

APRICOTS from ISPAHAN

By

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"The great two-handed blade rose high, paused an instant ere it began its shearing sweep."

THE sultan Schamas-ad-Din of Djalan-batû yawned prodigiously, rubbed his eyes, blinked, and adjusted his turban. An attendant rearranged the pile of cushions wherefrom the prince had emerged, so that His Highness might more comfortably resume the sitting posture from which he had slumped an hour ago.

A second attendant, kneeling, presented a tray of sweetmeats and a flagon of chilled wine. A third offered the sultan the stem of a narghileh. But the prince wished neither to drink nor to smoke.

"Absál," said the sultan to the scribe who sat at the foot of his mas-

ter's dais, "of what were we speaking?"

"These papers, my lord."

The wrinkled, leathery old scribe thrust before the sultan's sleepy eyes a bundle of papers and documents.

"Quite so, Absál."

Another world-engulfing yawn.

"Take them out and attend to them. I am very busy today. And by the way, have the apricots arrived?"

"Not yet, my lord. It is a long, hard trip from Persia."

The scribe withdrew, scowling at the great sheaf of papers that represented the neglected affairs of the realm.

The sultan sucked a wisp of smoke from his narghileh, sipped a bit of wine, stroked his curled beard, then turned to the eunuch who guarded the entrance to the harem.

“Saoud, didn’t you pick up a Kashmiri dancing girl the other day?”

“She awaits my lord’s pleasure.”

And without further command, the eunuch entered the seraglio to summon the Kashmiri.

From behind a carven teakwood screen at the sultan’s right came the wailing, piping, mournful notes of reed instruments, and the faint pulsing of atabals. The concealed musicians had been awaiting their cue, even as had the Kashmiri girl who was about to make her debut before the sultan.

The piping subsided. Then came three thin, vibrant, shivering notes of a gong; and, as the sighing, whining reeds resumed their cadence, the Kashmiri entered the presence.

Silent, shadowlike, she picked her way across the tiled floor, each step a formal pose to display her slim, serpentine perfection for the sultan’s approval. And then she danced with weaving, twining steps and sinuous arms: lithe, wondrous swift, with gesture and contortion that aroused even the phlegmatic despot from his lethargy. A silken veil rippling in the breeze; a moonbeam shimmering on a sword-blade; a wisp of smoke curling from a censer; all these, but surely not a woman it was whose gilded limbs gleamed before the nodding prince. Neither bracelet nor anklet tinkled; for this being her first appearance, she was without jewels, without any tokens of the master’s approval.

Again the gong behind the screen shivered its thin, rustling note. The Kashmiri sank in obeisance before her lord to receive from his hand some trophy to flaunt before her rivals in the seraglio.

Schamas-ad-Din drew from his pouch a small, heavy purse, weighed it in his hand a moment, and replaced it. Then from his turban he removed the wondrous Father of Fire, a great, livid ruby that flared fiercely from its bed of diamonds.

“You are from the Valley of Kashmir? And your name?”

“Istalani, my lord.”

The girl’s eyes gleamed welcome to the magnificence that smoldered before her.

“Ah, yes, I remember now. Kashmir . . . a land of rich gardens. . .”

The sultan fingered the massive ruby and its adamantine companions.

“Rich gardens . . . the finest and loveliest of my apricot trees, even now on the way from Ispahan, shall be named after you,” concluded the sultan as with a magnificent gesture he dismissed the girl and replaced the glowing jewel in his turban.

Whereupon Schamas-ad-Din arose from his dais and went into the gardens to prepare with his own hands the earth that was to receive the long-awaited apricot trees.

AFFAIRS of state and the administrative duties of a monarch were nothing, and less than nothing, to the Sultan Schamas-ad-Din of Djalabatû. Absâl, the ancient secretary and ex-captain of the guard he had inherited from his father, had the administration of affairs so well in hand that the horticultural prince had but to sign on the dotted line, then spend the remainder of the day in his gardens. At times, of course, he would in person dispense capricious justice in the halls of public or private audience, and at times pause for an hour of soporific music and the intricate dances of his sultanas; but these were after all but distractions from his important mission in life, that of pottering about in his extensive gardens. Here, certainly, was the perfect, un-

troubled life of a prince who reigned painlessly and without care.

The following morning, as was his custom, Absál awaited the sultan in his study and arranged for his inspection the previous day's accumulation of papers: petitions, communications from neighboring princelings, statements from the *Feringhi* engineers who worked the rich mineral deposits of Djalan-batû and for the privilege paid royalties so heavy that the taxation of the sultan's subjects had become a useless formality. And all these affairs were handled as capably by Absál as they had been administered by the chief wazir whose recent death had left the scribe heir to the duties, though not the rank, of the deceased.

The responsibilities were Absál's, though not the title, the prestige, nor the privilege of that high office. And for this the old man had to thank Zaid, the court astrologer, the crafty star-gazer who played well and skillfully on the sultan's credulity. Schamas-ad-Din had informally promised Absál the post of chief wazir; and then he had become evasive. In due course the truth leaked out, reaching the scribe's ears in a fairly complete report of the conversation that had wrecked his chances of advancement.

"... Absál doubtless is learned, but he is simple-minded . . . lacking in the astuteness requisite to a chief wazir, one who must partake in a measure of my lord's cunning and shrewdness . . . consider, my lord, the unhappy configuration, here in the sixth house. And see, here in the ascendant, what unfavorable signs . . . surely my lord will not consider elevating Absál to that high position when all the omens and all the stars are against it. . ."

And then the sultan had side-stepped, asking the astrologer who, then, he would recommend. Whereat the astrologer had dissembled, not

deeming it wise at that time to offer his own uncle as a candidate; for even the sultan's obtuseness had its limits.

All this Absál learned and in a measure verified by seeing that day by day the uncle of the astrologer became more and more prominent at court. But the scribe could do no more than curse all stars and all star-gazers, and patiently wait for the opportunity that would enable him to discredit his enemy.

The scribe had scarcely commenced his day's work when Zaid entered, laden with charts, and resplendent in the garb of his office.

"And with you be peace," returned Absál to the astrologer's salutation, then resumed his task.

Before the scribe had arranged the portfolio of documents in heaps according to their nature and ultimate disposal, the sultan himself entered, preceded by eight cadaverous Annamite fan-bearers, and followed by his personal attendants.

"A thousand years!" greeted Zaid and the scribe as they made their salaam to the prince.

"What news this morning, Absál?"

"The *Feringhi* engineers seem bent on robbing us."

"And what of my apricot trees?" interrupted the sultan, before the scribe could report on the mining syndicate.

"They arrived last night, my lord. Here is a message from the head porter. Now as to the *Feringhi*. . ."

"Let that wait. You should have notified me last night the moment those trees arrived. Zaid, determine a day propitious to their planting. And you, Absál, check them in immediately, and note their condition carefully. Report to me as soon as you are through."

The astrologer busied himself with his charts.

Absál departed on his urgent mis-

sion, letting the affairs of the realm take care of themselves.

"Each worth its weight in gold, and more," reflected the scribe, as he checked those young apricot trees whose commonplace appearance belied their precious character, priceless in view of their long trip from Persia, and doubly so in view of the sultan's whim.

"Seventy-two . . . seventy-three . . . this one can not survive . . . seventy-four . . . this one has been scorched . . . seventy-five . . . someone's head will answer for this . . . seventy-six . . . seventy-seven . . . boy, the sultan spoke of forty trees; and there are over eighty in this lot."

"You are right, uncle. But look at their labels and you will see that they are not all apricot trees, even though they do look much alike. Half of them are nectarines."

"Well then, and did he also order nectarines?"

"No. But the head porter brought them along as a bit of speculation. It costs no more to carry eighty than forty. He will sell them in the *souk* today."

"So . . . well, help me sort them out. And by the way, I may buy some of those nectarines for my own garden. Gardening is the great game here . . . perhaps the road to royal favor," mused the scribe as he departed.

When Absál sought the sultan to inform him that the trees had been checked in and were in good condition, he found him still in conference with Zaid, who, with charts deployed, was laying his customary fog of astrological jargon.

"A few have been slightly damaged, my lord; but the count is nevertheless in excess of what you expected. I have just turned them over to the chief gardener."

"Allah forbid! I must plant them with my own hands, three days hence, at an hour to be named by Zaid. Tell

Musa . . . never mind, I'll tell him myself."

"But what of these papers, my lord?"

"Take them with you. I will be busy all day. You can handle them."

UPON leaving the sultan, Absál sought the head porter and bought the lot of nectarine slips, paying then and there the exorbitant price he demanded. This done, he made short work of affairs of state. But despite his haste, it was late in the afternoon before he was free to pursue some recently conceived plans of his own.

His first move was to go in search of Musa, the chief gardener; not at his house, but in the various *caravan-serai* and wine shops near the *souk*. In the third tavern he found Musa, drunk, as usual, but not, as Absál expected, riotously gleeful.

"Peace be with you, friend Musa," saluted the scribe.

The gardener returned the peace, and, flattered at the notice of so high a person, offered him wine. And with the wine he inflicted his latest grievance, told how the sultan had, in the presence of the gardeners under him, strictly forbidden him to touch those precious apricot trees; had forbidden him, Musa, to set out those accursed trees from Persia.

"Well now," thought Absál, as he heard the gardener's sorrows, "this is excellent. The chances are that I'll not even have to suggest it. . . Still . . . it might never occur to this ass of a gardener that it would be a rare jest to sprinkle salt about the roots of those fiend-begotten trees, and then watch them mysteriously wilt and die. . ."

After numerous drafts of Musa's wine, Absál contrived to put in a few words of his own.

"That is what I call lack of appreciation! To think of affronting you,

who for twenty years served his father, upon whom be peace!"

"And exceeding prayer!" interjected Musa. "That was bad enough; but that was but half of it."

The gardener gulped a glass of wine, grimaced fiercely, and simmered in his grievances.

"So. . . Really, you interest me strangely, Musa. Come to my house where we can talk in privacy, and drink Shirazi from the sultan's own cellar," suggested Absál.

And thus it was that shortly after sunset, the scribe and the chief gardener reeled across the courtyard of the palace, chanting in broken, uncertain cadence. The gardener's gloom was alternated with flashes of his usual good humor. With song and denunciation drunkenly mingled, they tottered into Absál's quarters; and, upon the advent of the scribe's servant with a jar of Shirazi, began anew the discussion of their several sorrows.

"Drink wine, oh my brother, for the world is but a breath of wind," hiccupped Absál, who was scarce as drunk as he seemed.

"Iblis fly away with your wine," protested the gardener.

But unable to resist the old man's invitation to drink the master's wine, he drained the glass at a draft.

"And the black hands of Abbadon strangle all sultans and all astrologers!"

"Especially all astrologers," suggested Absál.

"Especially all sultans!" contradicted Musa.

"Well now, friend, you have your grievances. But why feel so bitter about it? The chances are that the gardeners under you did not even hear the sultan's words."

Musa stared somberly into the depths of his Cairene goblet.

"A mere trifle, that. Come now, Musa, tell me the truth," wheedled the scribe. "What is on your mind?

If I remember rightly, you suggested. . ."

"Many things. Remember, ten days ago, they sold a Kashmiri girl in the *souk*? Lovely as the morning star. . ."

"Remember? Well now, and were I not an old man, I would have bought her myself. And it seems to me that you were there, bidding heavily."

"To what end?" queried the gardener dolorously. "That fat eunuch outbid me in behalf of the sultan, that old wind-bag with more girls than he could name in a day. Oh, loveliest of all loveliness! And that father of many little piglings robbed me of her, bidding his great wealth against my poverty. And I could have bought her otherwise, for no one else was bidding against me."

"So that is the lay of the land, eh, Musa? Well, and I should grieve also, were I in your place. But is it not written. . ."

"Rot! You with your Persian verses. . ."

"Softly, Musa, softly! Do you suppose that the Kashmiri was pleased with the bargain? Surely she would prefer a handsome young fellow like yourself. And didn't she weep when Saoud led her to the palace?"

And then Absál, to whom came all palace gossip, related the tale of the Kashmiri's debut, and of her rich reward.

"Named a tree after her!"

The gardener spat disgustedly, then stared sourly at the gilded scrolls on the wall.

"Tell me, Musa, are you really a man of courage? Do you really want the girl? It happens that Saoud has me to thank that his head is still above his shoulders. He can refuse me nothing within reason. I think—I am sure it could be arranged."

The ensuing half-hour was spent in smothering the gardener's protesta-

tions of gratitude and assurances as to his courage.

THE succeeding three days were slow of passage, weary and anxious and nerve-racking to gardener and sultan alike. The former thought of the lovely Kashmiri behind the barred windows of the seraglio, looking, perhaps, into the very garden wherein he worked; the latter counted the hours and fretfully awaited the sunset of that day which would be favorable to the planting of those fine young apricot trees from Ispahan.

Absál went about his duties as usual. At times he permitted himself a shadow of a smile as his lean old talons stroked his long, white beard. And the smile widened whenever he caught sight of the astrologer. The old man even went so far as to purchase a silver-white *Kocklami* stallion, richly caparisoned after the Moorish fashion.

"A chief wazir," he reflected, "should be well mounted when he appears in public."

SUNSET of the third day. The astrologer, with the sultan at his side, stood in the garden, waiting for the lord of the sign to rise into the position of good omen. At last he lowered his astrolabe.

"Now, my lord, you may plant the first tree. The one named after the Kashmiri. And be assured that they will flourish and prosper in the shadow of your magnificence," he concluded, as he received from the sultan's hand a small purse, heavy as only gold could make it.

Musa stood by with the necessary implements, fidgeting and pæing about as the sultan with scrupulous care set each tree in place, checked its alinement with its mates, irrigated it with rose-water. And from time to time the chief gardener glanced over his shoulder at a cavernous,

barred window overlooking the garden.

The sultan, wearied at last by his own frenzy of enthusiasm, left the garden, followed by the astrologer.

No sooner had the gate closed after them than Absál emerged from the shadow of a plane-tree. The gardener approached at the scribe's low whistle.

"She is expecting you, Musa."

"And she will go?"

"She favors you. But it is for you to persuade her. Tap at the bars of that window. And if you can convince her of your worth, she will tell you of the means I have devised for her escape. I will be waiting with horses just outside the garden wall. You can pass the sentries at the Eastern Gate, and once clear, ride across the border into Lacra-kai, where you can rest secure under the protection of an old friend of mine high in the rajah's favor. Or would you rather not leave the service of the master you have served so long?"

"Iblis fly away with all sultans! . . . What's that?" whispered Musa, lowering his voice at the sound of a heavy step and the tinkle of spurs just outside the garden gate.

"Only the captain of the guard on his way to inspect the sentries along the city wall. If he is at the gate, you can not pass, even though I have bribed the sentries. So lose no time! And I will go out on the wall and detain him."

Whereupon Absál departed to seek the captain of the guard, leaving Musa to meet his fate at the barred window.

After several unsuccessful attempts, Musa drew himself to the crest of the wall, just beneath the window, whose sill was at about the height of his shoulders. With the garden keys he tapped lightly on the bars; waited a moment; tapped again.

Silence, save for the splashing waters of a near-by fountain; not a

sound came from within the seraglio. Standing there on the wall beneath that forbidden window, Musa felt all the eyes of Djalan-batû were impaling him. And from the blackness within he felt destruction blindly groping to reach and strangle him. He cursed the dazzling whiteness of the moonlight; shivered at the thought of what would befall him if his mad escapade were witnessed; damned all scribes and all Kashmiri girls; but, just on the point of sinking back into the garden, he collected himself and tapped again.

Out of the blackness of that forbidden apartment came a breath of jasmine, and musk, and nenufar; then a misty, nebulous whiteness materialized, took form before his eyes; the Kashmiri, lovely beyond the maddest of all desires, was at the window, her slim fingers curled about the bars that kept him from her. She smiled graciously, as might a goddess at the adoration of a clown.

Before that wondrous beauty Musa felt his courage evaporate. Who would dare aspire to such perfection?

"You are the Emir Musa whom the sultan outbid in the *souk*?"

She had mistaken him, a gardener, for an emir!

"Even so, Lady of Beauty. And I am here to take you to Lacra-kai, where I have powerful friends."

"You will take me . . . if I will go."

"But you will go. For I love and desire you as no man ever desired any woman."

"But the danger. . ."

"Hurry, and we are safe. Didn't you smile at me as I made my bids, and weep when they took you to the sultan? Surely you will go . . . to-night."

"I might . . . I will . . . if . . ." she conceded.

"If what?"

"If you will first uproot those accursed apricot trees to leave a fare-

well token for that old wine-skin who named one of them after me! They mock me day and night, those female hyenas! Anywhere, Musa. . . The bars of this window have been sawed at the top. So destroy those trees and then release me."

"We have no time."

"Nonsense."

"Then kiss me, Wondrous One."

"First uproot those wretched trees and I will deny you nothing. Hurry!"

A low, rippling laugh, half of delight, half of mockery, urged the gardener to his task as he dropped from his perch upon the wall.

Vengeance, and the Kashmiri, and then a fast horse. . .

"MY LORD," announced Absál, shortly after the hour of morning prayer of the following day, "there are numerous letters that require your personal attention."

"Write the answers yourself and have them ready for me when I return. I am going to inspect. . ."

"A thousand years!" saluted the captain of the guard as he clanked to a halt at the foot of the dais.

"Why this haste, Isa?" snapped the sultan. "Riots? Insurrection?"

"Worse than that, my lord. A madman entered the gardens last night and uprooted. . ."

"What? My apricots?"

"Even so. I captured him last night as he was uprooting the last tree."

"Carve him in a thousand pieces! Impale him! Flay him alive!" sputtered the sultan. "Bring him in immediately."

And then and there the sultan rushed into the garden, cursing the earth, and the heavens, and the powers that made them both. Isa was right: not a tree had been left in place. Each of those precious apricot slips had been uprooted and broken, and now lay wilting in the fierce

morning sun, ruined beyond all redemption.

"All the way from Ispahan," mourned Schamas-ad-Din as he staggered back to the throne-room, stunned and dumb from the sight of that ruin.

Coincident with the sultan's return from the scene of destruction was the arrival of Isa, followed by a detachment of the guard.

"The prisoner, my lord," announced the captain, indicating the heavily shackled culprit.

The sultan, upon recognizing Musa, exploded afresh.

Realizing the enormity of his offense, the gardener knew that there remained but to learn the sultan's fancy in unusual torments. There was no plea to be offered. With dumb resignation he faced the sultan's frenzy. To say that the Kashmiri had urged him to the deed would but add to the sultan's wrath.

As from a great distance now came the sultan's choking, apoplectic tirade. At the right of the dais stood the African executioner, fingering his crescent-bladed simitar. And there was the astrologer who had caused him, Musa, to be humiliated before his subordinates. Very trivial it all seemed now. And to the left sat the scribe, calm, expressionless, placidly stroking his long, white beard; there was the man who had urged him to his madness. It all seemed unreal, fantasmal. And the sultan's torrent of wrath rolled on, threatening torment without end for him, Musa.

Then the scribe smiled as one viewing a spectacle that, though wearisome, still has its amusing features. Absál, the cause of it all, smiling!

"It's his fault, my lord! The Kashmiri told me to destroy them. . ."

And thus, incoherently, he blurted forth the entire story.

The astrologer's exultation was boundless.

"Did I not prophesy, my lord?"

What manner of chief wazir would this old traitor Absál have been?"

The sultan choked; turned the color of an old saddle.

The African glanced from one culprit to the other, wondering which would first need his attention.

And then the captain of the guard put in a word.

"My lord, this man is stark mad. Absál had nothing to do with it. In fact, it was he who informed me that a maniac was uprooting your trees, and sent me to capture him. But I was too late to save the apricots."

"Even so, my lord," confirmed Absál, after crucifying the astrologer with a glance, "I found him in the *caravanserai*, drunk with wine and drugged with hasheesh. He babbled of the affront offered him when my lord with his own hands desired to plant those trees. And he raved of a Kashmiri girl. Look and see whether there are hoof-prints where he claimed that horses were waiting to take him and the girl to Lacra-kai. And see also whether the bars in that window are really sawed through. What? Am I to answer for the frenzy of a madman?"

All of which convinced the sultan.

"Anoint him in boiling oil! Bathe him with molten lead!" coughed the prince, indicating Musa. "No, carve him in small pieces here and now!"

Four members of the guard, each seizing a limb, dragged the gardener to his knees on the tiles before the dais.

The African advanced, gaged the distance, twice stamped the tiles and set himself, all poised to strike. The great two-handed blade rose high, paused an instant ere it began its shearing sweep . . .

"Stop!"

The clear voice of the old scribe startled the African with its note of command, so that the rhythm of his stroke was broken. He lowered his blade and glared at Absál.

The sultan leaped to his feet.

"He is not guilty," declared the scribe.

"What? Didn't he admit his guilt?"

"Even so, *he is not guilty.*"

"Explain yourself," snapped the sultan.

"Mountain of Wisdom," began the scribe, "why did you with your own hand set out those trees instead of letting Musa plant them?"

The scribe's calm insolence amazed the sultan into answering.

"Because the learned astrologer had named a fortunate day for their planting. And then this imbecile uproots them, after they had been set out under favorable omens."

"Even so, Light of the World," interposed the star-gazer. "The signs. . ."

"Now, by the Prophet's beard and by your life!" exulted Absál. "This astrologer is the true criminal! He said that such and such was the fortunate hour, and lo, behold them already dying! Uprooted and ruined! What manner of prophecy is this?"

"My lord. . ."

"Silence, fool! He is right. Son of an infidel pig, why did you name such an unfortunate hour?"

The African renewed his grip on the hilt of his simitar and sought the sultan's eye. Two members of the

guard advanced toward the star-gazer.

"Impale him in the square. Flay him alive and stretch his hide on the Eastern Gate," directed the sultan.

"And you, Absál, publish a proclamation banishing all astrologers from the city."

"Spare his worthless carcass, my lord," protested Absál. "Scourge him out of the city, but spare his life. For your apricots are safe and sound. I anticipated that this ass of an astrologer would cast a false horoscope, so I took your trees from the porters and in their place substituted nectarines, which you set out. And thus your apricots await your pleasure."

"**A**BSÁL," remarked the sultan that evening, as they watched Musa setting out the apricots from Ispahan, "this was all a most curious affair . . . this Kashmiri, by the way, is not really to my taste. Perhaps you would accept her as a token. . ."

"Peace and prayer upon my lord, but forty years ago, when I served in the guard, I had my fill of strife and battle. Why not give her to Musa, so that each may be the other's punishment?"

"But you are a subtle man, Absál," replied the admiring prince. "And now that you are chief wazir, I may be able to devote more time to my gardens."

