suddenly. We were scattered helter-skelter, but fought on grimly wherever we were. Suddenly I heard a loud melodious song and saw the singer, a fine horseman, riding straight for me. I swung a tremendous blow at him. He parried with his axe. It was swept out of his grip by the strength of my blow, but at the same time my carefully-hidden plaits fell straight down in front of my eyes, obscuring my view. The next moment my axe was torn out of my hands. A strong pair of hands dragged me from my horse on to his, and he held me pinioned in front of himself. I managed to get my right hand free and actually had my dagger in it ready to plunge it between his ribs, when I found his eyes blazing into mine, and felt on my lips the kiss of a life-time. The dagger fell out of my hand, my arm went round his neck, and there we were in the middle of the fight, kissing as if we had been quite alone. 'My God, what a beauty you are' he kept on exclaiming; then with his sword in his hand, made his way out of the field. Catching a run away horse, he put me upon

it and said, 'now ride with me, oh nobly-born, and we shall soon be in safety at home.' Ten miles we rode at reasonable speed meeting hardly anybody, and ended up here, which then was just a modest homestead. It occurred to me during that ride that I could safely make a break for freedom, his horse was more tired than mine, but the magic of those kisses and his supreme confidence kept me more securely with him than if he had tied me to the saddle with strong cords.

When we reached the well of the yard, he said 'I am sorry I cannot provide hot water at this hour for your bath, but this well-water is quite clean and you can wash with it, if you will.' I said, 'good, I will, if you will just go away for a short while.' 'Why certainly,' he said; then a thought striking him, 'are you a maiden still?' I nodded, and he turned away. When he came back, I was quite clean and refreshed. He said, 'Now we must eat though we cannot cook, there being no firewood in the place. Anyhow I have plenty of rations, ready, cooked, in my saddle bag.' So we stabled the horses, fed them, made them comfortable, and then went into the house, carrying the rations, which we opened and put upon a small table, with a jar of water from the well. Soon we were eating with great relish the strips of dried cooked meat and *nan* that formed the ration, and to finish off, we had two dried dates each. During the meal, I had seen him looking at me considerably several times, so when the light began to fail and he said I could make myself comfortable there and he would go into the next room, I said 'Look lord, I am your captive, your handmaiden. You do not have to think of me. Just deal with me as you will and I shall be very content. But perhaps your slave finds no favour in your eyes? If so, I shall be glad to sleep alone as you direct.'

He said, 'girl, don't be foolish. You know I fell in love with you, the moment our eyes met in the battle and our lips touched. Do you think I do not wish to take you into my arms this very minute? But you are a maiden. So I must not do it, until we are married. As to whether you will marry me, you must decide after listening to what my situation is. I tell you I want to marry you, but I am already married. I tell you I love you, but I also love my wife. Sometimes, the Lord bestows upon a man a heart big enough to hold two loves, and the man is blessed indeed then, if both his loves love him. I love the wife I married a year ago and she loves me. I love you too and shall marry you tomorrow if you agree. I shall look after you as my wife and care for you properly, but you will have to live here and not at the capital where my home is. The estate here I shall transfer to your name. It is not too small and looked after properly, as it was in my father's time, produces a reasonable income. I am sorry about all these conditions but there's no help for it. So tell me, oh sweet lady, will you marry me tomorrow? If you will not, I shall provide you with sufficient funds and food and take you to the boundary of your own land, so that you can appear in your own army as a late straggler, and fill the hearts of those who have mourned you as lost with joy again. Well, what say you?'

I said, 'Whatever your conditions, I shall marry you tomorrow. But mind you, I have a condition too. It is that you take me in your arms just now and kiss me as you did on horseback a few hours ago. Just kiss I mean, nothing else. Then I shall sleep happily, here or elsewhere as you please. If you will not, then I will plunge this dagger straight into my heart and put an end to my misery.' And I quickly took the dagger from the belt he had taken off when we sat down to eat. With a jump he seized me, and laughing harrily said, 'You witch' and we kissed and kissed and kissed for quite a time.' In the morning I found myself asleep on one side of the room with him against the wall on the other side.

That day we were married. He has ridden out for an hour and had brought in servants and food and all necessities, so that I, the nomad fighter, was transformed into the lady of the manor. Ten days he stayed with me on that occasion, ten days of utter delight. I learned something new from him all the time. When he found I could read, he brought out his father's account-books and diaries of cultivation and we read them together. He was gay, light-hearted, merry. Never have I laughed so much in my life as in those days. To be young, to be in love and loved, to be together—is there a better definition of Heaven? Ah me, so long ago it was yet it is as fresh to my mind as if it had happened yesterday. Yes, you are lucky to have had such a father, but unlucky not to have known him. However, you have added fresh lustre to his name and I am sure, if he can look down and observe you and your deers, he must feel proud of you. Come, let us walk to the gymnasium over there, and have about with the foils. I like to keep in trim. Let us see how many points, I, the old lady, can score against you, Oh renowned young warrior.

(To be continued)

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