

THE ONE-ARMED THIEF

By Kachi A. Ozumba (Nigeria)

Five years as a beggar at the dusty Maraba Junction had taught Abdul how to play on the emotions of men like an artiste. He knew the face to wear to extort pity from passers-by and get the coins jingling into his bowl, and the one to wear to plague the tight-fisted with a guilt that would keep them awake at night. This magistrate will never sleep well again if she convicts me, he thought to himself as he stood in the dock of the Abuja Magistrate Court.

'Your Worship, this man is a thief,' said the prosecutor. 'The complainant caught him bolting away with his sack of rice.'

The magistrate's gaze was unsettling. Her eyes shone with the wisdom and cunning of forefathers, and seemed out of place in a woman of forty-something years. Abdul met her gaze with sad, dopey eyes, then lowered his head and stared at his feet. It was a combination that had never failed him: the soulful eyes of a dog and the bashful manners of a virgin bride.

'Your Worship, this is the kind of ineptitude that the Nigerian police are known for,' said Abdul's lawyer. 'How can a one-armed man steal a 50KG sack of rice? Even I cannot lift that sack onto my back with my two arms. My client informs me, and I verily believe him, that the complainant swore to use any means to eject him from his begging post at the front of the complainant's foodstuff shop.'

The squint in the magistrate's eyes betrayed the battle that emotion and reason waged in her mind. Abdul lifted the stump of his right arm and scratched his face with it. His forearm had been severed from the elbow and the scarred stump peered out, pathetic and ugly, from the rolled sleeves of his once-white dashiki.

'This man is not a first offender...' said the prosecutor.

Abdul's lawyer sprang up. 'Your worship, the prosecutor is being unfair. My client might have been a thief, but that was years ago before he lost his arm to sharia law in Zamfara state . . .'

'We have seven cases of theft involving him in our files,' the prosecutor continued. 'Your worship, believe me, notorious thieves like him don't change easily.'

The cool breeze blowing into the courtroom failed to dry the sweat that had gathered on Abdul's brow. Abdul shook his head slowly. He stared down at the sack of rice slumped on the aisle between rows of black-robed, blond-wigged men and women, and a sigh escaped his lips. It was the long-suffering sigh of a martyr resigned to his persecution.

The magistrate's eyes blazed fiercely as she spoke to the prosecutor, 'Wicked man. You're supposed to prosecute not persecute. Have you no heart left in you?' Her countenance softened as she turned to Abdul. 'Please accept the apologies of this court. You can go home. And take the sack of rice with you as compensation. Go on, carry the sack of rice and go home right now!'

Abdul could not believe his ears. He spun round and stepped out of the dock. Two strides took him to the sack of rice. He grabbed it, dropped on one knee, touched his head to the ground and, with a sudden flick of his back and arm, heaved the sack onto his back.

He struggled back to his feet, bent by the weight of the sack. 'Thank you very much, your worship,' he said, panting.

'Thank you too,' the magistrate said. 'Police, arrest him!'