

The Sultan and The Seedsman.

(CONCLUDED.)

Skinner knew little of Iranistan affairs, save that the kingdom, although independent, was heavily subsidised by Great Britain. He had heard, of course, of French eyes cast longingly upon certain ports and coaling stations, and of Russian jealousy of England's paramount influence in the Sultan's dominions. These matters were common newspaper gossip at home. It seemed very likely that the conference just overheard might concern some plot against British supremacy in Iranistan. "Seeds are my business," said Skinner to himself, as he turned in for a few hours' sleep; "but I'm not going to see our side get any the worst of it."

Accordingly, when Phineas's workmen arrived that morning, one of them was sent with a note to Macpherson-Fraser. The note asked the Resident to come and behold a most extraordinary specimen of slug found in the garden, and deemed by Skinner a serious menace. It was just as well that the message was thus worded, for—as Phineas afterwards discovered—his workman was stopped by Doctor Le Verrier, and the writing examined, under the specious pretence that the doctor thought it was intended for him.

"Where is this rare slug of yours, Mr. Skinner?" asked the Resident, when he made his appearance about noon. In reply, Phineas led him towards a distant part of the garden, and there, while they made believe to examine the drills for the dangerous slug, Phineas told his countryman everything which had occurred during the night.

Macpherson-Fraser was silent for a minute. Then looking the little seedsman in the face, he made answer:—"Mr. Skinner, you have put me in possession of most important facts—facts which I have suspected, but could never prove before. And I must call upon you for still further exertions and assistance."

Skinner cast an uneasy glance at his foreman's awkward efforts to peg out a line with a ravelled string. "Well, Mr. Fraser, there is my work—"

"Service of the Empire, Skinner?"

Phineas's manner altered. "In that case," he replied with a grin, "as a ratepayer of Battersea, I'm bound to stand by the Empire."

Macpherson-Fraser and the seedsman walked up and down for half an hour, apparently discussing the slug. But in this time the Resident managed to give Phineas a great deal of useful political information. The Sultan had long enjoyed an annual subsidy of 2,500,000 rupees from the British government, and a year before he had borrowed from the same source a very large lump sum. Nevertheless, he was constantly demanding an increase of subsidy and further loans, and these had been sternly refused. In return for value received, the Sultan was pledged to allow no other nation a foothold in his realms, and to remain the faithful ally of England in peace and war. Rebuffed in money matters, however, he had shown a restless discontent of late; and, at the instant of his new and favourite wife, Pirouze, had dismissed his British physician in favour of a Frenchman, Le Verrier, who was keenly suspected of being a Franco-Russian agent.

"I will bet my pay," said the Resident, "that Pirouze is really the Clothilde whom you heard mentioned last night. Mahmoud has always asserted that she was a Circassian, but I've had my doubts. It looks like a very pretty plot—the object being to spirit Mahmoud away from Haran, evade the repayment of his debts to us, cause a war, and give Russia and France a chance to step in. Of course, if the Sultan fled, he would take his favourite wife with him, hence the remarks about the ladder. However, we must not surmise. Tonight will tell us the truth. I will ask you to let me in by the small gate in the west wall, through which you throw out your weeds, at 11 sharp. In the meantime send this telegram for me from the Haran office. It will arouse no suspicion, coming from you; for by a splendidly lucky coincidence I took my secret telegraph code from a botanical dictionary."

A little later in the day the stolid Moham-medan in charge of the Haran telegraph office despatched the following message for Mr. Phineas Skinner:—

"Brown, D— street, Calcutta.—Send ten packages Brussels sprouts, care of British Resident, immediately."

Doctor Le Verrier happened to drop into the office while Skinner was writing the telegram.

"Ah, my friend the seedsman," he said, glancing genially over the other's shoulder, "sending a wire to old England, eh?"

"No, sir. I've run out of Brussels sprouts seeds, and am sending for more." And he handed the telegram to the clerk.

Doctor Le Verrier smacked his lips. "Good," he remarked, "I have a particular fondness for Brussels sprouts. Be very careful of that message, Abdul, I am most anxious that those seeds should arrive in safety. Ah, my good seedsman, what a careful person you are, and how I shall enjoy those Brussels sprouts when they come up!"

Probably, had he known how many High-

lander and Ghurkas go to a cipher "package of Brussels sprouts," the doctor might not have smiled with such complacent cynicism.

At 11 o'clock Phineas opened the small gate in the southern garden wall, admitted the latter official and two companions. Macpherson-Fraser had brought with him his secretary—a young Irishman named Blake—and a stalwart, hirsute Sikh, who acted in time of peace as a sort of dragoman at the Residency. All three were armed with revolvers, and Phineas kept them company with a serviceable Smith and Wesson, given him by an American millionaire whose gardens he had helped to lay out. They took their way in silence to the spot where the seedsman had lain perdu on the preceding night. Here the strategical genius of Phineas had caused a deep trench to be dug, "for a melon frame foundation," he declared to the head gardener, although there seemed little need for melon-frames in Iranistan. The trench was curtained by the clump of bushes above alluded to, and the four had little difficulty in hiding there. Conversation above a whisper was interdicted, and, as early as midnight, pipes and cigars were laid aside. Shortly after one o'clock they heard a distant footstep, and the hum of voices.

A group of persons was advancing from the pomegranate grove which marked the path to the Golden Pavilion. The Frenchman led the way, followed by a man carrying some bundles; next walked two women closely veiled; while in the rear there stalked a corpulent individual in a turban. Apparently this completed the procession, but Skinner rightly fancied he caught a glimpse as of drawn steel among the distant trees.

At the foot of the wall Doctor Le Verrier repeated his performance of the night before—twice throwing a pebble across, and twice receiving it back from the colleague whom he called "M. le Comte." There was a brief pause, and then something resembling the coil of a rope was thrown into the garden. It proved to be a ladder of hides, which Le Verrier and the man with the bundles lost no time in securing firmly to the trunk of the pear tree. Another pause, and a head appeared over the wall. The head was followed by a body, and a tall man, attired in the dress of a Persian merchant of wealth, climbed swiftly down the rungs.

"This, O King," said Le Verrier, speaking in the vernacular, "is Lieutenant Count Vassili Petrovitch Dourskow."

The stout personage in the turban waved a jewelled hand, while Count Dourskow salaamed as only those can salaam who have some Asiatic blood.

"I have harkened to your persuasions," said the corpulent man, in high-pitched, querulous tones. "I have harkened, and almost am I convinced. It is certain that the English are dogs. They want my very kingdom for a few rupees. You wish me to fly into the north with you, proclaiming a holy war. I am almost convinced."

From his capacious girdle Vassili Petrovitch took two small bags of sheepskin.

"Great King," he said, "my master sends you these as earnest-money. Three times the sum awaits you when we reach the frontier. My cavalier halts on the fringe of the palm-grove; not a hundred yards away. In a few days we shall be among your faithful tribesmen in the north, among the peoples from whom your royal race first sprang. Twelve thousand rifles and six pieces of ordnance stand ready across the border. Deign to accompany your servant and throw off the English yoke."

Mahmoud Khan, Sultan of Iranistan, took the twin sheepskin bags and weighed them meditatively, glancing back where the two women stood. "This is well enough," he said, but what of the large loan that was spoken of?"

Le Verrier came hurriedly forward. "The loan will be consummated," he said, "on the day that the King is pleased to raise his standard against the English. Is it not so, Count Dourskow?"

"It is even so."

"Almost am I convinced," said Mahmoud.

Dourskow took a third package from his girdle. "Behold," he said, "a string of pearls, which I implore your Majesty to clasp around the ravishing neck of the lady, Pirouze, Sultana of free Iranistan."

The foremost of the women advanced in very un-Oriental fashion and seized the gift. "Ohe Vassili, mon vieux!" she cried, in the accents of Montmartre. "You've still got the gift of the gab and a taste in bijouterie." Then, approaching Mahmoud, she whispered a few words.

"The will of Allah be done," remarked Mahmoud. "I am convinced. I will accompany you."

"And the proclamation, O King? The proclamation to your Empire, and to the people, annulling all treaties with Great Britain?"

The veiled woman handed a folded document to Dourskow. "It is here," she said, with a laugh. "Mahmoud Khan signed it an hour ago. And now, my King of Kings, let us go; for I fear these English. Vassili, do you lead the way."

"The Sultan moved slowly to the hanging ladder. Doctor Le Verrier seized the rope and held it fast.

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"Death to the English!" cried Dourskow, waving the proclamation above his head.

A small, lithe figure shot out from the trench hard by and gripped the upliftd hand. The suggestive nozzle of a revolver was pressed against the Russian's ear, and a sharp voice exclaimed, "Death be blessed! You're trespassing on my grass seeds!"

"Parsamble! It is the pig-dog of a seedsman. Kill him! Cut him down!" roared Le Verrier, clapping his hands as he spoke.

At the sound, armed men came rushing from the pomegranate grove. Vassili Petrov was wrestling furiously with Phineas for the procession of the Sultan's proclamation.

"Mount the ladder, O King! Up the ladder at once!" the Frenchman shouted, actually hustling in his excitement the sacred person of the lord of Iranistan.

But the Sultan's jaw had dropped; and he was staring, pale-faced and speechless, at the trench before which stood in line the British Resident, his secretary, and the Sikh, each with a revolver pointed pointed straight at his Majesty's head. Mahmoud is said to be no coward; but he saw that he was fairly caught.

"Bid your soldiers halt, O King!" rang out the voice of the Resident; "bid them halt, or I fire!"

The tongue of Mahoud Khan was loosened. "Back, dogs!" he cried, springing before the advancing men; "back, till I summon ye!" The command was instantly obeyed. The onrush was stopped in time, although Le Verrier gesticulated fiercely, and the woman Pirouze, or Clothilde, screamed for help. Meanwhile, little Skinner, by a skilful crack, sent the heavy Russian lieutenant sprawling upon the grass-seeds, and, clutching him by the throat as a weasel does a sheep, forced him to deliver up the paper.

"Got it, Skinner?" asked the Resident.

"Yes, sir, I've got it."

"Then fall back."

The seedsman fell back promptly; and now there were four revolvers covering the enemy.

"Return to your pavilion, O King," said Macpherson-Fraser. "For the sake of your royal health, return. Forget not that for weeks you have been too ill even to hold counsel with your faithful ally and friend. The night air is chill, O son of many khans; 'tis not well for the infirm to be abroad so late."

Mahmoud tugged savagely at his beard.

"I dismiss you from my court," he answered. "I break off all alliance with your Empire. Go in peace, therefore, lest worse befall you. You are dismissed."

"I will not be dismissed," said Macpherson. "Listen before it is too late. Yesterday a secret telegram was sent to Calcutta, to be hurried back by agreement from Calcutta to the frontier. It called for soldiers and guns. Ere this they were coming down from Fort Ghuznee."

Up spake the voice of Doctor Le Verrier. "It is a lie. No such telegram left Haran. I read every message sent."

"How about 'Brussels sprouts,' doctor?" shouted Phineas Skinner, joyously.

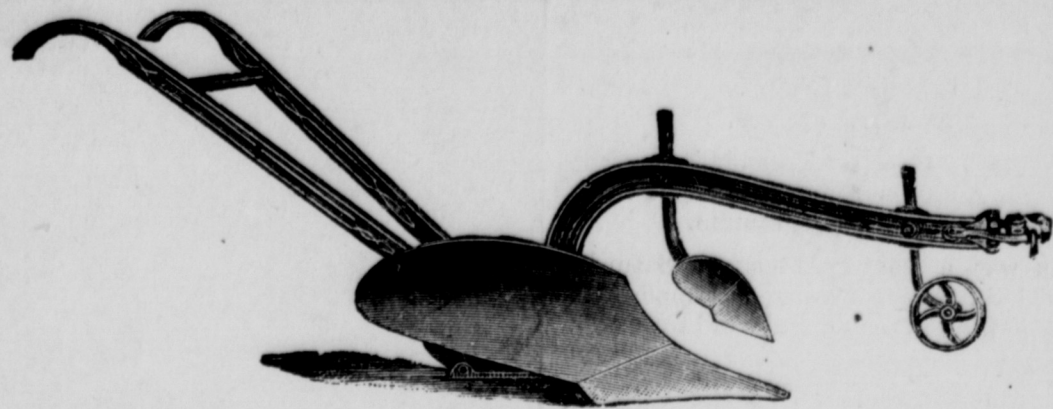
At the reminder that the apparently in-offensive message to "Brown of Calcutta," might have been a call for troops, not vegetable seeds, the Frenchman started back, and clapped his hand to his head. "Sapristi, quel sot!" was all he could say in response to the mocking laughter of the seedsman.

"Your Majesty had much better return to the pavilion," resumed Macpherson-Fraser, abandoning the florid Oriental mode of address, and speaking in plain, matter-of-fact tones. "You may rush us now, and win a brief success; but what will you do against Col. O'Doherty and his column? There will be another Sultan on the throne, mayhap. Think well, Mahmoud Khan."

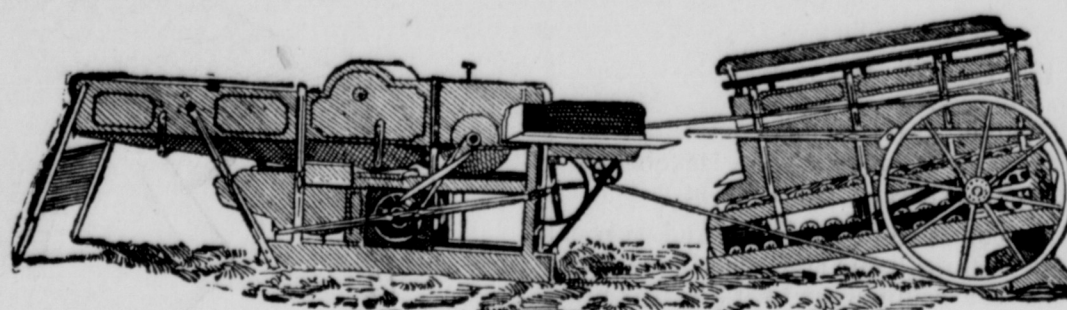
The Sultan knit his brows. "I have drawn the sword," he said. "It is too late to put it back."

"Not so. You have been led astray by evil councillors. There is yet time. Withdraw to the pavilion, and remain a king. Else—"

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Mahmoud advanced a step. "Do you pledge me your word?" he demanded.

"I pledge you my word."

"And have my friends here—the Frank and the Russ—freedom to depart?"

It was the Resident's turn to hesitate. He looked darkly at Le Verrier and Dourskow, the latter of whom, covered by Skinner's revolver, sat scowling where he had fallen.

"Mahmoud Khan," said he, "beyond the necessary fact of a few weeks' British occupation of Haran, I will guarantee your immunity from punishment. To these gentlemen, I shall give a fair chance of retreat to the frontier; but upon two conditions. The first is that you adequately reward Mr. Skinner here, who has done you the service of saving your honour."

Mahmoud nodded sulkily, for he had a sordid soul, and did not appreciate the delicate irony.

"And the second," went on Macpherson-Fraser, "is that this so called Circassian woman whom you have made your wife must depart with her fellow-conspirators."

"By Allan, never! Kill me rather. She is my wife, and the light of my soul."

"I cannot help that. She has wrought evil enough. She must go."

And in spite of threats, pleadings, and promises, Madame Clothilde was forced to depart. She accepted the situation, and departed gracefully up the ladder, with the Sultan's last kiss upon her forehead.

Limping heavily, the Russian followed her, and then Le Verrier.

The Sultan of Iranistan is now one of the best and most enlightened allies which this Empire possesses in the East.

As for Phineas Skinner when he is at home you may find him in a pretty villa within a stone's throw of Clapham Common, on the side towards Battersea. About the time of his return from Iranistan Phineas came into a very pretty fortune. His explanation of this prosperity is to the effect that the Sultan Mahmoud Khan presented him with a bag of gold out of gratitude for the introduction of Brussels sprouts into his Majesty's dominions.

Experts pronounce the gold pieces to be Russian Imperials of fifteen roubles.

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Cloverdale, Carleton County August 28th 1899.