

The Sultan and the Seedsman.

When Phineas Skinner dismounted from the mule-train at the Sultan's gate in the city of Haran, he indulged in no prostrations, nor did he remove his boots. Phineas Skinner had come to Iranistan to plant garden seeds, not to cultivate Oriental etiquette.

If you searched all Battersea through you could not have found a more alert and keen-eyed Briton than this little seedsman. Hardly more than five feet high was Phineas; but those were five feet of courage, energy and endurance. The little seedsman had sold the wares of the Central Seed Syndicate to most of the Royal and Imperial gardens of Europe, and some of those in Asia. He had wandered far afield; but on every occasion had come home safely to Battersea and Mrs. Skinner.

But this visit to the Sultanate of Iranistan Phineas farther than he had hitherto. His Majesty the Sultan Mahmoud Khan desired a kitchen garden; and the Central Seed Syndicate had contracted to give him one. So the syndicate's Mr. Skinner went out to Bombay in charge of a great quantity of vegetable seeds, watering-pots, garden rollers, and the like; pushing thence to the limits of active British rule, and eventually finding himself and his goods upon a mule-train bound for the sacred but unsanitary city of Haran.

The British Resident at Haran is Macpherson-Fraser, C. S. I.; and his work is cut out for him. He is expected to keep the Sultan of Iranistan in good humor, and the man who accomplishes this successfully could manage a schoolful of spoiled children to the satisfaction of their doting mothers. The Resident, to Skinner's great relief, explained that Mahmoud Khan had been seriously indisposed for several days; and that the ordeal of an audience with royalty need not be gone through. Vastly delighted that he was not called upon to "shed his boots and do a crawl" (as he expressed it), Phineas was conducted to a hut which had been placed at his disposal, on the outer fringe of the royal gardens, as persons familiar with Haran will remember, lie two miles north of the city, on the great caravan road into Central Asia, and surround the famous Golden Pavilion where in the Sultan sometimes recreates himself.

Having ascertained the precise limits of space allotted for seed-planting, and made the acquaintance of Hadji Mustapha, the Chief Gardener, Phineas set about unpacking his bales and boxes. Next day saw him hard at work clearing ground, with seven stalwart and turbaned toilers to obey his lightest behest. Seed-planting had actually begun when Macpherson-Fraser rode out to the gardens again. Skinner's men were well in hand, and one corner of the grounds looked like a sort of elfin necropolis, with its little wooden stakes sticking up from the new-turned earth, each stake bearing a pencilled legend to the effect that "Broccoli," "Endives," or some other seed had been interred below in confident hope of an appetising resurrection.

"You are not likely to be annoyed by a royal visit at present," said the British Resident, as he accompanied Phineas along the drills. "The Sultan is reported quite ill. Even I cannot see him, and he has been removed here to the Golden Pavilion, at the urgent advice of his new physician, Doctor Le Verrier."

"Le Verrier?" repeated the seedsman. "Is that the little French busybody that came fussing around here today, and jumped on me for swearing a bit at the men?"

"I suppose so, Mr. Skinner," sighed Macpherson-Fraser. "The description sounds very much like the doctor."

"Well, sir, he got as good as he gave. Before he came I had confined myself to plain English, but out of compliment to him I threw in a few French remarks too. You should have seen him waddle off when I began."

"No doubt you were justified in resenting his interference, Mr. Skinner; but—er—it is better not to insult Doctor Le Verrier. He is a person of distinction, and—er—has great influence at court."

"Cauliflowers are my line, not courts. I've simply got to ballyrag these fellows or they won't do a stroke of work; and it's my job, not Doctor Le What-you-may-call-him's."

Macpherson-Fraser returned to the city, and Phineas Fraser went on with his own work in his own way. But he had not seen the last of Doctor Le Verrier. A spare patch of ground at the very end of the gardens, close to the boundary wall, had been dug up, rolled and sown with specially-selected grass seeds. One morning Phineas wrathfully observed that somebody had been walking over the loose earth. The footprints were small, and had been made by a sharp-pointed shoe. In other words, they were the footprints of a European. Skinner's language was vigorous as he raked away the offending traces. But when they reappeared on the following morning, his rage grew white-hot.

"If I could only catch the fellow—" he was beginning, when the thought flashed across his mind that he had seen shoes somewhere recently which might fit those marks in the clay.

"The French doctor, for a moral," was his muttered reflection. "I noticed his elegant little tennis shoes at the time. I wonder what brings the doctor over my grass-seeds two nights running."

The patch of embryo grass stretched to the foot of the wall, and the footprints seemed to lead toward where a large pear-tree spread its branches and afforded an easy climb to anyone desirous of trying a drop into the palmgrove beyond. Approaching this tree, Skinner saw that it had been freshly barked in places, and that a dead twig or two had snapped off. He rubbed his jaw meditatively.

"Why does the French doctor prefer to risk his neck over a wall, when all the gates might open to him?" he asked. "And what on earth does the doctor want outside at night? Perhaps it's a love affair. Well he can do all the love making and midnight serenading he likes; but he shan't hoof it over my grass seeds. I'll lay low in that clump of bushes tonight, and catch him in the act."

Accordingly Phineas went into ambush a few hours after sundown, and waited for the tree-climber with the sharp-pointed shoes. Partially hidden by the remnant of uncleared scrub, and partially by the shadow of the wall, he made himself as comfortable as possible. It had come into his head that the Sultan's French physician's nightly trips across the garden might have for their object some revengeful plot against his seeds—and to touch Skinner's seeds was to tamper with his reputation.

A footstep struck into the circle of Skinner's hearing and a vague, white form appeared, coming across the garden.

"Straight through my celery-bed," groaned Phineas. "But he's alone, and he hasn't got a spade. So it can't be the seeds he's after."

The man in white was Doctor Le Verrier. He passed within a few feet of where Phineas lay, and the moonlight fell upon his bearded face and Tartarinesque figure. And yet the seedsman made no move. He was waiting to see what Le Verrier would do—to catch him, literally and metaphorically, up a tree.

What the Sultan's physician did was to march coolly among the grass seeds, pick up a pebble, and cast it over the wall. He threw with an underhand jerk, like most foreigners, but this did not explain the phenomenon which followed. For the flung pebble almost immediately returned from beyond, and fell at Le Verrier's feet. Once more he jerked it across, and once more it came speeding back.

Apparently satisfied, the Frenchman proceeded, not without pain and difficulty, to hoist himself into the lower branches of the pear-tree. Thence, by clambering a little way, he was able to reach a spot from which he could look over the parapet. Phineas Skinner's eyes had missed nothing of these movements; nor did his ears fail to catch what ensued. In the course of his expeditions he had picked up a smattering of French, the language in which the conversation was couched.

"Felicitate me, my dear colleague," said Le Verrier. "I have at last succeeded."

"He will come, then?"

"He will come, although he still affects to be in doubt. But the money will convince him. Tomorrow night, at half-past one, we shall be here. You are ready, I trust?"

"I have been ready this six weeks. Any fears of interruption?"

"My faith, no. The worthy British Resident apparently swallows all my accounts of Mahmoud's illness. The only person in the gardens is a brutal English seed-planter, who vomits curses all day, and sleeps like a pig all night."

"An Englishman, though," said the voice across the wall, doubtfully.

"Yes; but a stupid peasant—a mere gardener. And at any rate, I have taken the precaution to make sure of him. Every night as I pass his hut, I leave Ayoub on guard. Should the Englishman desire to walk abroad while we are engaged, Ayoub would cut him down on the spot."

The man beyond grunted approvingly; while Skinner congratulated himself heartily that he had left his hut before Le Verrier posted his nightly sentinel.

"The disguise continues effective, M. le Comte?" continued the Frenchman.

"Perfectly so. The bazaars know me as the rich merchant from Teheran, nothing more. Those Teheran blotches you painted on my face would deceive the Shah himself. My goods are all sold, and the caravan is ready to return north-west ward. And now, since all is ready, let us not stay chattering here."

"Au revoir," murmured Le Verrier, and prepared to descend the tree. But, with one foot on the lower branch, he stopped. "Oh, M. le Comte," he cried, "I omitted to ask about the ladder. She is very nervous about that ladder. You see, her brother lost his life from a scaffolding at Poissy, and so —"

The man beyond the wall laughed harshly. "Ah, bah! he said, 'women are all the same. I thought Clothilde was above superstition. Yet here she is, ready to spoil the whole enterprise just because the ladder isn't quite to her liking. Promise her another string of pearls to forget her brother and the

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scaffolding at Poissy. When we get her here she must either climb or remain behind to the mercies of Mahmoud's other wives."

Farewells were exchanged and the doctor clambered down from tee tree. As for Phineas Skinner, he remained quietly behind his clump of bushes. It had occurred to him that La Verrier's journey across the gardens might have for object something of far greater importance than the mere destruction of vegetable seeds. Else, why was a sentinel posted at the door of his hut? What did the rendezvous for the next night signify? Why was "Clothilde?" And the unseen speaker beyond the wall, with his talk of strings of pearls and Persian disguises—who was he? These reflections kept Phineas in concealment, while Dr. Le Verrier retraced his steps across the grass seeds and through the celery bed. Skinner heard him whistle for the man left on guard at the hut, and thereafter silence rested on the garden again.

Then Phineas arose cautiously, shook the dew from his garments, and lit a pipe. He did not climb up a tree, because he had no wish to reveal himself to anybody who might chance to be watching on the other side of the wall among the palm trees. On the contrary, he stole softly back to his hut, and, having reconnoitred the place lest Ayoub might still be on guard, entered the locked door.

[To be concluded next week.]

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Labouchere, according to the Argonaut, tells an amusing story of how he did a good turn for a legal friend, who, although accustomed to address juries and judges, was afraid of the House of Commons. "One day, walking home with him," says Labouchere, "I told him that he should get over this curious dread. A matter was coming under discussion which involved a good deal of law. I said to him: 'If you like, I will get up and speak against the government view. You must jeer at me. I will complain of this, and suggest that as you are an eminent lawyer you should express your objections articulately; then you—having prepared your speech—must get up and crush me.' This was arranged. When I laid down the law, he laughed. I looked indignant. I went on; he uttered sarcastic 'Hear, hears.' On this I protested, sat down, and invited him to reply to me. He got up and made an excellent speech."

Accumulations.—Old Friend: "And have you succeeded in laying up anything?" Unsuccessful Merchant: "Nothing but a lot of fine grudges."

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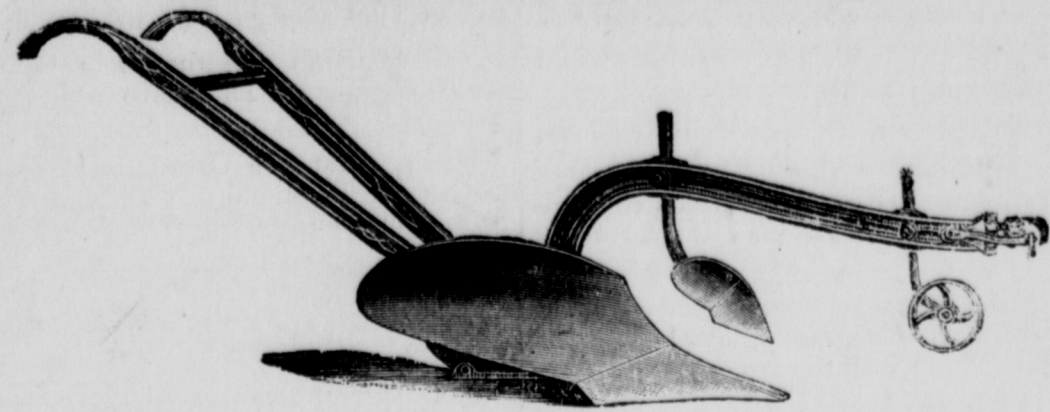
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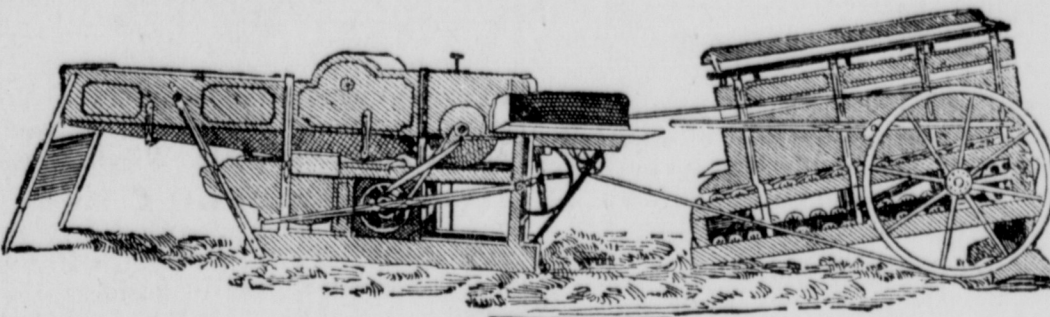
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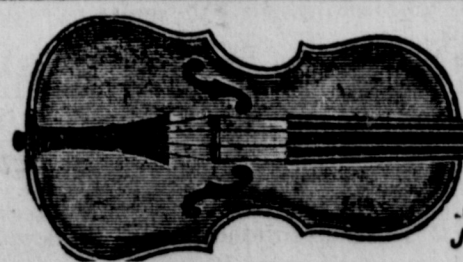
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