



*The pearl-diver was dashing away through the bazar.*

## The Merchant of Basra

By DUDLEY HOYS

*He looked upon his daughter as a chattel to be sold to the highest bidder,  
but he underrated the shrewdness of Ibu Seyyed*

“SON of a jackal!” screamed Auda Din. “You dare to tell me this!” His skinny hands twitched with fury.

The stolid Kurdish laborer touched his forehead. “I have searched for an hour, master, and it is nowhere.”

“Then search for another hour—a day—a week! And if you return with empty hands—” Auda Din could say no more. Rage choked his throat. He pointed to the doorway, and the unlucky laborer went meekly out into the dust.

Auda Din spat after him, then sat down in a

murky corner of his shop. His gray beard bristled. The heavy *abba* he wore seemed to quiver with irritation. The melon-headed Kurd had lost a silver stud, one of a set of eight destined to adorn a customer’s saddle, and the loss tortured every miserly instinct in the old man’s body. He kept muttering to himself and glaring out at the narrow stretch of the bazar.

Had his neighbors heard the news, they would have laughed. After forty years as a silversmith in Basra, he held the reputation of being the meanest trader in the town. Also, he was credited with

immense wealth. He had worked hard in the little shop near Ashar creek, hoarding steadily. During the war, trade had increased by vast bounds, for there were white soldiers, and white sailors from the big ships, who bought Amara ware and inlaid ornaments at a price reduced from triple value to double value; consequently, they believed that their haggling had secured real bargains from this follower of the Prophet—and of the profit.

Yet Auda Din was not worth robbing, for it was common knowledge that every spare piaster went straight to the European bank facing Ashar bridge. True, if Port Said is the world's sink of iniquity, Basra is its cesspool, and its shady characters had often discussed the old man as a potential victim. But they had come to the conclusion that he could not be outwitted. His money was too cunningly protected.

This morning, as he crouched in the shop, thought of that lost silver stud prevented him from working. While he brooded, his beady eyes stared straight ahead through the doorway. Beyond, a motley crowd passed through the odorous bazar—Persian *mujtoids*, skin-clad water-carriers, holy mullahs with their black robes and steel rods and rings, wild-eyed Bakhtiari tribesmen hurrying with the grace of fauns. From the coppersmith's nearby echoed the clanging rhythm of hammers, and in some tortuous alley behind a boy's voice rose in the shivering minor notes of a love song.

Presently the old man grinned. The frown vanished from his yellow forehead. He leaned forward, watching a slim, youthful Arab who had come to a halt outside the shop and was gazing upward. If ever a man looked forlorn, then it was this handsome youngster.

Auda Din gave an eager, half-derisive chuckle. He was enjoying himself. Treading softly he ascended the rickety stairs at the back, and suddenly opened a door. Reward paid his caution. He caught his daughter, Nouveya, peering through a barred window and sighing audibly.

She turned quickly. Her fine dark eyes winced.

"Why does he waste his time?" said Auda Din mockingly.

"Because he loves me." Nouveya's voice trembled. "And I shall always love him." This was said with no defiance, but a sort of wistful steadiness.

The old man fingered his beard and smiled maliciously. "No, my little one. With Muchaidie

Nafa as a husband, you will forget Ibu Seyyed. I say you will," he went on sharply, as she shivered. "Muchaidie Nafa is rich. He has a fine house at Shaiba, and many thousand palms, and a boat driven by an engine—"

"And three wives."

"What of that? He is a true follower of the Prophet."

Nouveya's lip quivered. "He is old, and ugly. Ibu Seyyed is young and beautiful."

"A beggar, nothing more!"

"He has a new, big *dhow*, and—"

"Enough, am I not your father?" Auda Din rubbed his hands and looked at her appraisingly. Small, dainty, with perfect features, she seemed to have collected all the best traits of Eastern charm. Neighbors had been astonished at his sudden display of generosity when he sent her to the Government school at Baghdad. But as always, his object had been gain. Cultured, she would be worth her weight in gold to the rich type of Basra merchant. Many would pay heavily for the privilege of receiving a wife quite different from the other inanimate, doll-like creatures.

So far, Muchaidie Nafa had made the highest offer, and Auda Din had decided to accept. Fortunately for him, Nouveya's education had not quite overcome the old, deep-rooted instincts of filial obedience. In her veins was the blood of women who for hundreds of years had been slaves in all but name, submissive to a religion that dubbed them the mere chattels of men. So the old man felt little fear of her trying to escape.

Still grinning, he walked to the window. Only once had he spoken to Ibu Seyyed. That was when the young *dhow*-owner, back from a trading voyage down the Gulf, had asked him for Nouveya. Auda Din had dismissed him with contempt, warned him never to come near again. Since then, Ibu Seyyed had appeared several times in the bazar outside, watching with yearning eyes for a glimpse of his forbidden paradise. His despair tickled the old man's sense of humor.

"He will think it is you," said Auda Din, and pressed his ugly face against the window. Below, the young Arab glanced up with sudden, breathless eagerness. Then his expression changed. He saw the toothless mouth, the wiry beard, and bowed his head and walked away. Auda Din laughed, watching his retreating figure until a tall man in a white *burnous* crossed the narrow street as if to

enter the shop beneath. At sight of this probable customer, Auda Din turned away and made for the stairs. He took no notice of his daughter, crying softly and hopelessly, with her hands to her face.

**I**N THE shop he found the tall man leaning idly against the wall. His strong brown fingers were playing with a bag of plaited straw.

Auda Din put on an ingratiating smile. "You have come to buy some of my silver work, no doubt? Of a truth, there is no craftsman from Muscat to Lake Van—" He stopped abruptly, as the customer made a silencing gesture.

"I am no buyer, but a seller. Look at these." He drew from his bag some tear-bottles, small stone flasks that had held the weepings of sad ladies long before Mahomet preached his deathless gospel. "There has been digging at Samarra, and these are from the ruins."

The old man's politeness vanished. Tear-bottles could be found by the legion. Even the gullible infidels had come to value them lightly.

"They are worth nothing to me. Take them away."

Instead of showing disappointment, the man gave a curious smile. "They are worth," he said, "one hundred Egyptian piasters each."

Auda Din gave an impatient grunt. "I have no time for fools." He pointed to the doorway.

The man stooped, heaped the bottles in a pile on a small stool, then turned and spoke with a confidential air.

"You will sell these for a hundred piasters each. And I am willing to take half."

There was something about his attitude that alarmed Auda Din. He wondered if the man were mad—or a thief trying some ruse.

"What is this trickery?" he asked slowly.

"Trickery? Auda Din, you are known throughout Basra as a wise and careful merchant, fond of a bargain. Here I offer you a bargain. I will leave these tear-bottles with you if you agree to charge a hundred piasters each, and give me half. If they fail to fetch that price, do not sell. Is it agreed?"

Auda Din tugged at his beard, and regarded the man with shrewd eyes.

"Forty years have I traded, and my knowledge is sure as the sunrise. A drunken infidel would not give ten piasters for all the bottles."

The man laughed. "The hawk is wise, but the

serpent is wiser. A sober son of the Prophet will do as I say."

Auda Din was silent, trying to find some explanation, some motive for the offer. He was an expert in the Eastern art of oblique thought. As he pondered, the drone of voices, the rattle of gharries, and the ghostly padding of feet trampling the dust outside blended in a drowsy hum. Try as he would, Auda Din could not penetrate the man's true object.

At last he spoke abruptly. "I could cheat you if I wished. You have no safeguard."

There was a sort of mocking amusement in the man's eyes. "I read men's souls," he said. "You, of all, would never destroy the fruitful. If you cheat me, I shall bring no more bottles. Then you would lose what is your lifeblood—money."

"Tear-bottles are cheaper than melons. I could obtain them anywhere."

"True. But buyers are hard to find." The man said this so meaningfully that Auda Din's suspicions were confirmed. There was something unlawful behind the affair. But so long as he knew nothing, he was safe.

"What is your name?"

"Call me Hussein."

"Hussein, I will take them."

"As I told you," said the man, "in a few days I will call again, and bring more." He touched his forehead and walked out of the shop.

**T**HE moment Hussein had vanished in the bazar, the old man picked up one of the bottles. With trembling, curious fingers, he pulled at the stone stopper, worked it loose, and tilted the bottle into his hand. A small stream of some grayish-white mixture trickled on to his palm.

Immediately his groping mind saw light. He was handling *hasheesh*, the drug so alluring that its early devotees formed a religion in its honor.

Very shakily he poured the mixture back and replaced the stopper. Visions of the gendarmerie and prison arose before him. Under Turkish rule, the drug traffic had been open, untaxed, a thing of public trade. But since the war, strict rules and merciless punishment had been prescribed to check a vice that made men's minds become wild and horrible.

Then the hot pricking of fear gave place to the clamor of greed. Every bottle meant a profit of fifty piasters. How could he be suspected? For forty years he had traded here, selling all kinds of silver

and curios, and many people came to buy. The man called Hussein must have found himself being watched by the gendarmerie, and devised this plan for sullyng his clients.

Old Auda Din chuckled and locked the bottles in a cupboard. The spirit of gain was warming his veins.

Scarcely an hour had passed before the first bottle was sold. The customer was a Persian scribe. He paid a hundred piasters without a murmur, and went his way. Auda Din almost crooned with delight. When, within two days, he had sold twelve tear-bottles, he began to commune with himself. Hussein was in his power. If he chose to take seventy-five piasters out of every hundred, the man could get no redress.

"Allah il Allah," murmured the old merchant, feeling that life was good.

Eight more tear-bottles went on the third day. Not one of the purchasers complained of the price asked. They all showed an abandoned eagerness to buy that made Auda Din rub his claw-like hands. Victims so deep in the clutches of the drug might pay two hundred, three hundred piasters to satisfy their relentless craving.

A visit from Muchaidie Nafa crowned his gloating delight. The wealthy palm-owner smoked a *nargileh* with him, drank coffee, and in a long, tortuous conversation made it known that he would add another hundred *lira* on his price for Nouveya, providing she were transferred to him at once.

The sad-eyed girl was brought down. Auda Din, scrupulously careful of her *yashmak*, waved her toward her future husband.

"My beloved, see how you are honored. Muchaidie Nafa says he cannot wait any longer. Without you, he will die of love."

Nouveya made no answer. She was trembling like some forlorn and frightened child. All the little stone bottles in her father's shop could not have held the tears she had shed. The fat Muchaidie Nafa licked his lips at the sight of her. Her silence and her loathing did not worry him. He knew how to overcome feeble girls—as his other wives could prove to their sighing selves, in the prison of the harem.

So the marriage was fixed for the following month, and Nouveya went back to her room, and because she could weep no more, lay in a kind of stupor upon the quilted ottoman. From her window that night she watched the dull orange of the sky

give place to blackness, saw the white moon rise up and shine over the distant, feathery palms and the silver bosom of the Shatt el Arab. The gliding *dhow*s sailed there as pale-winged birds, bringing thoughts of Ibu Seyyed. Five school years in Baghdad had taught her the dazzling glory of love and freedom. With Ibu Seyyed, she could have had both. Like her, he was young and modern, believing that in one wife alone could a man find true happiness.

For a while, a pitiful rebellion against Fate stirred her pulses. But instinct reasserted itself. Her father had decided, and there could be no appeal. The little time left to her must be spent in thinking of her beloved Ibu Seyyed and watching the freedom of the world that never could be hers.

While odd jackals wailed, and the moon climbed through the velvet of the sky, her dusky eyes stared yearningly through the window. All night she stood, until the pearl and rose of dawn stole out, and the muezzin's reedy cry echoed from the mosque. Then she turned away, trying to sleep and forget.

AUDA DIN looked up from his work. The man called Hussein was entering the doorway. He carried the basket of plaited straw, and by the look of its bulging sides, it was full.

"There have been buyers," he said, without preamble.

"True." The old man took a small book from the folds of his *abba*. "Here is the tally. I have sold twenty tear-bottles."

"Then my share will be a thousand piasters," said Hussein.

"Yes, a thousand piasters." Auda Din counted out the money slowly and handed it over.

"And now," he resumed, "let us talk of the days to come. From this hour onward, my share must be seventy-five piasters."

"Son of a jackal! Thieving, skinny old buzzard!" The man called Hussein advanced on him fiercely. "Not for nothing are you called the maggot of Ashar! Fifty piasters will I have, or—"

Old Auda Din raised one hand. He was frightened, but greed steeled his nerve. "Seventy-five piasters," he repeated.

"No, thieving scavenger!"

"Yes, son of profanity. You dare not refuse." Auda Din gave the ghost of a leer. "You dare not refuse."

The man called Hussein seemed to recover his composure. He showed his white teeth in a laugh. "Let it be so. You're bargaining is keener than the sting of a scorpion."

"Because there are many risks." For a moment Auda Din actually thought of them, and his wizened frame shook as with ague.

"Without risks, there is no good trade," said Hussein. He undid his basket and tipped out the second load of tear-bottles. "There is one warning I will give. Your share shall not grow beyond seventy-five piasters."

"No man can foretell the morrow," said Auda Din. Though he had won, he felt a kind of nervous apprehension. There was something in Hussein's manner he could not understand. It was a sort of mocking amusement, and it filled the old man with vague discomfort.

But five minutes later he had forgotten his fears, in the exquisite pleasure of selling two more tear-bottles. The customer was a gaunt and singularly clean Arab—probably a Bahrein pearl-diver, thought Auda Din. He noted the twitching hands as they grasped the two bottles, the hungry, yellow light in the staring eyes.

As the customer hurried out through the doorway he collided with a passing pedestrian. One of his precious bottles fell on the slab of stone that did duty for a step.

Came a muttered apology from the pedestrian. It was Ibu Seyyed. He stooped to pick up the bottle. It had split in two, and between its cracked edges trickled a grayish-white mixture.

Ibu Seyyed, his eyes narrowed curiously, turned to offer it to its owner. Then he stared in as much surprise as an impassive Arab can show. The pearl-diver was dashing away through the bazar like a startled gazelle.

Ibu Seyyed looked again at the broken tear-bottle. He sniffed the grayish-white mixture, touched it with the tip of his finger, took a delicate taste. Suddenly he stiffened. His clear eyes stared straight at Auda Din.

"Be gone!" cried the old man shrilly. Yet he could not quite hide the panic that made him pluck at his beard. A tinge of yellow had crept into his leathery skin.

Ibu Seyyed said nothing. He stood there motionless, like a hawk poised to strike. And the old man knew. The silence frightened him more than any words. Beads of moisture oozed out on his

cheeks. His skinny hands writhed together.

At last Ibu Seyyed stirred. "Kismet is kind. Had I not been passing—" He broke off and held up the bottle. "There is much profit in *hasheesh*, Auda Din."

"May Shaitan strike you for a liar!" The shrill voice trembled, dropped to a mumble. "That is not *hasheesh*. It is—"

Ibu Seyyed's cold laugh silenced him. "Auda Din, those who travel are seldom fools. Have I not sailed to all ports in the Gulf, to black Muscat, even to the sweating loneliness of Aden? If I cannot tell the look and taste of *hasheesh*, then I am an unborn child. Doubtless you have other harmless tear-bottles. Let me see them."

"There are none," snarled Auda Din, licking his dry lips.

"Belief will come with the proof," Ibu Seyyed half turned, looking down the narrow bazar passage. "There is a *rais* of the gendarmerie outside Mustapha Ali's shop. I will call him."

"Ibu Seyyed! Ibu Seyyed!" Auda Din tottered forward, seized a fold of his *burnous*. "I am an old man, and—"

"Let me see the tear-bottles."

Auda Din shuffled to the cupboard, unlocked it and produced his store. The watching Ibu Seyyed nodded, his mouth a narrow line.

"The new law has a fine of ten thousand piasters for this, and a prison term of three years. Prison work makes even young bones ache, Auda Din."

"But I did not know!" protested the old man wildly. "I am innocent."

"Shriveled old liar, be silent! I say you knew, and the law will have no mercy."

Auda Din shivered, drawing his *abba* about him as if against sudden cold. "You will say nothing? Ibu Seyyed, I am very old. You wish me no harm?"

The young *dhow*-owner stared at him. His eyes were like points of steel.

Auda Din leaned against the wall, his head bent. He was broken. Prospect of imprisonment he might have faced. But the thought of losing ten thousand piasters held the bitterness of death. He would never recover from the ceaseless, cankering regret.

From outside, the drone of business drifted into the hot silence of the shop. He heard the cries of the sweetmeat vendors, the haggling voices of traders, the dull chant of a Kurdish labor squad as they unloaded pots from a grunting camel. It came to the trembling Auda Din that these were the sweetest

sounds in the world—the music of trade. In prison, the beating pulse of the market would be dead to his ears. Besides, what would happen to his shop? Other silversmiths would gain the trade that should be his.

“Ibu Seyyed,” he said suddenly, “you love Nouveya. Would you send her father to prison?”

“Give Nouveya to me, and you are safe.”

“But she is promised to Muchaidie Nafa.”

“As you are a liar, another broken promise matters little.” Ibu Seyyed took a step forward, towering over the old man. “Will you give her to me or shall I call the gendarmerie?”

Auda Din tried to read hope in those flashing eyes, but there was none. Quite abruptly he raised his palsied hands.

“Eternal fires burn you! Take her.”

THE warm breeze that ripens the dates was sighing gently across the gulf. It stirred the water into tiny blue ripples, played with the palms fringing the shining whiteness of Muhammerah, and sent Ibu Seyyed’s *dhow* gliding toward the coast like a sea-bird. The one great sail was a graceful, quivering curve.

At the tiller stood Ibu Seyyed, boyish in his utter happiness. One eye he kept on the steering, and one on Nouveya, who was leaning over the side of the *dhow*. Passage of the sunny minutes seemed almost to frighten her. The ecstasy of life was so short. Now and again she turned to look at

Ibu Seyyed, with a fluttering movement, as if afraid that reality might escape her. The smile on her parted lips held enchantment.

Presently they reached the coast. Ibu Seyyed had come to pick up his mate, who had sailed to Muhammerah in another trading *dhow*. As they brushed up against the low quay, a tall man rose from a coil of rope and called out gaily. The next moment he had vaulted lightly aboard.

“This is my mate,” said Ibu Seyyed, and Nouveya smiled at the tall man, who was touching his forehead.

“I have met your father.” There was a twinkle in the mate’s brown eyes. “No doubt he will ever remember a stranger named Hussein. We traded together, in flour and gray sand.”

Nouveya stared at him in pretty wonderment. Ibu Seyyed broke into a huge laugh.

“Yes, flour and gray sand, beloved. But for that magic mixture, and the kindness of many friends, the sun would not be shining for us today. Remember, rose of my dreams, to look upon my mate as the giver of our happiness.”

The man called Hussein clicked his fingers. “It was nothing,” he said, in his jocular way. “You planned, I acted—no more.” He touched Nouveya’s arm gently. “Behold in your husband a great man, and be glad. You have a future paved with success.”

“I have something greater than that,” said Nouveya softly. “I have love.”