



JOHN W. WEDDERBURN

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CHAPTER XVI

A STRIPPING CHANGE OF FRONT.

So all my rosy hopes were blown to the winds again. Fate had cut off the last chance of escape, and I could look for nothing but immediate death. For I had heard something of the portentous mysteries of statecraft that make such havoc of the conscience of rulers and understand that behind the personal will and inclination of Abou Kuran were reasons of such fearful cogency as no prince who valued his life could ignore. However friendly the governor might be at heart, he was not a free agent, but merely the instrument of a tyrannous system which sentenced and slew with ruthless disregard of the sanctity of private thought.

This was driven in upon me with staggering emphasis when the leather faced grader I had relieved of his pains, humbly venturing to comment on the wisdom of his master's special arrangement for the absolute necessity of preserving the state from foreign intrigue at all hazards and at whatever cost of blood and ending up with the proposition, "Let my lord decree death forthwith, and while the lion is roaring, let matters I see will see this rogne executed."

But we had both mistaken the force of Abou Kuran's character. A weak lion is the slave of his office; a strong man is his master and director. Perhaps it was the wronging of humanity in his breast, perhaps it was a sudden conviction of my innocence, or what is more likely, it may have been a prince's dislike of dictation and interference that influenced my judgment, but he unexpectedly took a course of his own.

"Words of wisdom drop from thy mouth as honey from a honeycomb, Abdallah," he said, with a severe look at his eyes. "Foreign intriguers and spies must indeed be given to the fowls of the air and the beasts of the earth. It is my duty and privilege to guard the state. I will take care they are not neglected. Again, basic in order that thou mayest give thy mind to other and more important affairs I will myself execute justice on this stranger. Get thee forth with all haste, and thou, Koor All, who will command next to myself, go with him and take no rest until my army be ready for war."

The two men bowed very low and hastened on. He watched until they had gone, with a clamorous mob at their heels, then turning to me he said briefly:

"I have purposes that will astonish thy friend Abdallah. Thou shalt ride by my bride, and we shall see of what stuff thou art made. Nay, nay, no speeches," as he saw the fullness of heart coming into my face. "This is a time for action. Be silent, and I shall be able to give thee thy fair words, for if thou shouldst prove false thou shalt die the cruellest death Abdallah can devise to atone for this present offence."

That he turned abruptly to a farming official and said in a brusque tone: "The stranger will have need of food. See that he has his wants, and thy head answer for his safe keeping." Whereupon, rising quickly, he swept majesticly to the door, and observed me with a look of unusual moisture about the lashes, which I wiped furtively while trying to jest with my attendant.

The rising sun, they say, is worshipped, and certainly the favor of its rays, by many smiles and obsequious attentions. The demeanor of the people toward me changed as singularly as my shifting fortune. Those who had spat on me with foul impreccations but a moment before, now greeted me with loud ejaculations of friendship and blessing. Many a man probably would have valued the tokens of good will more than I did. I had been defiant to the mob in my adversity; in my triumph I hope I was no less so. But assuredly, I had indeed responded with my cordiality to the greetings of people, who, if Abou Kuran's humor had been different, would have shouted themselves hoarse with glee at seeing my head slashed off my shoulders.

The sight of one eager face after another, among the many fawning ones gave me a genuine thrill of pleasure. Said Achmet had haunted the place all the morning like a perturbed spirit, and now on the first opportunity he came running forward to congratulate me on my new lease of life. I had not much to say, but I gave the good man's hand a hearty Christian wring, and he did not resent it, though to shake hands with an infidel or stranger is pollution to the ordinary Mussulman.

When sorrows come, says the poet, they come not in single spies, but in battalions. Once or twice in a lifetime a few happy moments have the sweet experience of finding joys, too, come trooping in upon us. While my benefactor and myself were in converse together, to the further delight of us both, word came from Abou Kuran that until the troops were ready I was to be his guest or Said Achmet's, just according to my fancy. Needless to say, my choice I made not how deeply grateful I was to Abou Kuran for this fresh sign of his graciousness.

Said Achmet carried me off with as proud a heart as his own horse, and he treated me with a tenderness that mere greatness could never have evoked. Indeed I had been his own son risen from the dead he could not have been more lavish of the courtesies of his position, and he acted that the tremulous affection of an old man delights in or evinces a livelier regret at the parting that was near.

For the most part of three happy days I was with him, listening to wonderful tales of the diabolical progress of the man on the black horse from Tabal, or discussing the prospects of the campaign with him, or drinking in the wise and varied discourse of my host himself as he sat in audience grandly on the shade of his garden palms.

How far off all that is now, and how strangely tinged with mystic hues! Said Achmet has long since gone to his account, and his grave, with shining eyes, the Syrian stars look down, but the memory of his benign refuge remains with me as a beautiful dream of a day spent on an azure summer isle after escape from devastating terrors.

The preparations at the castle went on with more bustle than speed, for it appeared to be the determined object of every man to get to his fellow's way and thwart him in his work, so that there was a constant confusion and uproar. Night and day the hubbub went on, waxing ever louder and shriller, till it seemed like pandemonium come again, but at length order began to rise out of chaos, and even my novice mind could see that the preparations were really going on.

Men came hurrying in from outlying districts, horses and camels were got ready, spears and matchlocks were furnished up, ammunition was laid out, water skins were flung, provisions were loaded on snapping, recruited pack camels—a hundred pounds to every beast—and all the while the soldiers bawled, and jested, and blasphemed in a way that might have moved the envy of any Christian army in the world.

On the morning of the fourth day a messenger came to me breathless, saying that Abou Kuran was ready to start. I hurried off, Said Achmet accompanying in some excitement, fearing that lions and intriguers had been at their loathsome work and had succeeded in turning him against me. But I was quickly reassured, for when I entered his presence with palpating heart and hesitating step he beckoned me to him with a gracious smile, bade a cushion be placed for me, and proceeded to inquire in his most amiable tones, and as I thought, with covert glances at Abdallah, who sat close by, about my health and well-being.

"I am ready, my lord," I answered. "It is well, for the shadows grow long and the sun is listening to his bed. Bring the little Fatima," he said, addressing a slave. "She waiteth for her master."

Accordingly a minute later my little mare, fully caparisoned, was led ambly into the parlor ground. Addressing her to the slave made a pretty speech to the effect that she was going forth to greet honor with the fair faced stranger; that she was her reward, in a care that would preserve her from all ill treatment, and that she would have dates to eat and sweet water to drink when the perils of the desert were past.

The intelligent trust whined, as if to say she perfectly understood him. Then the bride rose was formally delivered to me, and she took a step toward me, as if acquiescing in the change of proprietorship. I stroked her gently as a token of good will, rubbing her face and speaking encouraging words in her ear after the Arab fashion. Having thus made an agreement, I fastened my green bag to the saddle, embraced Said Achmet, and then, with a grateful glance at Abdallah, I asked Abou Kuran eagerly, coming close to me:

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"I am ready, my lord," I answered. "It is well, for the shadows grow long and the sun is listening to his bed. Bring the little Fatima," he said, addressing a slave. "She waiteth for her master."

Accordingly a minute later my little mare, fully caparisoned, was led ambly into the parlor ground. Addressing her to the slave made a pretty speech to the effect that she was going forth to greet honor with the fair faced stranger; that she was her reward, in a care that would preserve her from all ill treatment, and that she would have dates to eat and sweet water to drink when the perils of the desert were past.

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That the most successful business men are the strongest believers in Life Insurance? That they are, as attested by the following letter from a well known business man who held a Tontine Policy in the

Equitable Life

POWELL & SNIDER, STAPLE AND FANCY GROCERIES, GRADE AND FLOUR, ANNEVILLE, N. C., Jan. 18, 1894. MR. W. J. RODDEY, ROCK HILL, S. C.

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Respectfully, W. F. SWINEN.

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