

THE GARDEN OF LOVE *By Alexander Pym*

THE spaces of the desert stretched about me unpeopled save by phantoms. Overhead a ball of fire, blazing in a sky of burnished copper, drew what moisture it could suck from a parched and arid wilderness. Two companions never left me by night or day: sand—sand in hair and mouth and eyes—and silence. There are different kinds of silence, each with its significance; the silence of awe, the silence which presages disaster. But the silence of the desert is unlike any other. It is as though the functions of nature were suspended, and in the stillness the heart of the world can be heard to beat.

I seemed to have been always in the desert. My eyes were tinged with the wistfulness that the horizon gives; the expression in the gaze of the Arab and the sailor is the same. And I was looking not for something that I had lost, but for something I had yet to find. I did not complain, for the nomad life has enchantment. Here and there, when least expected, an oasis springs into being as though by magic. Every breath of air throbs with the mystery of the unknown, with a sense of immensity and freedom. But I had no home. Though footsore and weary I was compelled to go forward. For the desert is inhospitable, and there is no resting place there.

I had almost abandoned hope of escape when mountains raised themselves in outline before me. Patches of vegetation began to triumph over the barrenness of the land; the heat became less intense. As I advanced I discerned in the distance groves of palms and abundant foliage. Then I believed that my journey was at an end—I had reached the Garden of Love.

It was a spot pleasant to the eye. Around were dotted hamlets nestling among the woods. Within, myriads of flowers nodded in bewildering profusion, scenting the air with their fragrance. One who has little knowledge of such things could never name them. Wild, exotic, fragile, in masses and alone they grew, forming avenues and clumps and borders riotous with color. Green, purple, wine-red, scarlet, orange-red, blood-red, blue, saffron, sulphur-yellow, whites in every variety—all the hues of the rainbow were there, but the reds predominated. Yet every shoot appeared independent of the others, with an individuality of its own.

And in the garden were maidens of every kind. For some God had put violets in their eyes and rosebuds on their lips, and corn in their hair, and lilies in their breath and skin. Their ears were as shells which are gathered on the shore, and their faces turned to the brightness in the way of children. They were playing the only game in the world—the game of love. Others I saw who cheated as they played. Crimson stained their cheeks, and it was they, not God, who

had wound carnations in their hair. Such were the passion-toys of pleasure. Others, again, belonged to neither kind, yet partook of both. Each had a blossom entrusted to her keeping as an emblem of herself.

The men, the partners in the game, were permitted to pluck a flower, and with the flower they took a maiden. It was noticeable how frequently the flowers, when plucked, burst with buds into new life. Many, however, drooped almost at once, the petals crumpled, and the man and woman could remain no longer. That was the only sadness which came into the garden—the withering of flowers—and it was always the signal of departure. The rejected sometimes settled within sight of the happiness which they had lost; sometimes they obeyed the call of the desert; a few journeyed boldly into the mountains. I observed that the crimson blossom was particularly short-lived (there appeared to be something hostile to it in the atmosphere of the place). Those who tended it invariably departed before long, laughing and wanting into the great wastes.

Then I wondered if there was room in the garden for a wanderer like myself. Should I find there that which I had sought so long, which the desert had denied me? I could hardly believe that it was possible. I had seen fair places, but I had never found that. I had watched and waited—once with hope. Love would come to me; it must. But time passed and the desert summoned, and love lingered. Or perhaps it had come and I had not perceived it.

And while I waited I had consoled myself with make-believe. If love was a game then I would play it and be happy. But that was a mistake. Love can only be played with clean hands and a pure heart. It is the pursuit and capture, not, as I had supposed, of every passing fancy, but of the ideal. Yet it is worth a struggle. He who wins it and holds it in his arms has all.

It is this ideal that colors dreams and waking thoughts. But it is hard to find; it is slow in revealing its hid-

ing place. And when it fails to come men grow weary and try to cheat themselves with something base. This is why they become unclean; not because they like uncleanness, but because their dreams remain unrealized. Hungry and unsatisfied they prefer husks of swine to starvation. So they appear heartless, enticing and coquetting, transferring their favors from one attachment to another, assuming bonds of allegiance in a spirit of jest. Like children who cannot obtain the treasured toy they suppose for a moment that something else will do. But it is just pretense, in order to conceal their disappointment; in their hearts they know that they are beggars.

And if any say that this is not so there will come a day when they will confess that they lied. For in the act of accepting a phantom they bear witness to the power of the ideal and measure the preciousness of what they have lost.

And so it is with me. I was one of those who had gone unsatisfied, who did not know the meaning of love. Was I fit, then, to set foot in that sacred spot? Would not the presence of an outcast bring a blight among the flowers? And yet . . . there might be a place for me. Oh, if only it might be so, if only this might be so, if only this might be the beginning of something beautiful and noble in my life! I had endured so much of the sand and silence. If only . . . I pushed open the gate and entered the garden.

The first hours of happiness were shadowed by the dread that I might be expelled. But time went on and no one interfered. The number of strange people there surprised me. They were bad as well as good; some inconstant and shallow; others inspired by selfish motives, by love of the ego, by love of that which pleases the eye. Yet all were happy. That seemed to be inherent in the atmosphere of the place. But imperfections of character imposed this restriction. No one could make the garden his home for long except

those who were clean through and through, who had gained the pearl without price. The mingling of selfishness or passion with love sooner or later brought exile. And though some of the exiles I observed won their way back, this was rare. Most of those who left the garden said good-bye to it forever.

In such a scene of peace and brightness as this, listening in the sunshine to the stirring of the breeze, the hum of insects among the flowers, I was possessed by a feeling of content such as I had not experienced before. And I perceived my whole being quickened with a sense of anticipation. Something would happen to me. What? I could not tell. That it would be transforming, even lovely, I felt sure. But I was still alone. Women such as play unfairly at the game gazed at me, alluring, yet kind-

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