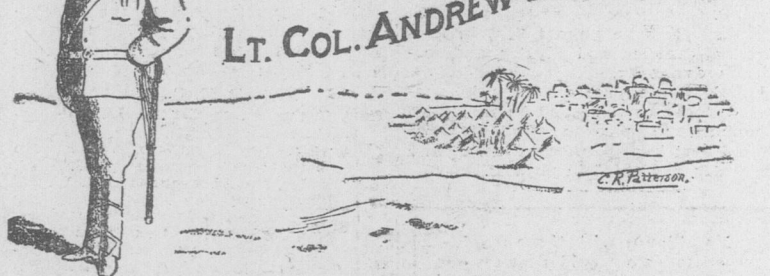




J. D. SWANSON.
Liberal Candidate, Kamloops.

A Persian Roseleaf

by
LT. COL. ANDREW HAGGARD.



CHAPTER XXXVI.—(Continued.)

Kadijah made a grimace of pain, then, releasing herself, she said—

"Yunes is stiff-necked, and I can do nothing with him, or rather, could not do so, nor can I now entirely bend him to my will; his position is too firm with his cousin, the Khalifa Abdullah, whom as I say, I am unable to entirely control. But what has happened in this—you will see that it is serious and indeed concerns you! Wad on Nejumi came to-day to the Emir Yunes, demanding that your father and Babeh Abdullah, your husband the Imam, both of whom he hates, should be put to death."

"Put to death! Great and Almighty Allah! Why?"

"He has, or says he has, in his possession evidence which I already knew, proving that they were both acting in collusion with Sheikh Saleh of the Kababish tribe. Since the death of Saleh, they have been people have confessed to Nejumi that you yourself were, with the Hadji and the Imam, plotting to escape to Egypt. That is all I know, and he has been actually confessed, but Nejumi has added to the story, saying that the plot involved the murder of the Khalifa."

"Oh! how awful! But it is not true, Kadijah! I swear it on the Koran—it is not true!"

"No, I know it is not true. Nor should I personally have objected to your escape to your own country, for I am a foreigner myself. Nevertheless, when Wad on Nejumi said, as I heard, for I was listening, that unless Yunes put them to death at once he would denounce the Emir to the Khalifa, as harboring his would-be murderers, he weakened at once. From fear for his own fate, he said that he would do so, but stipulated that he should choose his own time and way of executing them. Then, as Nejumi was pressing Wad on Nejumi to have them executed at once, I walked into the room, from where I was sitting behind a screen. I said something to Wad on Nejumi, and he left. And then I had a tussle with Yunes for the mastery. I begged for the life of Babeh Abdullah, Mirza Ali Khan and Babeh Abdullah. And oh! Kadijah, what was the result? If ever I was kind to you in the past, be merciful to me now—tell me that you were successful. Oh! my dear husband! my beloved father—oh! what, shall I do? I hope, at all events, if they are to die that they will execute me also!"

"Come, dry your tears, Lady Fatima," said Kadijah soothingly. "I was, after all, partly successful—that is, after I had showed my teeth, and also showed where Nejumi had lied." "Partly successful?" dear Kadijah, only partly successful!"

"Well, listen and be brave! Yunes said, that since he had stipulated to choose his own time for their execution, he would tell Nejumi that, as both the culprits were very useful to him, he would defer it until after the Egyptian expedition. And, of course, he would defer it altogether—but on one condition only, and that is for you to decide about—you have yet to agree to it, Lady Fatima!"

"For me to decide," replied Fatima joyfully. "Why, dear Kadijah, of course I will agree to anything. What is it?"

"Well, that is right, and simplifies matters. The condition is that you consent to become an inmate of the Emir's harem. He long has heard of your beauty, and has been longing and waiting for an opportunity to possess you—especially as you are white, and not even the Khalifa himself can boast of a white woman in his whole seraglio."

"Oh! spare me any more, Kadijah! spare me any more—for the love of Allah! You, who say you loved Mahomed Ahmed alone, must know what love is! How can I love Babeh Abdullah with all my heart, commit this

terrible sin? Spare me, I pray!"

Had she for one moment doubted Kadijah, she would have determined to disclose everything to the Hadji and Babeh Abdullah, upon their return from the review then proceeding. But she did not doubt Kadijah; she felt that the Galla woman had spoken the truth in every respect, both as regarding her own wonderful career and concerning the intentions of the Emir Yunes. For all the friendship that he had shown to her father, his fairness was well known. What he said that he would do, that he did. Moreover, he never allowed himself to be bullied in the gratification of his desires. Girl after girl, and even young married women, had been dragged off to his harem—free Donsese women and not slaves. They had been obedient and when he was tired of them, to return dishonored to their homes after a day, a week, or a month.

And now, that, to be her own fate—her awful fate! Fatima shuddered so that it seemed as if she had the ague, when she thought of the dilemma that she, a girl, a young woman, was called upon to understand in the arms of this merciless tyrant. Then in indignation she rose to her

feet, clenching her fists and teeth, and stamping with rage—"I will kill him first—yes, kill him with his own dagger! Never, never will I suffer dishonor!"

But inexorable reason returning, whispered—"Yes, but if I kill the Emir Yunes, that will not preserve my father's life. Wad on Nejumi will be left to wreak his vengeance—and in that case, I shall be a widow, and but later hanged some of his enemies head downwards—after mutilating me. No, I can not, dare not, kill Wad on Nejumi. What course, then, is there left to me? To yield, after first informing my dear ones of my reason for doing so, would only mean their death, for I know them. Rather would they slay themselves with me than live to witness my dishonor. And why should they die now that they are so near escape, about, perhaps, to behold the blessed sun in liberty once more?"

For Kadijah as good as said that they will go on the expedition, and if they do, are not the chances greatly in favor of one or both obtaining freedom? If I yield, I will take a condition with Kadijah, that they shall go, and I will put it, that to retain them now would mean their disgrace, and, should I consent to come willingly to Yunes, as his wife—oh, horror!—I cannot allow my nearest relations and the Emir's friends to fall under the shadow of dishonor. Yes, that would do—that would do it! I could be brave and make up my mind to this awful sacrifice, which is to include my voluntarily demanding to be separated for ever from my Reginald. Oh, my own free will, and for ever! For ever!" repeated the poor unhappy child to herself. And then nature, long overstrained, came to her relief, and she broke down in a flood of violent weeping.

At last her tears ceased, and she felt calmer. Fatima arose with composed features, washed away carefully all traces of tears, and attired herself in her nearest and most becoming garments. Then, having put on her harem dress, she called forth a eunuch of the black Bazarings who now was always stationed as an orderly outside of her father's house next door, she made him take up a basket to the market and bazaars.

In an hour's time she had returned, when, with no traces of her recent emotion on her face, she called to her father's youthful wife, Ayesha, to come and assist her in preparing the evening meal, which was to be upon an unusual scale and accompanied by various kinds of spirituous liquors. It was not long before the men, returning dusty and tired from the wearying evolutions, Fatima greeted them with a face which was pale but smiling.

Kadijah had been here to-day to pay me a visit, and the sight of her face has given me the horrors. So I have determined that we will have a merry evening and enjoy ourselves together. Ayesha and I have already prepared all kinds of nice things to eat and drink, so make haste to wash off the dust, and come and be happy."

Never a trace of care did the courageous girl show during or after the feast. When Ayesha had been sent home at an early hour, Fatima listened with apparent delight to the last details of the plot for their approaching escape, with affectionately bringing her father an extra cup of wine to drink to his fortunate accomplishment.

When the Hadji in turn had departed, the beautiful Persian lavished her attentions and caresses upon her husband with unusual fervor. So much so, that Lord Rothiemay, jovial and contented, sank happily to sleep by his side, and assured manner which somewhat discomposed her visitor, especially when she added pointedly—"Would it not be better, Kadijah, if you did not beat about the bush, but came to the point at once? I am no child, and this is no ordinary visit of politeness that you are paying me. I am ready to listen to what you have to say. Ask that which you wish to ask; I am prepared with my answer." And she smiled a bitter smile, which was significant and told nothing to be closely observed Kadijah.

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"Yes, I know, but I imagine that Wad on Nejumi's movements are not what you came here to talk to me about," answered Fatima with a cool and assured manner which somewhat discomposed her visitor, especially when she added pointedly—"Would it not be better, Kadijah, if you did not beat about the bush, but came to the point at once? I am no child, and this is no ordinary visit of politeness that you are paying me. I am ready to listen to what you have to say. Ask that which you wish to ask; I am prepared with my answer."

And she smiled a bitter smile, which was significant and told nothing to be closely observed Kadijah.

"Nevertheless, Nejumi's departure seems concern that which I have come to see you about, Lady Fatima, for he has departed as the deadly enemy of the Emir Yunes, whom he is prepared to slay at any vulnerable point. In their final interview last night, he again accused Wad on Nejumi of harboring traitors who had conspired against our Lord the Khalifa. Although the Emir boldly told Nejumi that he lied, in which assertion he had me to support him, he was not less, need of considerable courage, in order to maintain those supposed traitors in their important posts. Instead of, by executing them, relieving his mind of all anxiety as to Nejumi's accusations in the future. Fortunately, his blind hatred of Wad on Nejumi inclines Yunes to dare him, and show that he deserves him. But this alone will not be sufficient to induce him to show mercy by sparing two heads dear to you. Indeed, he is even weakening upon the point, saying that he is not sure whether even the possession of your charms will sufficiently balance for him the hatred of the Emir. He is, however, still thinking much about you."

"Then that simplifies matters for me!" exclaimed Fatima, as a ray of light shone upon her brow. "We can all three die together, and it would be the happiest way for all."

"No, Lady Fatima, it by no means follows that you would die. Even if your father and husband were executed, your life might still appear precious enough to the Emir Yunes to be preserved."

"For how long do you think he could preserve it?" laughed the Persian girl scornfully. "When he had slain by beloved husband, killed my dear father, do you think that I would live to please this bloody Emir? I have a hundred ways of killing myself, and should do so before ever I came into his power. Can you not see that the only object for retaining life would have been taken from me? I can see before even you said it, and told the Emir that you would kill yourself. And then he asked me a great many questions about your personal appearance; after which he said that he was dying with impatience to see you, vowing that never could he allow one so beautiful to destroy herself, but that he must see your face and would first visit you alone in order to know whether indeed he can spare your husband and your father. If he would, at all events, be a great pleasure to him to behold you."

"I am honored, but how does he know that I will consent? I have not said so, and none knows better than Yunes, the so-called Mismar ed Din, that he is 'haram' for him to behold the face of another man's wife. So what if I refuse him that pleasure, and, as I have a mind to do, only give him the opportunity he desires after death has set his seal upon my features?"

"Then, Lady Fatima, those whom you love will die also."

"Yes, Kadijah, they will die, and will prefer death, for they shall know all before they travel forth upon the bridge formed of one single hair that leads to Paradise. For think not that I will spare Wad on Nejumi in what he calls his pride. No, they who have been his friends shall assuredly know the treachery of this base man, and, in dying, carry with them the story of our wrongs—to our Lord Mahomed—upon whom be peace."

"But what, Lady Fatima