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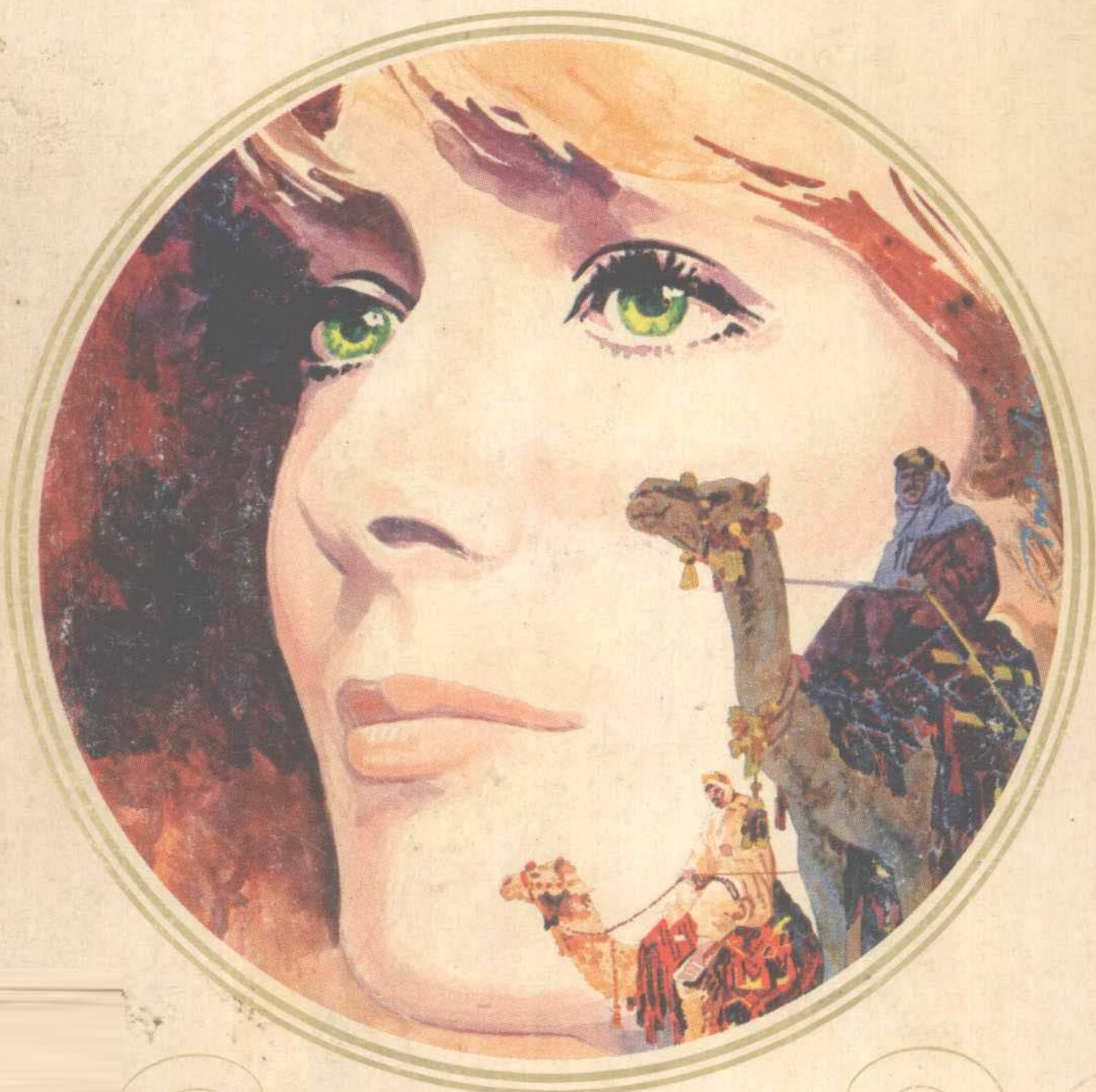


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"You must adhere to the local customs!"

Nicola frowned at Jason's warning. "There are a number of Arabs working on the site," he went on. "Their encampment is beyond our camp. But their women are protected more than ours. Your being here might cause a furor when the Sheikh finds out."

Nicola smiled. "The Sheikh!" she echoed softly. "How romantic."

Jason stared at her angrily. "For heaven's sake, don't get any ideas in that direction. They are men like other men, and they consider European **womenself-seeking** and **virtueless**."

Nicola's **eyes widened.** " **ican take care of myseif, Mr wilde. Not to worry.** "

"I don't," **muttered jason.** " **my only concern is the pieline, not your person.** "

Nicola had never met such an / infuriating man!

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CHAPTER ONE

It was hot, uncomfortably so, and inside the cloistered dwelling with its thick hanging tapestries and richly carved ceilings there was little air. A huge lamp made of bronze and burnished to a rich tone burned what little oxygen penetrated the thick walls, and not even the glowing arches, picked out with lapis lazuli, or the gold and blue mosaic of the floor could compensate for the cloying atmosphere of heavy perfume, strong wines, and the inherent scent of perspiring bodies.

The Sheikh Abi Ben Abdul Mohammed, lounging on cushions of satin and silk idly helping himself to handfuls of grapes, was every inch the eastern potentate and seemed totally oblivious of the heat or the unhealthy atmosphere. But Jason Wilde was aware of it, just as he was aware that the effort to control his temper was causing rivulets of sweat to slide down his spine, plastering his shirt to his back.

'Look, Mohammed,' he said tautly, 'we've got to get this settled. You know that and I know that, so we might as well come to an agreement.'

Sheikh Mohammed studied his companion rather appraisingly, and then said coolly: 'You must make the agreement, Wilde. After all, it is in your interests much more than mine!' His tones were smooth and slightly derogatory, and Jason felt an immense urge to lift him out of his bed of cushions and thrust his fist down his

throat. It would be so easy and so enjoyable. The man was like a snake, deliberately causing unrest, arousing the men so that they didn't know where to turn, uncertain of their loyalties.

But he couldn't touch him. They were not individuals, and no amount of wishful thinking would alter the fact that he was the representative of Inter-Anglia Oil, just as the Sheikh was the ruler, and therefore the spokesman, of this small state of Abrahm.

So instead of reacting violently he said, equally coolly: 'Nevertheless, Mohammed, it would be ludicrous of me to attempt to make any kind of agreement when I don't know exactly what it is you want.'

The Sheikh leaned forward and with slow and purposely languid movements helped himself to a cigarette, and after one of the attendants who stood rigidly to attention behind him had dashed forward to light his cigarette he drew on it deeply before speaking again.

Jason got to his feet. Sitting on the floor was not conducive to comfort when one's legs were long, and besides, the inactivity was infuriating. The Sheikh looked up at him rather derisively, and said:

'But, Wilde, you know what I want. I want my men to have a - square deal, just as your own men do. I do not feel that at present this is so. Besides, you are visitors here, never forget that, and as such are only welcome so long as your presence is not annoying to me.'

Jason thrust his hands into the pockets of the cotton pants he was wearing, and controlled his features. 'Without the resources of my company, Abrahm would not be able to mount such an operation,' he replied,

quite expressionlessly.

The Sheikh shrugged. 'No. I agree, this is so. Nevertheless, without Abrahm's natural resources there would be no operation.'

Jason heaved a sigh. As always in matters of this kind, the Sheikh was overwhelmingly obtuse, constantly creating *impasse* in their discussions by remarks of this kind. There was no answer to him, and Jason knew that no matter how impatient he might become he would just have to wait until the Sheikh was prepared to state his demands without preamble.

But it was difficult to remain impassive when to add to the overheated atmosphere of the Sheikh's magnificent habitation there was Jason's own impatience at this needless delay. They met enough obstacles in the course of their work without meeting the unnecessary obstinacy of the Sheikh.

But now the Sheikh seemed to decide a change of subject was warranted, and with annoying urbanity, he said: 'Tell me, Wilde, what does a man like you derive from working here? You do not strike me as the kind of man who eschews the fleshpots for more, shall we say, aesthetic pursuits.'

Jason controlled his anger. It was typical that Mohammed should endeavour to direct the course of the conversation into these channels. He had an unhealthy interest in dissecting the men who came within his sphere, examining their lives and their motivations minutely.

'Abrahm is not the first Middle Eastern country I have worked in,' Jason said now. 'As a member of an

oil company, one has to be prepared to work in any part of the world.'

'Yes?' The Sheikh sounded thoughtful. 'I suppose this is so. Nevertheless, I understand from reliable sources that you were offered a less active part in the proceedings, which you turned down.'

Jason wondered where the man obtained his information. His refusal to accept the board's generous offer of a seat at their table had shocked his contemporaries. But just at present it suited him to be out of England, and Sir Harold had made it plain the offer was still open.

'Your sources of information are very astute,' he remarked now, walking lazily across the room, as though uncaring of the swift passing of time. He picked up a small bronze statue and examined it in detail, while the Sheikh watched his movements and pondered the mind of this annoying foreigner who seemed totally indifferent to his own status here.

'So,' said the Sheikh at last, summoning one of his servants who produced a heavy ashtray for him to stub out his cigarette. 'We return to the subject in hand. You think perhaps I am being unkind when I say my people are being exploited?'

Jason swung round, a ready retort dying on his lips as he realized he had almost fallen again into the Sheikh's trap.

'Go on,' he said quietly.

'Very well. Would a few more pence bankrupt your company? I think not. The English and American oil barons are growing rich on the poverty of their invest-

ment areas. My people do not have television sets, or cars or even proper homes. The standard of living here in Abrahm is very low.'

Jason could have said that it would have been useless people having television sets in a country where there was no television station. He could have said that there was no money to build roads to drive cars along until the oil began pumping along the pipeline which was barely a third completed. He could have said that the oil company was providing work for those people to enable them to have a better standard of living.

But he said none of this. Instead, he allowed Mohammed to state his case, knowing full well that to argue would cause a stream of abuse, and possibly more trouble for the company in the long run. Eventually Mohammed grew tired of the Englishman's silence, and said: 'Well, Wilde! What is your answer? Are you prepared to listen to reason?'

'I'm prepared to listen to anything that is reasonable,' replied Jason dryly. 'All right, Mohammed, I've been in touch with London, and they have given me permission to offer you a two and a half pence increase.'

Sheikh Mohammed's lip curled. 'Five,' he said sharply.

Jason shrugged. 'Three - and that's my final offer.'

Sheikh Mohammed rubbed the side of his nose with a hand that literally glittered with the rings of emerald and ruby that sparkled there. Then he summoned one of his underlings and signified that he wished someone

brought to the conference chamber. Jason moved restlessly, beginning to feel impatient again. Good God, how long was this going to go on? He glanced at the gold watch on his wrist, and gave an exclamation. It was already late afternoon and by the time he got back to the site the evening meal would be in the course of being prepared. That meant yet another day had been wasted.

Even so, it was pleasant to recall the comparative luxury of his air-conditioned bungalow, and the thought of a decent drink and some food was quite appealing. After all, it wasn't his fault they were being held up, although he seemed to bear the brunt of the complaints from the boardroom in London.

Sheikh Mohammed had summoned Krashki, his chief minister, and Jason was forced to kick his heels for almost another half hour while they talked in undertones, their gesticulations eloquent of their conversation. Eventually, when Jason was on the verge of walking out of the conference altogether, Mohammed turned to him, his expression brooding but subdued.

'Very well,' he said, getting to his feet, his flowing robes giving him a dignity that European clothes would not, 'we accept your terms. But it is to be understood that when Sir Harold Mannering comes out from England I shall discuss this further with him.'

He raised his hand as Jason would have replied, and swept out of the room like some emperor of old. His servants followed him closely and for a moment Jason remained where he was looking towards the doorway through which Sheikh Abi Ben Abdul Mohammed

had passed. Then with an infuriated shake of his head he stood on the butt of his cigarette and strode after him, turning away from the inner quarters of the palace with its Moorish-styled architecture towards the searing blaze of the sunlit courtyard.

The brilliance of the sun was dazzling, and he slid his dark glasses on to his nose before walking swiftly across to where his Land-Rover was parked. He slid behind the wheel and heaved a sigh. There was a sense of relaxation in actual action after the enforced inactivity of the last couple of hours. Breathing deeply, he realized that anything was preferable to the cloying heat of the Sheikh's apartments.

Turning on the engine, he drove out of the courtyard, ignoring the stares of the guards on the gate, and quickly rolled up his windows as the vehicle encountered the track outside which was little more than an extension of that desert that stretched between here and the drilling site. He thought Abrahm was one of the most barren places on the earth. Situated between Tunisia and Libya, with a port on the Mediterranean, it had little to commend it.

He had several miles to cover between Abyrra and Castanya where the oil company had set up their camp of bungalows, and as he drove he wondered why he had not chosen a more amenable spot in which to work. In his position he could have chosen any one of a dozen locations, but he liked the crew at Castanya, and if there was little more in Abrahm than sand, sand and more sand he wasn't particularly bothered. He was not a man who desired a hectic social life and if the site got