STRANGE ENCOUNTER

Adapted from "The Prisoner and other Tales of Faith" by Rabbi Salomon Alter Halpern and published by Feldheim.

It was a foolish thing to do, of course, and I suppose I am lucky to be alive. One ought to listen to the advice of the inhabitants, especially in the wilder parts of Israel. All the same, I don't regret the adventure.

I had been staying with my friend Mosheh in Jerusalem, and since he had to visit Be'er Sheva in connection with the new orthodox school there — he works in the administration of that particular educational network — I seized the opportunity of a free ride to the Negev and came along. Mosheh would be busy, of course, but he promised to ask a local man to show me the sights and generally take care of me.

However, when we arrived after a breakneck ride that started at dawn — all the drivers there seem to be frustrated jet pilots and like nothing better than speeding on cliffside curves — it turned out that the local man was away for the day.

"Look here," said Mosheh, "I'm terribly sorry, but I've got to attend to my affairs now; the school people are waiting. You're tired from the journey and soon it will get sizzling hot. I suggest you stroll around a little; anyone will show you the famous Wells of Abraham. Then you go back to the hotel and have a good rest. But please don't go out in the heat! It's the mistake all the tourists make. Then at about three o'clock ask them to direct you to the Rabbi's house. You'll find him a very interesting man to talk to, and I'll collect you from there when I'm ready. We'll still have an hour or two to do the sights before dark. And now, Shalom!" — and off he went.

Well, I was annoyed, I can tell you. Here I was with nothing to do for hours and hours and in any case this midday rest business was not my cup of tea. All very well for these people who got up at a fantastic hour in the morning. They maybe could afford to knock-off at two o'clock for the day, or make a break from twelve to three. But I had paid good money for this trip. Why waste the best hours?

I soon got tired of sitting in the lounge. Then I remembered that a friend from England lived in a settlement near Be'er Sheva, and when I asked where the place was I was told it was quite near — less than three kilometres and only half a kilometre from the road. It seemed one couldn't miss it. Just over half an hour's walk? Why, I could be there and back before Mosheh was finished with his business!

Soon I was on the road. What nonsense all that fuss about the heat! Just nice and warm like a fine summer's day in England. And what a landscape! On the left, range upon range of hills rising up into Yehuda. On the right some isolated hills, and between

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them an unrestricted view into an amazing distance. And best of all, no one to talk to for a change! I was free to make my own associations come to life. I could just imagine the patriarchs pasturing their sheep on these very hills. Avraham welcoming guests who had trudged along this age-old caravan road ...

My mind was rather full of Avraham just then. The night before, we had been talking about him quite a lot. Zahavah, — that's Mosheh's wife — was a teacher too (most young women of our circle were) and she had brought up the kind of questions the girls asked her. Very sharp these Sabra children, I must admit, and their questions by no means easy to answer. We had been discussing this commentary and that, until I remarked: "I wish I could ask Avraham himself what really happened." And Mosheh — he always makes bad jokes — had promptly rejoined: "Don't be in such a hurry, you'll meet him soon enough ..." Very funny!

All the same, I did wish Avraham was there. For one thing he could have given me a drink and some shade. It was getting a little hot and the strong light was becoming a little too much for me — I had not taken my sunglasses, I can't think why not. And I was getting tired, too. I must have walked an hour already and hadn't passed any settlement near enough to the road to be the one they had described.

In any case there were decidedly more turnings and branchings than the people in the hotel had mentioned. The trouble with me is that I speak Hebrew like a native, or anyway like a Me'ah She'arrim man who has been to America; the immigrants round here aren't too hot in Hebrew themselves so they take me for another Israeli. I suppose that's why no one bothered to explain these little snags to me.

I wished I could stop somewhere and rest a little. But just then there was no shade in sight, no settlement or even any human being in sight. No wait! There *was* something: believe it or not, a Bedouin encampment! I could distinctly see the black tents, and quite a lot of them too, not half a mile down the road, a little to the left of the road — and sheep, lots of them, all over the hillside, lying down most of them, ruminating, I suppose. Well, I would go to the camp and sample their famous hospitality. They were bound to be friendly so near the town and in broad daylight.

I quickened my step — or rather I tried to — my feet didn't quite respond. The heat was getting to me after all. Lucky I had come to this place in time. They seemed to have spotted me, too. There was a lad running towards me, about fourteen maybe. Very Jewish-looking he was, if you know what I mean, and with nothing like the snotty-nosed "I-don't-know-you" bearing of some of the Arabs I had seen in the towns. Perhaps they got like that when they grew up. He wasn't dressed in the white shirt and headcloth of those Arabs either. In fact I had never seen such a kind of dress before, except on some picture in an archaeology book — Egypt, was it? Yes, probably Egypt, by the shape of that picture: a long line of people, men, women and children, all dressed more or less alike in a clinging long garment, white, with spots or flowers in a regular pattern. That was what the boy was wearing, except that he had a huge headcloth

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draped over his arms as well, rather like a tallit … So many different kinds of people in Israel nowadays, I thought, you don't know whom you'll meet next.

He had come up to me and made a very deep bow, all in one sweeping movement, very oriental and quaint. And then he spoke. It sounded very Arabic, full of gutturals, but I quickly realized that he was speaking Hebrew. Not modern Hebrew either, by the style of it, you understand; rather a classical Hebrew, Biblical I should call it, although he used a number of words that I didn't recognize from the Bible and that I had to guess at rather than understand.

And then I remembered what it said under that picture:

"Semites bringing tribute." It may have been the heat, of course, but I tell you from that moment on I was not really surprised at anything that followed.

What the boy was saying in a rather long-winded and embellished way was to the effect that I, his lord and master, would honour and delight his grandfather — the Haham or whatever I should call him — if I would have the goodness to step into his tent and accept whatever little thing he could put before me. His grandfather was very old apparently and was quite heartbroken at not being able to come out and welcome me as was fitting.

What did I tell you? Oriental hospitality at its classical best.

I did my best to reply in style and went along with the boy. Or to tell the truth, I went very much leaning on him, for he had noticed the shape I was in and insisted on supporting me. But I reached the big tent eventually — quite a pavilion, raised up on poles so that one had a view of the countryside in every direction. And there was the Haham, a majestic but friendly white-bearded man, dressed in gold-embroidered damask, getting up from his ivory-studded couch just as I came in and bowing to me before I could get my own greeting in. Greetings completed, he indicated to me that I should please make myself comfortable on a couch that felt like foam-rubber but actually was built up from layers of sheepskin rugs. Drinks were brought — I found the chilled buttermilk best, which was served from a jug kept inside one of those huge water-jars of porous clay — and when they saw that I still did not feel comfortable they brought me a wet headcloth and led me to a smaller tent to rest a while.

Soon I felt as fit as a fiddle; the boy took me to an ablution tent to "wash my feet." I used the opportunity to wash thoroughly with the water the boy poured for me. Then we went back to the reception tent and I was left alone with my host whilst we waited for the meal to be served — for he had begged me to stay — if not for the night, at least for a meal and until the heat went down — and I had accepted gratefully. I had forgotten all about my appointment with Mosheh. In fact, I had forgotten everything except the wonder of the old man's smile and the extraordinary quality of his conversation.

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At first I was tongue-tied — a very unusual condition for me. Quite frankly, I was over-awed by the splendour of my host's presence. The radiant friendliness of his smile was something I had never before experienced; and when he turned his eyes full upon me — well, I am not normally addicted to deep emotional experiences — quite the reverse, in fact — but those eyes — they somehow suffused my whole being in one great glow of kindliness and love. I remember thinking to myself: "This is what it must be like to look into the eyes of an angel — or a patriarch."

But very soon the boy brought wine, in primitive-looking leather flasks, and after the first few sips I began to feel more at ease. It was good wine, exceptionally good, in fact, in spite of the slight tang of the leather which clung to it, and I began to enter more into the conversation, which up to now had been slightly one-sided. My host, whose name I didn't quite catch — Ibraheem something-or-other, it sounded like — led me on to speak about what interested me most at the moment. This was that problem of Avraham I had been thinking about. In fact, probably due to the influence of local colour it had been in the forefront of my mind since that morning. Seeing that my host was obviously the distinguished Haham of a nomadic Jewish community at the very least, I decided to put the problem to him. You never know, I thought, he might have an original view-point to put forward; these other-world types very often had.

What I got was something utterly unexpected; something that even today I can neither properly explain — nor forget ...

I put forward my problem. I told him that I couldn't understand why our forefather Avraham, who risked his life against impossible odds to rescue his nephew Lot from the clutches of the Four Kings, nevertheless refused to raise a finger to protect his own wife when she was taken prisoner first by Pharaoh and then again by Abimelech.

My host's reaction to this innocent question shocked and amazed me. Those eyes were again turned full upon me, but this time when I looked into their depths, I saw a fierce glare that felt almost like anger burning there — a glare which seemed to penetrate to the core of my being and burn up all my insides.

My host spoke. His voice came to me as if from a great distance, but I could not mistake the vibrant intensity of his reply.

"Fight Pharaoh?" said the voice. "Die fighting for my rights? For my honour?" The ironic intonation was heavy. "That might count as a noble thing with the Philistines or other sea-peoples, but in the way of G-d one does not die for pride or for honour. One prays, one suffers, if need be, accepting the justice of G-d, but one survives. There are better things to use one's life for than as a monument to one's own glory.

"But Lot?" went on that voice, riveting me to the spot, paralysed, but with my heart wildly beating. "Lot? — I bring heaven and earth to witness that this was for no other purpose than for the glory of G-d! To lay down one's life for justice and for right — *that* is a truly noble act — what greater deed can a man do than to stand up for justice and

right? *That* is man's task in the world — do you hear me?" He seemed almost angry. His words came at me with such strength of feeling that he seemed to be shouting at me from far away ...

In my disturbance of mind I must have got up and walked out of the tent, for the next thing I knew a piercing light was hurting my eyes, and through the light came half-a-dozen figures carrying rifles. "There he is!" exclaimed a voice.

Then they were standing around me and the one with the red Ma'gen-David on his arm was feeling my pulse. "What's the matter?" I asked in a confused way. "Leave me alone!"

I had spoken in English and it was Mosheh who answered. "Take it easy, old man, we'll soon have you right. You've had sunstroke, but since you've survived till now you'll be alright. What on earth possessed you to go and sleep in the open?"

"In the open?" I protested. "Why, I've been under canvas all the time, and they looked after me fine, I can tell you."

"Under canvas?" wondered Mosheh. "You mean those Bedouins down the road? But they've sworn they hadn't seen anything of you, and they haven't, I'm sure. They wouldn't have let you out again in your condition; it's against their principles. You can't imagine what a time I had when you were missing. The frontier police here have been driving round for hours until we spotted you."

And so it went on. According to Mosheh I had collapsed by the roadside and dreamt the rest, and so thought the others. My only ally was the doctor. He was quite amazed at how quickly I had made a complete recovery but even he would only say that if I *had* had sunstroke it was all gone and he couldn't find a single symptom. And indeed I reached the jeep under my own steam and feeling perfectly fit, though I *was* grateful for the blanket they gave me — the night was pretty cold.

When I got back to my hotel room and the familiar electric light and h & c, I was almost ready to come round to their way of thinking. The whole episode began to seem most unreal, and I was hard put to explain it even to myself. It would certainly be more comfortable to write it all off as a touch of sunstroke and try to forget all about it — if possible ...

But then, sitting on the bed, I discovered that I was still clutching something. I looked at it. It was a leather wine flask of very peculiar make. I have since taken it to an archaeologist friend of mine. He seemed very excited when I showed it to him and said it seemed to be of a kind which was in use in Canaan in the second millennium B.C.E. — in fact, in the time of Avraham. He has persuaded me to let him send it away for the radio-activity dating test but he's furious with me for not being able to tell him clearly how I got hold of it. Frankly, I am not at all sure myself what to make of it all.