

¶Multiply a man's domestic operations by nine—

## THE MAN WITH NINE WIVES

FROM the veranda of Bab El Assi where we were seated we could see the Bay of Tangiers, a deep quiet blue.

Hamed's voice had a trace of bitterness in it.

"We did not give up the practice of polygamy because we wanted to do so, but through necessity. Sometimes," he sighed, "I read articles and books which the Europeans write about the changes in our customs. They talk about 'the transformation of Mohammedan minds . . .', 'The evolution of the Moroccan psychology . . .'. What do they know! Our likes haven't changed. It is our pocketbooks, not our hearts that have become impoverished."

He stopped and turned to look at some one who was coming out on the veranda. It was an old man.

"Sidi Abd-el-Aziz!"

Sidi Abd-el-Aziz came toward our table with outstretched hands.

"Hamed!"

Hamed introduced me to the newcomer. He was a rich merchant of Rabat. It seems that he was a protégé of the French

whom he had greatly helped during the World War.

"The Spanish are almost like our own brothers," he assured me courteously.

He sat down by our side on the cushions and ordered tea.

"Sidi Abd-el-Aziz," observed Hamed, "can talk to you about women. He has many wives."

"Really!"

The old man nodded in the affirmative, but he seemed to be absorbed in his own thoughts.

"It would be interesting to learn your opinion of women," I ventured.

"The Prophet says 'Women and perfume are the joy of life,'" he declared. He was lost in thought once more.

It was growing dark. In the pale evening sky, stars began to appear. A low voice wailed in the distance, near the sea.

"Do you know what he is singing?" murmured Hamed. "It is the *Ya Asafi* . . ."

*Ya Asafi* (The Sorrows) is a song about the loss of Andalusia.

*What a shame that that time is past, Oh, my Lord. Those days of happiness and pleasure, the sweet nights . . . Ay, my*

*lost Andalusia, never shall I forget you.*

It was a heartrending lament, much like the wailing of the *flamenco* songs of Southern Spain.

Soon Sidi Abd-el-Aziz, who was still meditating, murmured—

“Yes, I am a polygamist.”

I looked at him without knowing what to say.

“I have four wives and five concubines. Nine women in all. And eighteen sons and daughters. When I leave early in the morning to go to the mosque,” he continued, speaking with lowered head, as if talking to himself, “Mesauda, my first wife and her three sons come to kiss me good-bye. I kiss them. Then my second wife, Halima, and her five children stand on tiptoes and offer me their foreheads. I kiss them, too. Then Baya, the third wife, and her four little ones lovingly surround me. I kiss them. Afterward, I must kiss Safia, Leila and her child, Muny and hers, Zohra and hers, Nadyema and hers, and Aziza and her child. That’s twenty-seven kisses. When I return, Mesauda with her three sons, Halima and her five children, Baya and her four, and Safia and Leila and Muny and Zohra and Nadyema and Aziza, each one with her little one, are at the door

waiting for me to kiss them again. That’s twenty-seven more kisses. Later in the morning, when I leave for work, the nine women and eighteen children line up again at the door to say good-bye to me. And I kiss them again. They are there at noon when I come home for lunch. I kiss them then. And they come in the afternoon to say good-bye before I go for a walk. I kiss them then, too. They wait for me toward evening, at the hour of my return home. And I kiss them all once more. Each day,” concludes Sidi Abd-el-Aziz, after a brief pause, that no doubt he employed in multiplying 27 by 6, “I bestow one hundred and sixty-two kisses.”

“Once,” continued the polygamist, after a brief silence, “I bought Safia a radio. It was 11 a. m. when it was first turned on, and at 11:05 Mesauda leaned her head coaxingly on my shoulder, ‘Won’t you make me a present of some music like Safia’s, my husband?’ I bought her a radio. When Halima saw it she rushed to me. ‘Halima,’ she sighed, embracing me wildly, ‘has given you five descendants, O husband, and you deny to her what you give to others.’ I bought another radio. Then Baya came and threw herself at my feet, wailing with anger. ‘Am I so wretched, Abd-el-

Aziz, that I don't deserve to be remembered. Let me return to my parents' home!' I bought her one so that she wouldn't leave me. I bought another for Leila to stop her crying. And another for Muny to keep her from committing suicide, and still another for Zohra to save her from a very convenient nervous breakdown. And one for Nadyema to prevent her from going on a hunger strike. And another for Aziza to get her to stop her shrieking.

"In the evening the following programs could be heard at one and the same time in my patio: a jazz band from Toulouse which was playing 'Yes, We have No Bananas'; a gentleman from Argel who was reading a weather report; a violin recital from Paris; some bagpipes from London interpreting a Scottish dance; a young lady from Milan who was singing 'goodby' from *Tosca*; a chorus from Barcelona singing a holy church song; and an orchestra from Moscow playing the *Internationale*."

"Must you always," I asked, "kiss all your wives whenever you go out or come home? Wouldn't it be enough for you to kiss one or two? And

wouldn't you have been able to leave one of them without a radio?"

The old man interrupted me in amazement. "Kiss some and not others? Give presents to some and not to others? The Prophet has said 'Be careful not to despise any of your wives.' Besides, do you think that *they* would allow it. They are continually after you, eaten up with jealousy, ready to weep and wail and to scratch your eyes out or poison you as soon as you show the least preference. Those tales of harem favorites which circulate through Europe are pure fantasy. In the harem there is no favorite. I feel sorry for the man who tries to have a favorite. But you can imagine what a man's life is like when he has to multiply all his domestic operations by nine."

There was a pause. Hamed was dozing, half reclining on the cushions. Sidi Abd-el-Aziz was gazing as if hypnotized at the sea which had grown threatening and dark.

"Only Allah is great," he sighed after a while.

"The main thing is to be in good health," I replied.—*Vicente Sánchez Ocaña, reprinted from Estampa, Madrid.*

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