

Chapter

Eighteen

And so it came to pass that Hafid waited in his lonely palace for he who was to receive the scrolls. The old man, with only his trusted bookkeeper for a companion, watched the seasons come and go, and the infirmities of old age soon prevented him from doing little except sit quietly in his covered garden.

He waited.

He waited nearly three full years after the dis-

posal of his worldly wealth and the disbanding of his trade empire.

And then from out of the desert to the East there appeared a slight, limping figure of a stranger who entered Damascus and made straightway through the streets until he stood before the palace of Hafid. Erasmus, usually a model of courtesy and propriety, remained resolutely in the doorway as the caller repeated his request, "I wouldst speak with thy master."

The stranger's appearance was not one to inspire confidence. His sandals were ripped and mended with rope, his brown legs were cut and scratched and had sores in many places, and above them hung a loose and tattered camel's hair loincloth. The man's hair was snarled and long and his eyes, red from the sun, seemed to burn from within.

Erasmus held tightly to the door handle. "What is it thou seeketh of my sire?"

The stranger allowed his sack to fall from his shoulders and clenched both hands in prayer toward Erasmus. "Please, kind man, grant me an audience with thy master. I mean him no harm nor seek I alms. Let him hear my words and then I will go in haste if I offend him."

Erasmus, still unsure, slowly opened the door and nodded toward the interior. Then he turned

without looking back and walked swiftly toward the garden with his visitor limping behind.

In the garden, Hafid dozed, and Erasmus hesitated before his master. He coughed and Hafid stirred. He coughed again and the old man opened his eyes.

“Forgive this disturbance, master, but there is a caller.”

Hafid, now awake, sat up and shifted his gaze to the stranger who bowed and spoke. “Art thou he who has been called the greatest salesman in the world?”

Hafid frowned but nodded, “I have been called that in years now gone. No longer is that crown on my old head. What seeketh thee of me?”

The small visitor stood self-consciously before Hafid and rubbed his hands over his matted chest. He blinked his eyes in the soft light and replied, “I am called Saul and I return now, from Jerusalem, to my birthplace in Tarsus. However, I beg you, let not my appearance deceive you. I am not a bandit from the wilderness nor am I a beggar of the streets. I am a citizen of Tarsus and also a citizen of Rome. My people are Pharisees of the Jewish tribe of Benjamin and although I am a tentmaker by trade, I have studied under the great Gamaliel. Some call me Paul.” He swayed as he spoke and Hafid, not fully awake

until this moment, apologetically motioned for his visitor to sit.

Paul nodded but remained standing. "I come to thee for guidance and help which only you can give. Will you permit me, sire, to tell my story?"

Erasmus, standing behind the stranger, shook his head violently, but Hafid pretended not to notice. He studied the intruder of his sleep carefully and then nodded, "I am too old to continue to look up at thee. Sit at my feet and I will hear you through."

Paul pushed his sack aside and knelt near the old man who waited in silence.

"Four years ago, because the accumulated knowledge of too many years of study had blinded my heart to truth, I was the official witness to the stoning, in Jerusalem, of a holy man called Stephen. He had been condemned to death by the Jewish Sanhedrin for blasphemy against our God."

Hafid interrupted with puzzlement in his voice, "I do not understand how I am connected with this activity."

Paul raised his hand as if to calm the old man. "I will explain quickly. Stephen was a follower of a man called Jesus, who less than a year before the stoning of Stephen, was crucified by the Romans for sedition against the state. Stephen's

guilt was his insistence that Jesus was the Messiah whose coming had been foretold by the Jewish prophets, and that the Temple had conspired with Rome to murder this son of God. This rebuke to those in authority could only be punishable with death and as I have already told thee, I participated.

“Furthermore, with my fanaticism and youthful zeal, I was supplied with letters from the high priest of the Temple and entrusted with the mission of journeying here to Damascus to search out every follower of Jesus and return them in chains to Jerusalem for punishment. This was, as I have said, four years ago.”

Erasmus glanced at Hafid and was startled, for there was a look in the old man's eyes which had not been seen by the faithful bookkeeper in many years. Only the splash of fountain water could be heard in the garden until Paul spoke once more.

“Now as I approached Damascus with murder in my heart there was a sudden flash of light from the heavens. I remember not having been struck but I found myself on the ground and although I could not see, I could hear, and I heard a voice in my ear say, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ I answered, ‘Who are you?’ and the voice replied, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting;

but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what to do.'

"I arose and was led by the hands of my companions into Damascus and there I was not able to eat or drink for three days while I remained in the house of a follower of the crucified one. Then I was visited by another called Ananias, who said he had been visited in a vision and told to come to me. Then he laid his hands upon my eyes and I could see again. Then I ate, and I drank, and my strength returned."

Hafid now leaned forward from his bench and inquired, "What then took place?"

"I was brought to the synagogue and my presence as a persecutor of the followers of Jesus struck fear into the hearts of all his followers but I preached nevertheless and my words confounded them, for now I spoke that he who had been crucified was indeed the Son of God.

"And all who listened suspected a trick of deceit on my part for had I not caused havoc in Jerusalem? I could not convince them of my change of heart and many plotted my death so I escaped over the walls and returned to Jerusalem.

"In Jerusalem the happenings of Damascus repeated themselves. None of the followers of Jesus would come near me although word had been

received of my preaching in Damascus. Nevertheless, I continued to preach in the name of Jesus but it was of no avail. Everywhere I spoke I antagonized those who listened until one day I went to the Temple and in the courtyard, as I watched the sale of doves and lambs for sacrifice, the voice came to me again."

"This time what did it say?" Erasmus spoke before he could stop himself. Hafid smiled at his old friend and nodded for Paul to continue.

"The voice said, 'Thou hast had the Word for nearly four years but thou hast shown few the light. Even the word of God must be sold to the people or they will hear it not. Did not I speak in parables so that all might understand? Thou wilt catch few flies with vinegar. Return to Damascus and seek out him who is acclaimed as the greatest salesman in the world. If thou wouldst spread my word to the world let him show you the way.'"

Hafid glanced quickly at Erasmus and the old bookkeeper sensed the unspoken question. Was this the one for whom he had waited so long? The great salesman leaned forward and placed his hand on Paul's shoulder. "Tell me about this Jesus."

Paul, his voice now alive with new strength and volume, told of Jesus and his life. While the two listened, he spoke of the long Jewish wait for

a Messiah who would come and unite them within a new and independent kingdom of happiness and peace. He told of John the Baptist and the arrival, on the stage of history, of one called Jesus. He told of the miracles performed by this man, his lectures to the crowds, his raising of the dead, his treatment of the money changers, and he told of the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Finally, as if to give further impact to his story, Paul reached into the sack at his side and removed a red garment which he placed in the lap of Hafid. "Sire, you hold in your arms all the worldly goods left behind by this Jesus. All that he possessed he shared with the world, even unto his life. And at the foot of his cross, Roman soldiers cast lots for this robe. It has come into my possession through much diligence and searching when I was last in Jerusalem."

Hafid's face paled and his hands shook as he turned the robe stained with blood. Erasmus, alarmed at his master's appearance, moved closer to the old man. Hafid continued to turn the garment until he found the small star sewn into the cloth . . . the mark of Tola, whose guild made the robes sold by Pathros. Next to the star was a circle sewn within a square . . . the mark of Pathros.

As Paul and Erasmus watched, the old man

raised the robe and rubbed it gently against his cheek. Hafid shook his head. Impossible. Thousands of other robes were made by Tola and sold by Pathros in the years of his great trade route.

Still clutching the robe and speaking in a hoarse whisper, Hafid said, "Tell me what is known of the birth of this Jesus."

Paul said, "He left our world with little. He had entered it with less. He was born in a cave, in Bethlehem, during the time of the census of Augustus."

Hafid's smile seemed almost childish to the two men, and they looked on with puzzlement, for tears also flowed down his wrinkled cheeks. He brushed them away with his hand and asked, "And was there not the brightest star that man has ever seen which shone above the birthplace of this baby?"

Paul's mouth opened yet he could not speak, nor was it necessary. Hafid raised his arms and embraced Paul, and this time the tears of both were mingled.

Finally the old man arose and beckoned toward Erasmus. "Faithful friend, go to the tower and return with the chest. We have found our salesman at last."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

OG MANDINO is the most widely read inspirational and self-help author in the world today. His fourteen books have sold more than twenty-five million copies in eighteen languages. Thousands of people from all walks of life have openly credited Og Mandino with turning their lives around and for the miracle they have found in his words. His books of wisdom, inspiration, and love include *A Better Way to Live*; *The Choice*; *The Christ Commission*; *The Gift of Acabar*; *The Greatest Miracle in the World*; *The Greatest Salesman in the World*; *The Greatest Salesman in the World, Part II: The End of the Story*; *The Greatest Secret in the World*; *The Greatest Success in the World*; *Mission: Success!*; *Og Mandino's University of Success*; and *The Return of the Ragpicker*.

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On the outskirts of Damascus, in a stately palace of burnished marble framed by giant palm trees, there lived a very special man whose name was Hafid. Now retired, his vast trade empire had once known no boundaries, extending across so many lands from Parthia to Rome to Britannia that he was acclaimed everywhere as the greatest salesman in the world.

By the time he had removed himself from the world of commerce, following his twenty-sixth year of record growth and profit, the inspiring story of Hafid's rise

from a lowly camel boy to his mighty position of power and wealth had spread throughout the civilized world.

In those times of great turmoil and upheaval, while almost all of the civilized world bowed meekly to Caesar and his armies, Hafid's fame and reputation had almost elevated him to the status of a living legend. Especially among the poor and downtrodden of Palestine, a border region on the eastern frontier of the empire, Hafid of Damascus was honored in song and poetry as a shining example of how much it was possible to accomplish with one's life despite obstacles and handicaps.

And yet for a man who had fashioned such a monumental legacy and accumulated a fortune of several million gold talents, the greatest salesman in the world was far from happy in his retirement.

As he had done on so many other days stretching back through the years, Hafid emerged from the rear entrance of his mansion at dawn one morning, treading carefully on the dew-moistened tiles of polished basalt as he headed resolutely across the huge and shadowy courtyard. Far off, a solitary cock crowed as the sun's first rays of silver and gold radiated above the desert from the east.

Hafid paused near the octagonal fountain in the center of the wide patio and inhaled deeply, nodding in appreciation at the thick covering of pale yellow jasmine blossoms clinging to the high stone walls that surrounded his estate. He tightened the girdle of leather at his waist, tugged at his soft linen tunic, and continued at a slower pace until he had passed beneath a natural arcade of cypress boughs and was standing before an elevated granite tomb that was free of all ornamentation.

"Good morning, my beloved Lisha," he half-whis-

pered, reaching forward and softly caressing a white rosebud extending from a single tall bush that guarded the vault's heavy bronze door. Then he retreated to his nearby bench of carved mahogany and sat staring at the crypt that contained the remains of the loving woman who had shared his life, his struggles, and his triumphs.

Hafid felt the pressure of a hand on his shoulder and heard the familiar and hoarse voice of his longtime bookkeeper and faithful companion, Erasmus, even before he opened his eyes.

"Forgive me, master . . ."

"Good morning, old friend."

Erasmus smiled, pointing up at the sun that was now directly above their heads. "Morning has already departed, master. Good afternoon."

Hafid sighed and shook his head. "Another peril of old age. One never sleeps at night, always arises before dawn, and then slumbers like a kitten through the entire day. There is no logic to that. None."

Erasmus nodded and folded his arms, expecting to hear another lecture on the sorrows of growing old. But this was not to be like every other morning, for Hafid had suddenly leaped to his feet and raced toward the tomb in long strides until his hand was on the stone. Then he turned and in a strong voice exclaimed, "I have become a sorry excuse for a human being! Tell me, Erasmus, how long has it been, now, since I began this selfish and isolated life devoted only to feeling sorry for myself?"

Erasmus stared wide-eyed and then replied, "The great change in thee commenced with the passing of Lisha and your sudden decision to dispose of all your emporiums and caravans, following her entombment. Fourteen years have run their course since you decided to turn your back on the world."

Hafid's eyes had become moist. "Precious ally and brother, how have you managed to tolerate my miserable behavior for so long?"

The old bookkeeper stared down at his hands. "We have been together for almost forty years and my love for you is unconditional. I served you during your greatest moments of success and happiness and I serve you now, just as willingly, even though I have agonized at the living death you seem to have willed for yourself. You cannot return Lisha to life and so you have been trying to join her in that tomb. Remember when you instructed me, many years ago, to secure a red rosebush and plant it next to this white one, after you were dead and laid to rest there?"

"Yes," replied Hafid, "and let us not forget my constant reminders that this palace and warehouse would be yours upon my death. A small recompense for your countless years of loyalty and friendship and all that you have endured from me since we lost Lisha."

Hafid reached out, snapped the stem of the solitary white rosebud, and carried it back to the bench where he placed it carefully in his old friend's lap. "Self-pity is the most terrible of diseases, Erasmus, and I have been afflicted far too long. I have foolishly divorced myself from all humanity, because of my great grief, and made myself a hermit in that mausoleum where you and I reside. Enough! It is time for change!"

"But they have not been wasted years, master. Thy great charitable contributions to the underprivileged of Damascus . . ."

Hafid interrupted. "Money? What sacrifice was that for me? All people of wealth salve their conscience with gifts of gold for the poor. The rich feed off these contributions as much as the hungry and they make

certain that the world is made aware of their great generosity which, to them, is no more than a handful of pennies. No, dear friend, applaud not my charity. Instead, sympathize with my unwillingness to share more of myself. . . ."

"And yet," protested Erasmus, "thy seclusion accomplished some good, sire. Have ye not filled thy library with the works of the world's great minds and devoted countless hours to the study of their ideas and principles?"

Hafid nodded. "I have made every attempt to occupy the long days and nights by giving myself the education I never received as a youth and the effort has opened my eyes to a world of wonder and promise that I had little time to appreciate in my pursuit after gold and success. Still, I have prolonged my grief far too long. This world has provided me with everything a man could desire. It is time I began to repay my debt by doing all I can to help make a better life for all mankind. I am not yet ready for my final resting place and the red rose I instructed that you plant here, upon my death, next to this white one that was Lisha's favorite, must wait."

Tears of joy were now flowing down the wrinkled cheeks of Erasmus as Hafid continued. "Livy was writing his history of Rome when he was seventy-five and Tiberius ruled the empire until almost eighty. Compared to them I am only a child . . . a healthy child of sixty! My lungs are clear, my flesh is firm, my vision is excellent, my heart is strong, and my mind is as alert as it was at twenty. I believe I am prepared for a second life . . . !"

"This is such a great miracle!" Erasmus cried, looking toward the heavens. "After years of silent anguish and grief over thy condition, my prayers have finally

been answered. Tell me, sire, what has caused this surprise resurrection of the man who was so loved and respected by the world?"

Hafid smiled.

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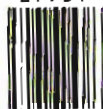
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