

The Big Fisherman

BY *Lloyd C. Douglas*

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The Big Fisherman

Books by Lloyd C. Douglas

Magnificent Obsession
Forgive Us Our Trespasses
Precious Jeopardy
Green Light
White Banners
Disputed Passage
Home for Christmas
Doctor Hudson's Secret Journal
Invitation to Live
The Robe
The Big Fisherman

**In appreciation of his constant kindness and encouragement in all weathers,
this book is affectionately dedicated to
JOHN WELDON (“WEARY”) WILSON**

I

IT WAS a calm, early summer noon in the southern mountains of Arabia. Sheltering the King's well-guarded domain, a mile above and a dozen miles east of the Dead Sea, motionless masses of neighborly white clouds hung suspended from a remote blue ceiling.

There had been an unusually heavy snowfall in the winter, not only upon the King's land but throughout the country. It was going to be a prosperous season for everybody. Intertribal jangling and discontent would be reduced to a minimum. Arabia anticipated a relatively peaceful summer.

Viewed from the main entrance to the King's encampment the undulating plateau was a rich pasture on which a thousand newly shorn sheep, indifferent to the rough nuzzling of their hungry lambs, grazed greedily as if some instinct warned that there might be a famine next season.

Nor was a famine improbable, for the distribution of snow was unpredictable. Almost never were two consecutive winters partial to the same area. This accounted for the nomadic habits of the people. They held no permanent property, built no permanent homes. They lived in tents; and, with their flocks, followed the snow and the grass. All but the King, whose encampment was a fixed establishment. When the King had a dry season the tribes replenished his purse.

And few ever complained about this assessment, for the crown in Arabia was more than an ornament worn on state occasions. The King was indispensable in this country. He earned his wages and his honors. It required a strong and

courageous man to deal equitably with these restless, reckless, competitive tribesmen who were distinguished throughout the East for the brevity of their tempers and the dexterity of their knives.

It had been a long time since Arabia had been governed by a ruler with the moral and physical strength of King Aretas. Everyone respected his relentless administration of justice to the rich and poor alike. There was no favoritism. They all admired his firmness, feared his frown, and — for the most part — obeyed his decrees.

Of course it would have been foolish to say that the Arabian people were sentimentally devoted to Aretas. In his difficult position he could not bid for their affection: he wanted only their obedience; prompt obedience and plenty of it. But there were a few who did sincerely love the taciturn, sober-faced, cold-blooded Aretas.

First of all there was his motherless daughter Arnon, upon whom he bestowed a tenderness that would have amazed the predatory sheiks who had often been stilled to sullen silence under his hot chastisements. And there was battle-scarred old Kedar, who had taught him to ride when he was a mere lad of ten, who had watched him draw a man's bow to full torsion when he was in his early teens, and had followed him worshipfully into all his hazardous adventures as Prince and King. And there were his twelve Counsellors who, in varying degrees, shared his confidence. Especially there was Ilderan, Chief of the King's Council. And young Zendi, Ilderan's eldest son who, everyone surmised, would presently marry the Princess Arnon with whom he was reputed to be much in love. Surely the wedding would be soon, they thought, for the Princess had recently celebrated her sixteenth birthday.

The tribesmen, who rarely agreed about anything, were unanimous in their approval of this alliance. Not only was Arnon popular for her beauty, and Zendi for his almost foolhardy courage, but — taking a long view of their marriage — there might come a day when Zendi would be their ruler; for if an Arabian King was without male issue the throne passed to the house of the Chief Counsellor. Ilderan was nearing sixty. If anything were to happen to Aretas,

which was not inconceivable, considering how dangerously he lived, the gallant young Zendi might succeed him. This would be generally acceptable. All Arabia looked forward to the royal wedding. It would be a great occasion. It would last for a week. There would be games, races and feasting.

* * * * *

In the shade of a clump of willows sheltering a walled spring, not far from the royal encampment, Arnon was awaiting the return of her father who had ridden early to the camp of Ilderan, seven miles east. She had joined him at breakfast, shortly after dawn, finding him moody and silent.

"Is anything amiss, my father?" Arnon had ventured to ask.

The King's reply was long delayed. Slowly lifting his eyes he had stared preoccupiedly at the tent-wall beyond her.

"Nothing you would know about," he had said, as from a distance.

Arnon had not pressed her query. Her father had made short work of his breakfast. At the tent-door he had turned to say, "I am consulting with Ilderan. I shall return by midday."

For a long time Arnon had sat alone, wondering what had happened. Perhaps it had something to do with the message her father had received yesterday. Of course there was nothing strange about the arrival of a courier with a message. It happened nearly every day. But this courier — she had seen him riding away — was apparently from afar. He was attended by a half-dozen servants with a well-laden pack-train. The donkeys had seemed cruelly overburdened. After the courier had departed, the King had retired to his own quarters. It was quite obvious that he did not want to be disturbed.

Arnon strolled restlessly about under the willows, her thoughts busily at work on the riddle. Presently her wide-set black eyes lighted as she saw her father coming up the well-worn trail, at full gallop, on his white stallion. She knew what to do. Emerging from the shade, Arnon stood beside the bridle-path with her shapely arms held high. Aretas leaned far to the left — the stallion suddenly slackening

speed — and sweeping his arm about the girl's slim waist — swung her lightly over the horse's shoulder and into the saddle. Arnon laughed softly and pressed her cheek against her father's short, graying beard. No words were exchanged for a little while.

"You have something very serious on your mind, haven't you, Father?" murmured Arnon.

He drew the stallion down to an easy canter.

"I have had a strange message from Herod, the King of the Jews," said Aretas, slowing the impatient horse to a walk. "Herod wants me to meet him for a private conference, a fortnight hence, in the city of Petra."

"How fine for you, Father!" exclaimed Arnon. "You've always said you were going to visit that beautiful city!" Quickly noting her father's lack of enthusiasm, she inquired, "But — you're going; aren't you?"

"Yes — it sounds important."

"Is it not a long journey from Jerusalem to Petra? I wonder why the Jewish King wishes the conference held there?"

"Perhaps it is something that concerns Petra, too."

There was an interval of silence before Arnon spoke again.

"Is this not the first message you have ever had from the King of the Jews?"

"It is indeed! The first that has crossed our border for — " Aretas paused to reflect.

"A hundred years?" guessed Arnon.

"A thousand years!" said Aretas. "Many, many more than a thousand!"

"What do you make of it, Father? What does the Jewish King want of us?"

Aretas shook his head. They were arriving at the encampment now. Guards stepped out to meet them. Arnon was released from her father's arms and slipped lightly to the ground. Dismounting, the King beckoned to old Kedar, as his horse was led away.

"You will fit out an expedition to Petra. We are leaving on the third day of the week. The Counsellors will accompany us, and a guard of twenty riders. We may be tented at Petra for one day — or ten: it is not yet determined. The

Counsellors will have had their instructions from Ilderan. You will attend to all the other arrangements."

"The festival tents?" inquired Kedar, implying that his sharp old eyes had observed the royal insignia on the accouterments of yesterday's courier.

"No," replied Aretas. "We will take only the equipment we commonly use when we visit the tribesmen."

Kedar bowed his gray head, his seamed face showing disappointment. He wanted to say that if the event was of high importance the King should make a better show of his royalty. He was turning away when Aretas spoke again, quite brusquely:

"And — Kedar — though you may have conjectured about the nature of our errand in Petra, if anyone should ask you what is afoot you will reply that you do not know. And that will be the truth."

* * * * *

Retiring to his private quarters, the King resumed his contemplation of the conundrum. What manner of emergency could have induced the proud and pompous Herod to ignore the age-old enmity between their nations?

For all of fifteen centuries, notwithstanding they were neighbors according to the map — their frontiers facing across an erratic little river that a boy could wade in mid-summer — the Arabs and the Jews had been implacable foes. This ancient feud had not been rooted in racial incompatibility, though there was plenty of that too. The antipathy had derived from a definite incident that had occurred long ago; so very long ago that nobody knew how much of the story might be mythical. But — let the tale be half fact, half fiction — it accounted for the bitter hatred of these people.

According to the saga chanted about the Arabian campfires by wandering minstrels, a wise and wealthy migrant had ventured from Chaldea to the Plains of Mamre. It was a long story, but the minstrels never omitted their elaborate tribute to Chaldea as a land of seers and sages, oracles and astrologers. In Chaldea men dreamed prophetically and were entrusted with celestial secrets. Abraham, distinguished above them all for his learning, had received divine instructions to make a far journey southward and found a new nation.

But the prophecy was in danger of lacking fulfillment, for the years were passing and the founder of the new nation was childless. Sarah, his aging wife, was barren.

To solve this problem, the perplexed idealist had won the consent of his wife to permit his alliance with a beautiful young native in their employ. A son was born to them. They named him Ishmael. He was a handsome, headstrong, adventurous child, passionately devoted to his desert-born mother whom he closely resembled. Sarah, naturally enough, did not like him. Abraham admired the boy's vitality and courage, but Ishmael was quite a handful for the old man whose hours of pious meditation were becoming increasingly brief and confused.

To further complicate this domestic dilemma, Sarah surprised everybody by producing a son of her own. They named him Isaac. He was not a rugged child. His eyesight was defective; so defective that in his later life he had gone stone-blind. He was no match for his athletic half-brother. For a little while they all tried to be polite and conciliatory, but the inevitable conflict presently flared to alarming dimensions. Sarah no longer made any effort to control her bitter hatred for young Hagar and her tempestuous son. "These imposters," she shouted, shrilly, "must go! Today! Now!"

With appropriate misgivings, Abraham conducted Hagar and their indignant boy to the rim of his claim, gave the bewildered girl a loaf of bread and a jug of water, and pointed south toward the mountains. Not a word was spoken. Abraham turned and plodded slowly toward his little colony of tents. Hagar did not look back.

When the vagabond minstrels sang the old story which, as the ages passed, lost nothing of the magical in the telling, they declared that Ishmael grew to full manhood that day. This may have been a slight exaggeration, though enough had happened to hasten his maturity. He swore to his mother that from now and henceforth forever he and his seed would be at enmity with everyone else descended from his father's house.

Seeking refuge among the savage tribes of itinerant shepherds and camel-breeders in the southern mountains, Ishmael quickly became their acknowledged leader, fighting his way

to power with an audacity and ruthlessness that commanded their admiration and obedience. It was no small matter to bind so many discordant elements into something resembling a nation, but before Hagar's forceful and fearless son was thirty the hard-riding, fierce-fighting savages of the desert were boasting that they were "Ishmaelites." The name was respected and feared, by rulers and robbers alike, all the way from the Jordan to the Mediterranean, all the way from Damascus to Gaza. As time went on, the wild new nation became known as "Arabia," meaning "Men in Ambush."

The descendants of Isaac, and his more resourceful but less scrupulous son Jacob, after many misfortunes and migrations — including a long, humiliating period of enslavement in Egypt — fought their way back into their "Promised Land," their western boundary on the world's busiest sea, their eastern rim within a sling-shot of the domain controlled by the Men in Ambush. If some stupid stranger inquired, "Why do the Jews and Arabs hate each other so bitterly?" he was told, "It is written in the sacred prophecies of both nations that they are destined to be at enmity forever."

It was commonly understood, therefore, that when the posterity of Father Abraham's two families met, they neither smiled nor saluted. They never broke bread together; never gave aid, no matter how serious the emergency. They conducted their necessary business briefly and gruffly; and, having brought it to a conclusion, turned away, and spat noisily on the ground. It was not often that they fought, but it was said that on such rare occasions the catamounts crept out into the open to learn new techniques of tooth and claw. Often the contentious children of Abraham quarreled; screaming, gesticulating and reviling; for both of their languages, stemming from a common origin, were rich with invective and ingenious in the contrivance of exquisite insults. Neither nation had ever sent an ambassador to the other's court. Officially, neither had ever acknowledged the other's existence.

Not meaning, however, that there was no commerce at all between these mutually contemptuous men. Racial antipathies had not deterred the ardent traders of both nations from venturing across the Jordan to engage in an under-

cover barter that would have amazed and enraged the ordinary rank-and-file of their respective kinsmen. Jewish merchants, far travelers by nature, quietly forded the river with pack-trains bearing imports from many distant lands, and did not lack for wealthy Arabian customers when they appeared with foreign fabrics of silk and velvet, fine linens, gold ornaments, precious stones, medicinal herbs, spices and other exotics. It was customary, on these occasions, for the negotiations to be conducted with all the sullen impoliteness that the everlasting feud demanded; but the expensive goods did change ownership, and the pack-asses skipped home, under a young moon, freed of their burdens. Had either the Jews or the Arabians been gifted with a sense of humor, all this might have seemed funny.

During the last score of years something resembling a commercial truce had permitted a group of Arabian camel-breeders to bring their incomparably beautiful and expensive animals to the celebrated stock-show and auction held annually on the disused drill-ground near Jerusalem during the Jewish Feast of Pentecost.

Indeed, it was the lure of the Arabians' superb camels that had lately made this Pentecostal stock-show notable throughout the East. Rich Romans, ever competing with one another in the lavishness of their gaudy turnouts in the proud processions of the Imperial City, would send their stewards to purchase the finest of these majestic creatures, regardless of cost. The Jews, well aware that this uniquely attractive camel-market was responsible for bringing desirable patrons from afar, tried to forget — for this one day of the year — that the coveted camels were Arabian. And the Arabs who owned the camels pretended they didn't realize — on this one day of the year — that they were doing business in the land of Israel. They growled and scowled and spat — but they brought the camels.

This camel business, profitable alike to the merchants of Jerusalem and the stock-breeders of Arabia, had come to a dramatic end, a year ago. A most unfortunate incident had occurred. The auction, last summer, had attracted an unusually large assembly of well-to-do foreigners. They had come from everywhere; Romans, Egyptians, Damascenes,

Cyprians, Greeks from Petra and Askelon. The bidding was reckless and the Arabian camels were bringing unprecedented figures. By custom, the least valuable of the herd were offered first; and so it was that as the afternoon wore on, the excitement increased. In many of the later contests, the spellbound crowd — whose majority had long since been priced out of the market — held its breath in amazement.

The finest beast of the lot was not offered until all the others had been bought. This tall, tawny, pompous three-year-old was clearly the pick of the herd. When, at last, the haughty creature was led forward, two well-groomed men, who had taken no part in the previous sales, shouldered their way through the pack from different directions, and showed a serious interest. Not many men in the crowd recognized either of them; but Demos, the suave Greek auctioneer, knew who they were, and was suddenly weak in the knees. The clean-shaven, middle-aged Roman, with the cloth-of-gold bandeau on his brow and the black eagle on the breast of his tunic, was a purchasing agent for Legate Varus, Commander-in-Chief of the Empire's Armies in the West. The lean, austere, gray-bearded Jew, in the long, black robe, was Joel, the representative of the immensely wealthy Simeon Maccabee, whose political power in Jewry was responsible for Herod's strong position on the Judean throne; for the Maccabee family paid the bulk of the tribute which Rome exacted of the province — and Herod was their man.

Commander Varus, who was distinguished chiefly for his high opinion of himself, had become accustomed to getting what he wanted. Simeon the Maccabee entertained a similar feeling about his own desires. It would be a very awkward situation if the representatives of these eminent men staged a battle in which one of them would be defeated. Wars had risen out of incidents more trivial.

Demos hastily consulted the Arabians, explaining the gravity of the impasse and suggested that they withdraw the camel from the sale. Disappointed but comprehending, they consented. The prize camel was led away, and Demos announced that the Arabs had decided, at the last moment, to keep the handsome king of their herd for the continued im-

provement of their own stock. This left the sons of Ishmael in a very bad spot indeed. The crowd jeered. There was some stone-throwing. The little party of unpopular Arabians were in no position to defend themselves, and they beat an inglorious retreat.

Upon their return home, the whole matter was laid before King Aretas who decided, promptly and firmly, that the Arabs were not again to participate in any of the Jews' affairs. That had been a year ago. This summer the camel-breeders had let it be known that they were marketing their valuable herd in Damascus. The announcement carried fast and far; and, as a result, the stock-show at Jerusalem, on the Day of Pentecost, was poorly attended by the people previously counted on to insure its prestige.

As King Aretas sat in counsel with wise old Ilderan, advising him of Herod's incredible request for a parley at Petra, the latter had said, after a considerable silence between them, "Perhaps he wishes to have our camels brought again to his Pentecostal fair."

Aretas shook his head slowly.

"No, my good Ilderan. It's something more important than camels."

* * * * *

There was no city anywhere quite like Petra. Nobody knew its origin or its age; a thousand years, perhaps. It was known to have sheltered at least four successive civilizations, and had borne as many names. For the past three centuries it had belonged to a wealthy colony of fugitive Greeks who had expensively bestowed upon it an incomparable beauty. It was Athens, minus the slums and the smells.

Petra was more than a city; for it embraced not only an exquisitely contrived municipality, distinguished for the architecture of its baths, theaters, forums, temples, and stately residences, but a broad, enveloping valley whose green meadows and fertile fields were nourished by innumerable gushing springs.

Nature had also made provision for the defense of this self-contained little city-state by encircling it with a ring of precipitous stone mountains, converting it into a natural

fortress. Petra could be entered only through two gateways; on the west, where a deep-worn camel-trail began its ambling toward distant Gaza and the coast-road north to Damascus, and on the south, leading to the Red Sea. These approaches were made through narrow, high-walled defiles which a handful of guards could — and often did — defend against bands of reckless marauders. It had been a long time since the city had had to repulse a serious invasion; never, indeed, since its occupation by the Greeks.

Naturally, it had been, through the ages, a much coveted stronghold, populated and re-populated with rich traders, of various tints and tongues, whose dynasties successively fattened and fell, each of them leaving monuments and tombs which their victors wrecked to make room for the more extravagant memorials of their own.

According to what passed for history in Arabia, which had never gone to much bother about keeping records, the most recent invasion of this territory had been made by their own tribesmen, some five hundred years ago, who had thought it their turn to enter and sack the rich old city, then in the hands of a decadent generation of Nabataeans. At small cost to themselves, the Arabs had driven out all the inhabitants who were left from a ruthless slaughter, had carried off everything of any value, and then had wondered what to do with their new acquisition; for they were nomads and had no use for cities.

After an interval of a couple of centuries, during which only the bats and hyenas were in residence, one Andrakos, fleeing for refuge from a Roman invasion with a large company of well-to-do Athenians, offered King Retar of Arabia a great price for the deserted city. Much gratified to have, as neighbors, a new kind of people, who had seen much too much of warfare and might be expected to behave themselves, Retar promised the Greeks that they would never be molested by the Arabians, and published a decree warning his own people that Petra was not to be violated. This injunction they had scrupulously obeyed, not only because King Retar was held in high regard but because the penalty for annoying Petra was a public stoning. Arabia had kept the peace-pact; and, with this comforting guarantee of

security, Petra had built the most beautiful city in the world.

As for the current relations of Petra and Arabia it could hardly be said that they had any at all. In the opinion of the Arabs, the Greeks were a queer lot of people who spent their time carving figures out of stone, painting pictures, and reading old scrolls written long ago by men as idle as themselves. Such preoccupations, however unprofitable, were harmless enough, and if the citizens of Petra wanted to fritter away their lives in this manner, it was agreeable with realistic and illiterate Arabia. All that Petra knew about the Arabs was that they raised and rode the most beautiful and high-spirited horses to be found anywhere on earth, that their magnificent camels — too expensive for draught duty — were bred for showy parades in which they marched accoutered with silver ornaments, that the long-fibered wool of the high mountains was eagerly sought by the most famous weavers of Caesarea, Corinth, and Rome, and that their interest in anything artistic was completely non-existent. Aside from the fact that the bodily temperature of the Greeks and Arabs was maintained at approximately the same level they had nothing in common and regarded each other with a condescension not unmixed with pity.

Upon the accession of Aretas to the Arabian throne (a venerable cedar chest covered with the spliced white pelts of two long-haired goats), a richly caparisoned deputation from Petra had come to pay neighborly respects. For all parties concerned it was a pleasant visit. The pundits from Petra were shown every available hospitality. Their gift to the young King was a richly illuminated scroll containing Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War; and, to show his appreciation, Aretas sent the aged Governor of Petra home on a tall, sleek, snobbish camel named Retar, in honor of the Arabian King who had had such amicable dealings with the Greeks in an earlier day. When, some weeks after the coronation, it was amusingly reported to Aretas that Retar had proved unmanageable, he replied, "That makes us even."

Chief Counsellor Ilderan, who had something of an instinct for statesmanship and was canny enough to take a long view of international relations, had sometimes urged Aretas to pay a visit to Petra.