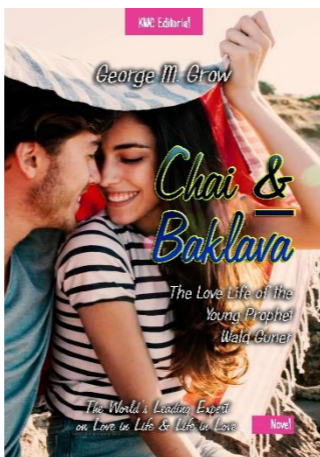


George M. Grow
Chai & Baklava
Romance

"Nobody else brings them
closer to themselves"



From the series
The Books of Life®



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The Sihdi

The inconspicuous building with the desolate front yard, Wald, the men from the pier and others entered was reached over the embankment, the bridge across the lake, through a whiff of nutmeg and cinnamon, over some hundred yards and a bleak pergola. The hall on the second floor is to his taste just insomuch as it gives him an acid eructation. He doesn't understand yet that this emptiness fulfills a ritual purpose. Neither curtains, nor carpets, plants, mirrors, pictures or posters were to be seen, and in view of the rows of tables, the hall reminds him of a big classroom in a barracks. On the wall, where, in this sense, the blackboard should be, there is a big Arabic lettering in black. In front of it, two rows of small prayer mats, and along the left side, he sees five big, square windows. Wald, who couldn't resist the heart-breaking encouragements to accompany them and, nonetheless, allowed them to push him from the pier into this spacious room, has not yet sighted what the windows open onto, since he is pressed from all sides. For whatever reason, everybody wants to interact with him, and they pester and shove him, tug at his clothes enough to panic him till Ibrahim exercises his authority.

"Step aside, listen to reason!" he calls, while Uwais and Afdal pushes the most intrusive ones of them aside. "Show some respect, away with you, and you? Stand aside!"

At long last, Wald is granted some space. He ties up his hair and adjusts his attire. Then Ibrahim offers him a chair, and while he is walking away, he asks whether he takes water or tea.

“Tea,” Wald calls in return, while he sits himself down.

“Sugar?”

“One,” he responds. Then he crosses his legs, straightens his tie and looks around, occasionally leaning back and rocking the chair.

Several of the fifty or sixty people at the tables gape at him. Some whisper, some stare out of the windows and some of them give him a smile. An immigrant from Benin spreads rumors that the Sihdi will be right there, and a woman with a bouquet of wild flowers says that the Sihdi is her oracle. “At some time in the past,” Uwais knows between nips of tea, “the Sihdi met a great master and took classes for eleven years.” “He freed my sister from her dreadful headaches,” a man in the same frock utters, and other praises are given till Ibrahim approaches with two steaming hot cups, puts them down and blows on his fingers. Then, after Wald has enjoyed a sip to the fullest, they start quizzing him about his origin, his profession and his wife until this moment of shock: “The Sihdi!!!” several voices ring out. Then a moving silence reigns, which, in Wald’s mind, is both greeted and accompanied by the procession devoutly entering the room. Only the two marshals clearing the way for the procession through the crowd spoil the silence so that it seems even more silent, more mature and even more

conscious in his ears. Then, in order to get a sneak peek at the cortege over the many heads, he, who has often practiced for an uprising in his youth, stands on the chair and catches sight of a small, hunchbacked man as old as Methuselah. At the beginning, it seems as if the man as old as the hills in the midst of the procession was floating, but when the line of people has turned into the center aisle, it becomes clear to him that the man, who only can be the Sihdi, is borne aloft on a chair-like construction made of wood. And when the cortege has stopped directly in front of his row of tables and the people shy away, he can see and hear the old man well, who, without even looking at him, points at him and says to the crowd,

“Well, and this is the young man you’d like me to have a look at! Then he glimpse at my friend and says, “This boy looks a bit unworldly to me, anyway!”

“Proworldly,” Wald amends, whereupon the Sihdi lets out a boisterous laughter and goes on laughing so happily and heavily that Wald promptly falls for the small man on the litter.

And even if it is part of the mental conventions that people picture a man who has the reputation of possessing supernatural strengths to be quite exclusive, and people even think such a man has to have Rasputin’s piercing eyes, has to be dressed in a black caftan, that he has to have amulets dangling around his neck and his appearance has to be both wizened and green, in Wald’s view, despite of his Homeric laughter, his

timeworn, brown, partly threadbare coat and his fuzzy, white wrapped turban, the Sihdi is a references for a good life, mirrored in his lively, almost childlike face and his little, vibrant blue eyes looking at Ibrahim, who steps forward and says,

“All praise belongs to Allah. Allah is our refuge and the sustainer of life!” Then he points straightaway at Wald and says, “Our intuition tells us that he is the right one!”

Now, and this for the first time ever, the old man is looking at Wald; and without averting his gaze, he allows himself to be set down by the stewards and his dim eyes like those of a blood-hound skim over Wald’s face so that he can distinctly feel the old man’s breath. “A bright fellow, but young, very young,” the Sihdi asserts, when he has finished sniffing at him. Then he awkwardly directs himself to the other side of the table, sits down with the help of several hands and asks his interlocutor,

“Well, young man! What do you say to this suspicion? We are waiting for a messenger, but we don't precisely know what he looks like.”

“A blind date?”

“Definitely, that’s how you can term it,” the Sihdi responds, at what Wald mentions that this was not a problem, if the place and the date of the meeting are known. “We know the date but we don’t know the place,” explains the Sihdi, who seems to expect an urgent message from this courier.

“That sucks,” Wald utters. “If you knew the place, you could go there

now and wait till he comes, but if you merely know date and time, you'll most likely miss him."

"Miss him? No, no," the small, hunchbacked man retorts and stops him with a wave of his hand. "We have prepared this meeting for a long time, we have spoken innumerable prayers and performed the rituals meticulously, so why we should miss him?"

The point Wald has foreseen is reached now. He should get up and go, but since the old man's eyes, which seem to see right through you instantaneously without seeming hurtful, look such expectantly at him, that he remains in presence, clasps his hands and says that in this case, it was better to forget this meeting except the Sihdi actually has magic skills what he, however, does not believe in. "Faith can move mountains," emphasizes a young man, on which Wald says that it was rather the other way round if only very, very slowly: that in fact mountains can move faith. Heard this, the Sihdi grunts somewhat, and a woman utters to my friend,

"Yarham waldek, may Allah be merciful upon you and your parents!" Then the Sihdi smiles again and signals the marshal on his left to step forward. Then the marshal says solemnly,

"The venerable Sihdi, may Allah preserve him for another many years, is a master of perfect abilities. These abilities are based on the power of concentration, on the control of the body and breathing or on magic. By the kindly help of Allah, he cured quite a number of goners. He gave blind

men their eyesight and caused lame men to walk. His closeness to Allah enables him. The Almighty is our resort and is the source of magic of which our Sihdi asks for those who hold The Almighty dear in their heart!"

Wald asks the marshal, the Sihdi and the other ones if they have seen the rationalists at their demonstrations in town yet.

"What do those know about the Power," the Sihdi asks, shaking his head.

"Which Power?"

"The Power of Magic, boy!"

"So you haven't seen them," Wald supposes.

"Of course, I have," the Sihdi replies. "I saw them making faith healers, men of God and exorcists look like fools, which I happen to greet with enthusiasm. I myself know some rationalists; they take part in our rituals. Verily, fact is there are people whose eyes are opened through rationalists and there are rationalists whose eyes are opened through magicians, perhaps even your eyes?"

"If you don't do the Sihdi's bidding," a shabby man with his forefinger raised up threatens, "the Sihdi let you disappear from the place!"

Wald puts his glasses straight and says this was inconceivable.

"What, that the Power is not powerless?" the aged, ebullient man asks and laughs, his gold teeth flashing. "Boy, oh boy, in this case, you must inform yourself a bit better, I thought you were religious!"

"Indeed, I am."

"Yet you don't believe in miracles?"

“Of course, the Power has power,” a woman confirms.

“It, therefore, is called The Power and not The Powerless,” a man finds logically consistent.

“Miracles yes, magic no,” Wald replies to the Sihdi’s question and reveals in a rapid speed that the isolated miracle, which should lift the burden from a man’s shoulder by mysteriously inverting the laws of physics or by enlightening a man by a magical stroke of conversion, is simply confused with the lightning bolt of love, of which the novelists have written. “Ha, ha, ha!” the old Sihdi delightedly breaks out in laughter while Wald, who also credits this emotional outburst not against himself but for the Sidhi, is taking the inward-turn and, in order to sort out this matter, digs two theorems or, as he calls it, parameters out of his chest of order: the “material deism”, according to which miracles do not occur under this sun within the consciousness of plurality, within the material things but within the consciousness of unity as far as we are in line with big deeds, and the theorem that states that only the same can see the same or the similar can see the similar, so that man has to go in unity in order to see it and its miracles, as well a man needs a great understanding of mathematics in order to judge the work of an mathematician or has to learn English in order to adequately speak with Englishmen. “If I had a plan of the I-Court at hand,” Wald says, the Sihdi and his friends would have grasped the whole story right away.”

“Aha,” I utter and feel as if I was

reminded of something at the beginning of our meeting. “Is this the project your mother was trying to talk you out of, that would lead to mankind’s ascent and your demise,” I ask. Then he smiles at me, provokes my eyes to look at his forefinger and lifts his briefcase onto his lap. And since he first has to find what he is searching for in his briefcase, I lay the pen down and turn around...

8 pages farther

New Moon

“Everything to your full satisfaction?”

“If I survive the sugar shock, I’ll be fine,” Wald replies to the waiter’s question whether the cheesecake was to his liking. And after the busboy has sloughed off behind the bar and I ask myself if it can be really true what he has been serving me and amounts to the idea that just as I’m not the creator of my body, God is not the creator of the universe, since He Himself is the universe, that the same way each of us is a being of flesh and blood and each of us has a character, the universe is His body, suffused by His character, which was recognizable by good cognition called “internication” and I have signaled him my readiness by nodding and holding the pen over the paper, he, the old Sihdi, the boatswains and the two marshals leave the assembly hall after my friend had shaken, held and squeezed quite a number of hands. And while my fountain pen

glides at a steep angle to the left over the paper, the group gets into the hall, takes the creaking staircase and steps out into the nocturnal gloom. In his mind, in their modest, wide-cut cloaks, the Sihdi and the men from the campfire look like bats while the two marshals, illuminating the way with lanterns, as the Kashmiris use them under their coats, are clad in brown, fluttery garments as Wald knows them sufficiently from his grandfather Joe. Bustling, once rushing forward, then waiting and rushing forward again, they conduct the group through the tunnel of leafless ivy into the main street, where an idyllic sea of light opens before the night's revelers. To Wald, the ocean of lanterns looks like the reflection of the stars. He cannot see the moon but he can make out the Big Dipper both above and below. Wald is surprised at the bustle at this late hour, and he is careful to do not push against anything or anybody. The Sihdi, awkwardly and unsteady on his thin legs, has linked arms with him so that he doubles his caution; but then a loud honking sounds, which causes the old, half-blind man to dig his nails into Wald's upper arm. His fingernails hurt, and Wald contracts his biceps to offer more support.

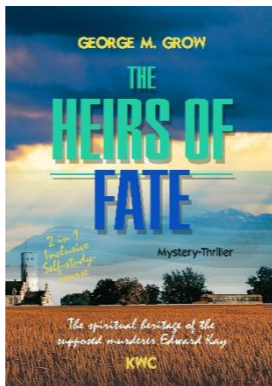
“You ass!” the Sihdi rants and raves behind the stubborn moped rider; and as soon as they have regrouped, they nearly have a collision with two cyclists who, as it seems, are trying to cycle between them all wagging their handlebars. Then, unexpectedly, even with a slight yearning,

reminded of the streetlight paradise, as Wald calls the much-cursed traffic abatement measures in his Viennese residential district, two women run up to them, bow their heads before the venerable Sihdi and present him two bouquets of flowers.

“Oh, my, what wonderful gerbera,” Wald calls enthused and giggles when the Sidhi inadvertently wipes Wald’s face with the bouquets till the marshals attend to them...

End of the reading

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