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THE DERVISH'S IDLE DAY

(Continued from 5-8-1980)

TOWARDS the end of his six months at the court, he noticed one night that Abida was somewhat distract. Next night against finding her in the same condition, he asked her the reason. Was it some lapse on his part that brought about this unwanted sadness of spirit to one usually so bright and full of gaiety ? No she said, it was no fault of his, except in this perhaps, that he had not a large fortune. If he had had, how eagerly she would have told her father about him, so that he could arrange their nuptials. Her father it seemed had suddenly taken it into his head that she should be married. He had even produced a candidate, a presentable youth with a very rich father, who could not be refused without good reason. Her father had said to her "I am not unreasonable. If you have any candidates, produce them, and I shall consider them taking into special account your personal preference." And all she had to produce was handsome me, completely ineligible from the beginning. My entire emoluments would scarcely pay for her scents and ungents for a month, she said. He had protested, said he had a small estate in the country. They could retire there, and lead quite comfortable and happy lives there, together it would be Heaven. Yes, she had said, and Abida would soon be on her way to that blessed place too, having drowned herself in the estate well to escape the boredom of counting the chickens, and helping the cows to have calves. She thanked him, but she would have nothing to do with a scheme which would deprive her country of one of its most valorous generals and perceptive statesmen of the future. So, he asked almost weeping. Well, she answered, 'obviously we must part, unless of course you are prepared to continue to be my lover after my marriage. I could, I have no doubt, manage that, however jealous and watchful my husband.' No, he had said with disgust, emphatically not, walk from his arms into mine, God spare us such disgrace. 'Then,' she said, 'there's nothing left but to part. Come, this is our last embrace.' And consumed with sorrow, they had come together furiously, then slowly and tenderly, again furiously and diligently, until with the false dawn, he had left her uneasily sleeping and with a last glance, vanished into the night.

The memories of that night of sorrow and exultation and lamentation came so vividly to the sleeping dervish that he woke and sat up weeping and sobbing bitterly. Gradually the storm subsided, and he realised that all this had happened sixty-five years ago. Slowly self-control returned, and he said to himself contemptuously, a fine ascetic you are, old man

with death so near, to be so moved after so many years about so petty a cause. Then his sense of justice asserted itself. Petty, to term Abida petty, what folly! And suddenly Abida stood there before him in all her glorious beauty and charm. Attempting to struggle up and go to her, he stumbled, hit his head against the rock-side and mercifully, fell down unconscious.

A large snake slithering over his body and face finally aroused him, and he lay there watching, as having gone past him a few feet, it stopped and looked back and slowly its head made a small inclination, as if bowing. Peace be upon thee, ejaculated the dervish, and with that he became himself again. Things seemed to fall into place. He got up, felt his way to the larder at the back of the cave, picked up the water-jug, took a long draught and replaced it, then making his way to the front, sat down, his back straight, his hands upon his folded knees and intoned deliberately and with proper articulation, the prayer for the peace of departed souls disturbed by the violence of human thoughts. Next, he prayed for forgiveness for himself. One view of the world as it had been, and all his detachment had vanished. At this rate, he might just as well have remained in the world, of the world. Where was all his discipline, his self-control? For him who could see externity in a grain of sand, for him to whom the great privilege of 'hāl' (ecstasy) had been granted on occasion, this was surely extreme degradation. So he sought both forgiveness and strength in prayer. From being audible, it finally became silent. Gradually his mind and heart, his whole being, seemed to be merged in a great light, not a burning, but a healing radiance. He became stiller and stiller, seemed hardly to breathe. Gradually the radiance faded, leaving him at the end a greatly strengthened person, one who very probably would not err in the same way again. Moving to the cave-entrance, he stood there for quite a few minutes, drawing in deep draughts of the fresh night-air. Then sitting down in his usual place, he determined to go through the rest of the Abida affair that very night.

Fifteen years later, when he was a mature man of thirty and the third in command of the army of the North, he thought about her seriously again. He had heard from time to time stray references when he visited the capital city about how she had captivated the court, and many serious men from it, with her wit, knowledge of world affairs and readiness in conversation, and had felt pleasure at her success. She had been right, he had thought, how foolish I was to think of confining that bright intelligence to my humble country estate! Suddenly, one day coming into the Commander-in-Chief's quarters, he heard her name and the C-in-C exclaiming "I can't believe it." "Believe what?" he asked the officer who had brought the despatches. "That Abida (with that husband of hers, of course), has been found guilty of serious peculation in supplies for the army, fudging the books, and has now been sentenced to be sold as a slave, her value to be credited to the state," said the C-in-C. "The husband has been hanged already, all his property has been confiscated, so too Abida's, and she is now in the slave-market quarters. Our friend

here tells us she would have been bought twenty times over, had she not made it a condition that she approved of the buyer beforehand. Otherwise she would kill herself. More to the point, the slave-dealer believes her and is content to wait until someone she approves of appears." I had a long talk with the messenger that evening after Mess. Two days later from my own headquarters, I was riding hell-for-leather to the capital on urgent State and personal business.

I had got married three years before, a good-looking, well-educated girl of about twenty-one, and though she had not yet produced the expected heir, I was well content, for I knew that we of our house were always late breeders. My wife and I got on comfortably enough though I am afraid our relationship had none of the magic Abida's and mine had. However, I had never expected it and was not disappointed. My first stop was at my house, my second at the war-office, my third, in disguise, as a medium agriculturist, at an old nurse's house, which I had visited not unoften in the days of my bachelorhood. I found the nurse at home. Having handed her a handsome fee, I sent her with a message to Abida. If she approved, I would buy her, set her free, settle a sufficient sum upon her to enable her to lead an independent existence. If she did not wish to have the slur upon her, of being bought I would take the slave-quarters by storm next night, carry her off to the big city, five hundred miles away, situated in another state, and settle her there as an independent, studious lady of private means. In three hours, the nurse returned with Abida's reply. She said Abida had laughed loud and long at my second alternative, but had said no, thank you, very firmly to it. She did not wish to put my whole future in jeopardy for the sake of a mere technacality. She had no objection to her being bought by me by private treaty or even in the slave-ring. About being set free, she wasn't very particular, though on the whole it would look good. The important point to her was 'Would I take her in my household?' She knew I was married, and would be quite content to be a minor concubine. But that she must know. She had no use for an independent household with me far away.

I looked at the nurse, the nurse looked at me. After bringing me a sherbet, she said, 'Leave well alone. I shall take no more messages to-day. Sleep over it.' 'No,'! I cried 'My duty is clear. It is to my wife. If Abida comes into the house, my wife might just as well leave. God, why did I get married at all? If only I had waited for this day. However the thing is done, and the soldier must be loyal even if it breaks his heart. Tell her all this, and persuade her so that to-night I can get her out of those horrible slave-quarters and let her live independently.' The nurse went and returned in a quarter of an hour, Abida says she will give her answer tomorrow morning. 'He always was a very good man. I remember his disgusted face when I offered to continue to be his lover after being married. Well, I hope his wife merits it.' Late that evening I heard that she had been drowned in the deep-end of the usual swimming-pool, a sudden seizure they said. Was it intentional, was it accidental? God alone knows. In any case, what else

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could I have done? If my beloved's death too must be set against my account, so be it! In any case, next morning I attended the funeral, walked openly among the chief mourners, helped carry the bier for quite a distance and showed every sign of sorrow.

The king sent for me that afternoon, saw me in his private chamber and taxed me with my conduct. I looked at him and said, 'I loved her,' 'yes' he said 'and so did I, oh not in the same way as you, but as a real companion.' I turned upon him 'and yet you let all this happen to her?' 'Do you think I did not try to save her? I tried everything I could, but it was too late; the moment the Chief Kazi's eagle eye had fallen upon it, it was settled. He fell upon a plea for delay like a lion upon its prey. Delay, what for, he cried. This matter is clear to any eye that will see, and he dictated his judgement forthwith, ending with the sentence the man to be hung next morning, the woman to be sold as a slave. To get round his judgment would be unthinkable. One thing our people will not stand, hanky-panky by me or anyone else, once an honest judgment has been delivered and—I say it with pride—in my time our courts are both honest and speedy. So what could I do? I sent a messenger to you with the story, hoping you would do something You did, with the result that she is drowned. Oh, you tedious young fool, why couldn't you have taken her into your household? Yes, yes, I know all about it, including your heroic offer to fight your own country to save your love. She had much more sense than you—had you done any such thing, the Chief Kazi would have insisted on perpetual banishment for you—she laughed at you, but she must have been very proud of you. You loved her truly, but you let a sense of duty keep you from her, and she escaped the whole weary world. Oh you good men, what a mess you make of life! No, no, I don't mean that. One can but do one's duty as one sees it. But Abida, my dear daughter Abida, look down on two men who love you and forgive us. O I am weary, very weary; go back to the Army and try not to think about this at all. To live one must often forget."

(To be continued)

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