

The Free Press Short Story

The Wisdom of Sidi Yusef

By HAL CORRELL

IN THAT part of the desert which travellers well know is most dangerous, there Sidi Osman had his city; and there, because the people of the country hated his councillor of state with a deadly and abiding intensity, his gateways were well guarded against the enemy.

In that city from his birth had dwelt the youthful Sidi Yusef, Osman's son, whose face was bright like the shining sun, and whose eyes always smiled with friendliness and trust. Because of the lad's trustfulness, old She-ib, Osman's councillor, shrugged his shoulders and spoke to his master, who lay weakly on a couch. "Who is he, Sidi, that he should go to Cairo without you or me to watch over him? Bah! She-ib again shrugs his shoulders and twisted his unpleasant features. "Bah! The first traveller he meets will take from him all that he has, for—you will pardon your servant, Sidi—he has not the wit to know honest from false."

Sidi Osman breathed rapidly for a short time before speaking, for he was suffering an attack of severe pain in his heart. These pains had been increasing in frequency of late, much to his concern. After a rest he replied to the councillor's words. "Let be, She-ib, let be! Yusef is but a lad, I know; yet he will learn in time to judge men, even as you and I. Go now, and bring from the treasure room the money the lad will need. Tell the keeper of the camels to make ready the finest animals I have, so that my son may make his first long journey as befits his station."

The sheik panted for breath. "And bring from the chests the garments I have had made for the coming of his manhood, and let him don them for the journey. But say nothing to him—mind it, She-ib! Say nothing to him that I am as I am, lest it spoil the pleasure of his journey. I shall recover shortly, and when he returns with wonderful tales of his travels, I shall be as before, and all will be happy in my household."

She-ib bowed and went to do as the sheik ordered. After the heavy silken curtain had fallen behind him at the doorway, he shrugged again and raised his eyes toward heaven. "When Sidi Yusef returns," he muttered, "he will find that his father is in his long sleep. Then—ah, then," he smiled craftily, "then shall She-ib come into his own! Then shall my hands be covered with gold and my pockets bulging with it."

Two days later all was ready for the journey. With the blessings of his father's people, Yusef set forth. In the bag at his side was gold. There was much of it, but he knew that it was not the full amount which his father had ordered for him. The balance, he knew, was stored safely in the chest in She-ib's room of the palace. She-ib was that kind of man. That was one reason why Sidi Osman had so many enemies. He permitted She-ib to act for him, and She-ib oppressed the people in many ways.

Yusef sang happily as he travelled. A week—two weeks passed without event, and then Halayig, the leader of the caravan, shook his head uneasily. "Behold, Sidi," he said, pointing. "The sky has a veil over it, and above the veil it is red. This was true. Dawn was at hand, bringing with it all the evidences which preceded the dreadful gibil, or sand-laden wind from the south. "Let us stop, Halayig commanded Yusef, looking thoughtfully toward the east. "Even if the wind had not threatened, we should not have gone much farther before making camp, and this spot is doubtless as good as any in the vicinity."

The men worked rapidly, first unpacking Sidi Yusef's tent and erecting it, then piling baggage high around it for protection. While they were still so occupied, the wind swept down on them with howls like wicked mirth. All during the day and into the night the storm raged, sometimes close around the choking travellers and sometimes high above, where its wail could scarcely be heard.

After many hours Yusef slept, buried beneath silken covers, which failed to protect him from the smothering dust Halayig, however, refused to close his eyes, knowing that at any moment some catastrophe might occur. He was not mistaken. In the midst of the darkness he heard restless movements in the camel herd, followed by the sound of padded feet moving away from the camp. Suddenly there came the half-frightened squeal of the harem. Instantly Halayig threw his garment around his face and leaped to his feet with a shout. "Waken, Musa, Ridi, Havar! The baggage camels are stirring! Push!"

When the startled men reached the place where the camels had crouched, they cried aloud in alarm, for the animals were gone! Ropes hastily tied in the confusion of making camp had become loosened, permitting the camels to wander into the blinding storm.

"After the late" cried Halayig. "Truly this is a pleasant thing! Listen! Can you hear the animals? Go, some one, see if the Sidi's harem is safe."

A man drew his garment over his head and went to see, only to return a moment later with the dreadful news that the trotting camels, also, were gone. "May

Allah protect us!" muttered Halayig. "Go with care, men, to see if you can find any of them. The wind seems less violent, and you may find at least one."

The wind providentially abated for a short time, and the men went in different directions. While they were gone, Yusef walked and discovered all that had happened. To be sure, he knew better than to leave the camp; but anxious to be of service, he ventured forth to seek his beloved Dawn Star, the feet-camel in the desert. Blinded by the flying sand, he wandered to the edge of a gully where he fell—down, down, down—to land finally in an unconscious heap.

When Halayig and his companions returned to camp, they supposed that Sidi Yusef slept. They did not discover his absence until the storm had abated and it was time to resume the journey on the three camels which had been found. Consternation reigned in the camp when Halayig burst from the young Sidi's tent, his face pale as parchment, and stammered the dreadful news. Frantic search was made for the missing lad; but the sand had obliterated all footprints, and at length Halayig led his men sadly homeward with the news.

When the storm had abated, and the terrific heat of the sun threatened to roast him as he lay exposed to its rays, Sidi Yusef stirred and opened his eyes. He moved painfully and sat up. Yes, he discovered, he could walk. He was not seriously injured. "Walk!" he laughed mirthlessly, knowing the desert. "Where shall I go? Truly my life must have been wicked, that Allah would let this befall me! But since he grants me breath, it is not for me to lie down and give up the life entrusted to me. At least I can find a place where there is shade beneath the rocks."

He found a shallow cave in which he rested until the sun sank in the west, after which he ventured forth and made his way down the gully, until, to his delight, he spied a caravan breaking camp to resume its journey in the coolness of the night.

Stumbling through the rock-strewn sand, Yusef hurried toward the caravan, shouting as loudly as his parched throat would permit. To his joy men saw him and waited to give him drink. "I am Yusef, son of Sidi Osman," he explained after he had taken water. He told all that had happened to him, and asked the leader to take him to the nearest city or oasis.

The man grinned unpleasantly. "Ha! The son of Sidi Osman, eh? Speak you the truth, boy?"

Yusef declared that he spoke truly. "It is well, boy!" growled the other. "Give to me, then, that chain of gold from your neck! And the ring from your finger! And that bag of gold at your side. Ah—that is right! Ah-hai! Allah sent you to me this day, that I might have from Sidi Osman and She-ib to do as he does! Unjust taxes, unjust duty on commerce, bribes, shares in dishonest loot—"

"Well," exclaimed Yusef, interrupting the other, "who are you that you should do this to me? Is it my fault?"

"Who am I? I am Musa Squaireen, and I take what is mine, where I find it."

Yusef turned on his heel and mounted the camel assigned him. As they travelled through the darkness he communed with the stars concerning affairs as they were in the world. "It is well for me," he smiled, touching his hidden belt, "that Musa Squaireen knew not of the gold in my harem, else I should have had nothing with which to travel after I leave him. And," he muttered fervently, "may that be soon!"

Several days later the men paused at a large oasis where caravans for all points passed. There they found a small group of men and ill-fed camels returning to Cairo after making a journey to the south.

Leaving Musa Squaireen's tents, the lad went to the other camp and bowed before the old man who sat at the door of the largest tent. "Sidi," said Yusef, respectfully, "I am Yusef, the son of Sidi Osman, and I would like to travel with you to Cairo, where my father has friends."

The old man bowed his head coldly. "That is for my master, Sheik Saad, to decide," he replied. "Enter his tent, and tell to him the thing which you have said to me."

He drew aside the curtain of the tent and Yusef entered, expecting to find another elderly man. To his surprise Sheik Saad was scarcely older than himself. Yusef bowed to the ground again and repeated his request.

"You ask much," replied the sheik bitterly. "It is because of your father that you find me here with my few half-starved camels. Had I been permitted to go on with my merchandise, by this time I should have been rich."

Yusef inquired what the other meant and learned that at Osman's city the keeper of the gate had detained the caravan until the councillor had given thought to the matter. "Then the councillor came with many deceitful smiles and assessed taxes without conscience," continued the sheik angrily. "Finally he concocted a story to the effect that on

previous occasions I had defrauded Sidi Osman, your father; and because of that he called many men and took all that I had, leaving me only what you see."

"Why did you not go to my father?" demanded Yusef indignantly. "He would never have permitted this to happen to you."

"How could I go to your father," inquired the sheik impatiently, "when none but his physician is permitted to see him?"

"Wh-what? My father, is he ill?" Yusef stepped forward quickly, his face depicting concern.

"Of a truth," nodded the sheik. "Did you not know it?"

"No! Oh, I must return at once! Here, sheik, here! I have gold!" Yusef opened his tunic and drew forth his harem, from which he poured golden coins. "Take what you will, but for the love of Allah, give me a camel and a guide to take me to my father's house!"

The sheik flushed and waved his hand. "Put up the gold," he said. "It is not far to your father's palace; and would Allah bless me if I should refuse to aid you? Come, let us make ready."

Yusef was so filled with concern that he scarce heeded the incidents of the journey, nor did he notice that the caravan of Musa Squaireen followed close behind that of Sheik Saad and entered the gates of the desert city.

At the palace door the servants bowed low before their young master, whispering blessings on his head. At his command he was led immediately to the room where his father panted for breath on a silk-covered couch. "Yusef, my son! Ah, Allah is good, that he brought you to me, for I need you, lad; I need you!"

"What is it, Father, that I can do? Why did you not tell me before I started on my journey?"

"Your journey! Ah, I fear you wasted your time, Son, for Halayig returned and said you were lost before you reached Cairo. I thought I never would see you again."

"Oh, no, Father, the journey was not wasted," exclaimed Yusef, glancing toward She-ib, who stood watching him with shifty eyes. "I was lost, it is true; but I did not see the banners of the city. But in the desert I found a thing of value."

"At another time you shall tell me, Yusef, beloved," whispered Sidi Osman after Yusef, "Go now, and let me rest, but after I sleep, come to me, for I have a thing of importance to tell you. And you, She-ib, see to it that all my chiefs who are in the city be with us."

The coolness of evening had settled over the valm-hidden city of Sidi Osman when the servants moved quietly through the endless corridors of the palace to summon the household stewards and the chiefs to wait for them. One by one the chiefs entered, each dressed in his best. Servants placed gorgeous cushions for the guests until the room was filled with sitting dignitaries. She-ib stood at the corridor leading to Sidi Osman's private apartment, and with curious eyes watched all that was done. "What is it that the master intends to do?" he wondered. Sidi Osman looked over the faces be-

fore him. At his side was Yusef, his beloved son. At his feet were the leading sheiks from the various districts over which he ruled. Further back were the lesser chiefs, and behind them chiefs from other districts who happened to be in the city at the time. These were present out of curiosity, since it had been whispered abroad that Sidi Osman had a matter of great import to tell to his people.

Yusef looked over the faces and saw far in the background Musa Squaireen and Sheik Saad.

All became silent, waiting with suppressed impatience for that which the old Sidi would say. At last he spoke, slowly but plainly. "Friends, the time has come for me to rest beneath the palms, for I am old and my health fails. It is to tell you this that I have sent for you. And to say that from this day you will give to my son, Yusef, the reality which you heretofore have given to me."

She-ib was the first to move or speak when the Sidi finished. "Sidi Yusef," he exclaimed, smiling at the youthful Sidi, "let me be first to offer my obedience! From this hour, I shall gladly serve you as I have served your father, knowing that your youth requires older

wisdom for its guidance."

Yusef gave the man a fleeting glance before bowing to his father. To the latter he said, "If you mean what you say, my father, may I rule as you have always done, according to my own judgment? And may I choose my own advisers and overseers?"

"Truly, my son, you may do these things," smiled Sidi Osman kindly.

"Ha!" exclaimed She-ib officiously. "It is well that you have one of the bravest chiefs of the desert here at this hour, Sidi! He will be glad to swear allegiance to you, I know. Behold, at the rear of the others, Musa Squaireen!"

Yusef shook his head, at which She-ib raised his hands in simulated alarm. "You will not take Musa to fight your battles, Sidi Yusef? You have those around your city who will protect you from your enemies!"

Sidi Yusef sat on the edge of his father's couch and smiled at the old Sidi as he replied. "My father, if I intended to continue to rule our city and desert districts as they have been ruled, then, truly, I should need powerful chiefs to protect me from enemies. In the desert I learned that we have many such, but it has been the practice here to rob travellers and traders of their gold. Why, then, should we not have enemies? Men like me to have their merchandise stolen under the plea that they are being taxed. I—"

She-ib hurriedly interrupted, not liking the tone of the conversation. "Ha, Sidi Osman! Said I not that the lad lacked wisdom? What does he know of such things?"

Sidi Yusef rose to his feet quickly and raised his hand. "Be silent, She-ib," he commanded with authority. She-ib fell back a step in surprise, for never had he suspected Yusef of such dignity.

"Be silent, She-ib, and give ear to what I have to say," continued the young man. "Although I know it not until this day, my father has long been ailing, and has permitted you to do as you wished in his land, with the result that gold has accumulated and friends have been turned away. But now I shall rule!"

She-ib cringed at the indignation in his new master's voice. "Go!" continued Yusef sternly. "Take your possessions and get you gone from the city! And with you, you may take Musa Squaireen. He, like you, will take gold which belongs not to him by rights. Beside me as I rule in my father's place, I want one who is honest to deal with the people who come to my gates."

She-ib turned curiously to see who it might be that Sidi Yusef sought as he looked toward the rear of the room. Sidi Osman raised himself on his elbow to watch the surprised young man who came forward at a sign from Yusef. The young Sidi spoke with a smile as he led the stranger forward.

"This, my father, is Sheik Saad. Al-

though he has reason to despise me because your councillor had treated him unjustly, he acted toward me as a friend in my time of need. It is such as he who will help make friends around our city, and friends are worth many rich enemies. As Sidi in your place, I take Sheik Saad as my councillor."

She-ib opened his mouth to speak, but Sidi Osman laughed softly and sank back on the couch. "Say what you will, She-ib," he said weakly. "The lad has more wisdom than I do. It must be wisdom that he found in the desert—eh, my son? Aye, aye, Yusef, I can see that one friend at all side now would be of more worth than all my bags of gold!"

There is no foundation for the common belief that the Indians of Canada are a vanishing race. While their numbers have varied considerably during the last thirty years, declining from 110,000 in 1907, to 104 in 1924, latest returns issued by the Department of Mines and Resources show that there are now approximately 114,000 Indians resident in the Dominion.

Like those of other races, Indian problems are determined largely by the climatic and physical features of the areas in which they live. In southern

Ontario, southern Quebec, and parts of the Maritime Provinces, the Indians are engaged largely in agriculture, and some of them find employment in nearby industrial centres. Another group occupies the great hinterland comprising the north shores of the St. Lawrence River to the Mackenzie Valley and Yukon Territory. These people are dependent mainly on hunting and trapping for their livelihood, and the Department has set aside large tracts of land in certain provinces, where only the Indians are permitted to hunt and trap. Efforts are being made to have this policy extended wherever feasible, having regard to the interests both of the Indians and of wild life conservation.

A third group of Indians is found in the Great Plains region and in the foothills country of Alberta, where their lands are suitable for agriculture and stock-raising. In 1878, when the buffalo herds were virtually wiped out, these Indians had to turn to farming and ranching, and within two generations a large number of them have developed into prosperous, self-reliant farmers. Still another group of Indians inhabit the northwestern coast of British Columbia. These people had developed a highly organized culture before the appearance of the white man. They are fisher-folk, trained to the sea, and for many years have been prominent in the fishing industry.

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