

I went away during the puja holiday, touring the country with a theosophist relative.
5 It was on the train back to Calcutta that we met the man. He was a Bengali Babu, but his dress made us think at first that he was a Muslim from Northern India – and his conversation was even more surprising. He spoke on every subject with such authority, that one might have taken him for God’s personal adviser. We had been quite content not to know about the world’s secret happenings: how far the Russians
10 had advanced, what the British were plotting, or the bungling machinations of the Native States. But our informant said with a slight smile, ‘There happen more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are reported in your newspapers.’ It was the first time we had been away from home, so the man’s whole style was a revelation to us. He could jump, at the drop of a hat, from science to the Veda to recitations of Persian
15 couplets; having no such command ourselves, we admired him more and more. So much so, that my theosophist relative grew sure there was supernatural aura around the man – a strange sort of magnetism, a divine power, an astral body, or something of that sort. He listened to every little thing he said with rapt attention, and made surreptitious notes. I suspected that our strange companion was not unaware of this,
20 and was rather flattered.

The train came to a junction, and we sat in a waiting-room for a connection. It was half past ten at night. We heard that some kind of disruption on the line had delayed the train badly. I decided to spread my bed-roll out on the table and get some sleep, but it was then that the man began the following story. I got no more sleep that
25 night...

‘Because of some disagreements over policy, I left my employ in the state of Junagar and entered the service of the Nizam of Hyderabad. I was young and sturdy at that time, so I was first of all given the job of collecting the cotton-tax at Barich.

‘Barich is a most romantic place. The Shusta river there (the name is derived from
30 the Sanskrit svacchatoya) flows through large forests with desolate mountains above, snaking its pebbly way over rocks like a skilful dancer picking her feet. A white marble palace stands alone on high rocks beneath the mountains, with 150 steep stone steps leading up from the river. There is no other house nearby. The village of Barich with its cotton-market is a long way off.

35 ‘About 250 years ago Shah Mahmud II built the palace as a private pleasure-dome. In those days there were rose-scented fountains in the bathrooms: young Persian

concubines sat in seclusion on cool marble, with their hair unplaited for bathing, dipping their soft, naked feet in pools of pure water, sitars in their laps, singing vineyard ghazals. Those fountains play no longer, the songs are heard no more, fair feet no longer fall on white stone: there is no one to inhabit the palatial emptiness of the place but a single, lonely tax-collector. But the old clerk in the office, Karim Khan, told me over and over again not to live there. "If you want, go there during the day," he said, "but don't ever spend a night." I scoffed at him. The servants, likewise, were willing to work there till dusk, but not to sleep there. "Suit yourselves," I said. The building had such a bad name that even thieves didn't venture there at night.

'At first the desolation of the palace oppressed me like a weight on my chest. I kept away from it as much as I could, working continuously, returning exhausted to my room to sleep. But after a few weeks, it began to exert a strange attraction. It is difficult to describe my state of mind and equally hard to convince people of it. The whole building seemed alive: it was sucking me in, its powerful stomach-juices were digesting me slowly. Probably it started to work on me from the moment I first set foot in it, but I clearly remember the day when I first became conscious of its power.

'It was the beginning of the summer: the market was sluggish, and I had little work to do. I had sat down in a comfortable chair by the river at the bottom of the steps, a little before sunset. The Shusta was depleted; its many sandbanks opposite were ruddy in the afternoon light; near me, pebbles glittered in the clear, shallow water at the bottom of the steps. There was not a breath of wind. The scent of wild basil, spearmint and aniseed in the hillside woods made the air oppressive.

'When the sun went down behind the crags, a long shadow fell, like a curtain abruptly ending the drama of the day. Here in this cleft between mountains there was no real dusk, no mingling of light and dark. I was about to mount my horse and ride away, when I heard footsteps on the stairway. I turned round – but there was no one there.

'Thinking that my senses were deceiving me, I settled in my chair again; but now lots of footsteps could be heard – as if a crowd of people were rushing down the steps together. Slight fear mixed with a peculiar pleasure filled my body. Even though there was no physical presence before me, I had a clear impression of a crowd of jubilant women rushing down the steps this summer evening to bathe in the Shusta. There was no actual sound this evening on the silent slopes and river-bank, or inside the empty palace, but I could none the less hear bathers passing me, chasing one another with merry laughter like the waters of a spring. They didn't seem to notice me. I was as invisible to them as they were to me. The river was as undisturbed as before, but I had a clear feeling that its shallow stream was being ruffled by jingling,

braceleted arms, that friends were splashing each other and shrieking with laughter, that kicking swimmers were scattering spray like fistfuls of pearls.

‘I felt a kind of trembling in my chest: I can’t say if the feeling was of fear or delight or curiosity. I longed to see what was happening, but there was nothing in front of me
5 to see. I felt that if I strained to listen, I would hear all that was spoken – but when I did try to listen, I only heard scraping crickets! I felt that a 250-year-old black curtain was dangling in front of me; if only I could lift one corner and peer behind it, what a splendid royal scene would be revealed! But in the deep darkness nothing could be seen.

10 ‘Suddenly the sultriness of the air was broken by a sharp gust of wind: the calm Shusta shook like the tresses of a nymph, and the whole shadowy forest stirred as if waking from a bad dream. Whether dream or not, the invisible pageant from a world of 250 years ago was whisked away in a trice. The magic women who brushed past me with bodiless footsteps and noiseless laughter to jump into the Shusta did not
15 return up the steps, wringing the water from their clothes. The spring breeze blew them away like a scent, in a single gust.

‘Had the ruinous Goddess of Poetry landed on my shoulders, finding me all on my own? Had she come to clobber me, for being such a slave to tax-collection? I decided I had better eat: an empty stomach can play havoc with one’s health. I called my cook
20 and ordered a full, spicy Moglai meal, swimming in ghee.

‘The next morning the whole affair seemed ridiculous. I cheerfully trundled about, driving my pony-trap myself, wearing a pith helmet like a saheb, making routine inquiries. I had my tri-monthly report to write, so I meant to stay late at my office. But as soon as it was dusk, I found myself drawn to the palace. I cannot say who was
25 drawing me; but I felt it unwise to delay. I felt I was expected. Instead of completing my report, I put on my helmet again and returned to the huge, rock-bound palace, disturbing the deserted, shadowy path with my rattling pony-trap’s wheels.

‘The room at the top of the steps was immense. Its huge decorated, vaulted ceiling rested on three rows of pillars. It echoed all the time with its own emptiness. Evening
30 was well-advanced, but no lamps had been lit. As I pushed open the door and entered that vast room, I felt a tremendous upheaval, like a court breaking up – people dispersing through doors, windows, rooms, passages, verandahs. I stood astonished; there was nothing I could see. I shuddered, went gooseflesh all over. A lingering scent of age-old shampoo and atar caught my nostrils. I stood in the gloom between the
35 pillars, and heard all round me the gush of fountains on stone, the sound of a sitar (but what the tune was I did not know), the tinkle of gold ornaments, the jingle of anklets, the noise of a gong striking the hour, a distant alap on a sanai, the chinking

of chandeliers swinging in the breeze, the song of a caged nightingale on the verandah, the cry of tame cranes in the gardens: all combining to create the music of the dead. I was transfixed: I felt that this impalpable, unreal scene was the only truth in the world, that everything else was a mirage. Was I really the Honourable Mr So-and-So, eldest son of the late Mr So-and-So, earning 450 rupees a month for collecting cotton-taxes? Did I really wear a pith helmet and short kurta, drive a pony-trap to the office? It seemed so odd and absurd and false, that I burst out laughing as I stood in that great, dark room.

‘My Muslim servant then came in with a flaming kerosene lamp. I don’t know whether he thought I was mad – but I suddenly remembered that I was the Honourable Mr So-and-So, eldest son of the late Mr So-and-So. Our great poets and artists could maybe say whether disembodied fountains played eternally in this world or somewhere outside it, or whether endless ragas were plucked on a magic sitar by invisible fingers, but this was true for sure, that I earned 450 rupees a month collecting taxes in the Barich cotton-market! Sitting at my lamplit camp-table with my newspaper, I recalled my strange hallucination of a little while ago, and laughed boisterously.

‘I finished the newspaper, ate my Moglai food, turned out the lamp, and lay down in my small corner bedroom. Through the open window in front of me, a brilliant star above the darkly wooded Arali hills looked down from millions and millions of miles away at the Honourable Tax-collector on his measly camp-bed. I cannot say when I fell asleep, reflecting on the wonder and absurdity of that. And I don’t know how long I slept. But suddenly I awoke with a start – not that there was any sound in the room, or any person that I could see. The bright star had set behind the dark hills, and the thin light of the new moon shone wanly through my window as if afraid to enter. I couldn’t see anyone. But I seemed to feel someone gently pushing me. I sat up; whoever it was said nothing, but five ring-studded fingers pressed me firmly to follow.

‘I stood up gingerly. Although there was not a soul but me in that palace with its hundreds of rooms and immense emptiness, where sound slept and only echoes were awake, I still walked in fear of waking someone. Most of the rooms in the palace were kept closed, and I had never been in them before; so I cannot say where and by which route I went that night, following with soundless steps and bated breath that urgent, unseen guide! I couldn’t keep track of the narrow dark passages, the long verandahs, the huge solemn audience-chambers, the airless and obscure cells.

‘Although I could not see my guide with my eyes, I had an image of her in my mind. She was an Arab woman, whose marble-white hands emerged from voluminous sleeves – hard and flawless hands. A fine veil hung down from her head-dress; a

curved knife was tied to her waist. It was as if a night had come floating from One Thousand and One Nights. I felt I was making my way through the narrow unlit alleyways of sleeping Baghdad, towards some dangerous assignation.

5 'At last my guide stopped before a dark blue curtain and seemed to point to something underneath. There was nothing there, but the blood in my chest froze with fear. In front of the curtain a fearsome African eunuch sat with drawn sword in his lap, legs sprawled out, dozing. The guide tiptoed over his legs and lifted a corner of the curtain. Behind it was a room spread with Persian carpets: I could not see who was sitting on the couch, but I saw two feet lazily resting on a pink velvet footstool,
10 beautiful feet in brocade slippers peeping out of loose saffron pyjamas. On the floor nearby was a bluish crystal bowl with apples, pears, oranges and grapes; and next to this there were two small goblets and a glass decanter of golden wine ready for a guest. From within the room, a strange intoxicating incense enthralled me.

15 'I was nerving myself to step over the sprawled legs of the eunuch, but he suddenly woke – his sword fell on to the stone floor with a clatter. There was then a horrible yell, and I found myself sitting on my camp-bed, soaked with sweat. It was dawn: the thin moon was pale as a sleepless invalid, and our local madman, Meher Ali, was walking as usual down the empty early-morning road shouting, "Keep away, keep away!"

20 'My first Arabian Night ended in this way – but a thousand more nights were to follow. A gulf between my days and my nights developed. During the day I would go about my work in a state of exhaustion, cursing my nights with their empty delusions and dreams; but at night it was my work-bound existence that seemed trivial, false and ridiculous. After dark I lived in a trance, in a maze of intoxication. I took on a
25 strange alter ego, hidden in an unwritten history of hundreds of years ago. My short English jacket and tight trousers ill-befitted that person. So I dressed very carefully in baggy pyjamas, flower-patterned kurta, red velvet fez, a long silk choga; I perfumed my handkerchief with atar; instead of cigarettes I smoked an enormous many-coiled hubble-bubble filled with rose-water; I sat in a large cushioned kedara – waiting, it
30 seemed, for a grand romantic tryst. But as darkness thickened a weird thing happened which I cannot describe. It was as if some torn pages from a marvellous story were blown by a sudden spring breeze to flutter around the various rooms of that vast palace. They could be followed so far, but never right to the end. I spent my nights wandering from room to room chasing those swirling torn pages.

35 'Amidst the swirling, tattered dreams, the whiffs of henna, the snatches of sitar-music, the gusts of wind spattered with scented water, I caught from time to time, like flashes of lightning, glimpses of a beautiful woman. She was dressed in saffron pyjamas; brocade sandals curving at the toe on her soft pink feet; a richly

embroidered bodice tight round her breast; a red cap on her head with a fringe of golden tassels framing her forehead and cheeks. She made me mad. I spent my nethermost dreams each night wandering through the streets and dwellings of an intricate fantasy realm, in quest of her.

5 ‘On some evenings, I would light two lamps either side of a large mirror and carefully dress myself like a prince. Suddenly next to my own reflection in the mirror, the spectre of that same Persian girl appeared for a moment. She would bend her neck and direct her deep black eyes at me, full of a fierce, plaintive passion, while unspoken phrases hovered on her moist, beautiful lips. Then, nimbly twisting her
10 buxom body round and up in a light and exquisite dance, she would vanish into the mirror – smile, gaze, ornaments, pain, longing, confusion flashing like a shower of sparks – whereupon a wild gust of wind, scented with woodland plunder, blew out my two lamps. I would undress and stretch myself on the bed next to my dressing-room, eyes closed, tingling with delight. The air all around me – laden with mixed
15 scents from the Arali hills – swam with kisses and caresses; the touch of soft hands seemed to fill the secretive dark. I felt murmurs in my ear, perfumed breath on my brow, and the end of a delicate veil fragrantly brushing my cheeks. Ravishing, serpentine coils seemed to grip me ever more tightly – until, with a heavy sigh, limp with fatigue, I sank into deep slumber.

20 ‘One afternoon I decided to ride out – someone told me not to, I forget who, but I insisted on going. My saheb’s hat and jacket were hanging on a wooden hook: I snatched them and was going to put them on, but a tremendous whirlwind, sweeping before it sand from the Shusta banks and dry leaves from the Arali hills, whisked them away from me, and a sweet peal of laughter, hitting every note of mirth, driven
25 higher and higher up the scale by the wind, soared to where the sun sets, and spiralled away.

‘I did not go riding that day; and from then on I gave up wearing the short jacket and saheb’s hat that had been so ridiculed. That night I sat up in bed and heard someone groaning and wailing: beneath the bed, under the floor, from within a dark tomb in
30 the stone foundations of the palace, someone was crying, “Release me; break down the doors of futile fantasy, deep slumber, cruel illusion; lift me on to your horse, press me to your breast, carry me away through forests, over mountains, over rivers to your daylit abode!”

‘Who was I? How could I rescue her? Which lovely, drowning projection of desire
35 should I drag ashore from a whirlpool of swirling dreams? Divinely beautiful, where and when did you live? By which cool spring, and in which palm-shade, and to which desert nomad were you born? To which slave-market were you taken to be sold, crossing hot sands, riding on a lightning horse, torn from your mother’s lap by a

Bedouin brigand, like a flower from a wild creeper? Which royal servant studied your blooming bashful beauty, counted out gold mudras, took you overseas, placed you in a golden palanquin, gave you to his master's harem? What was your story there?

5 Amidst the sarangi-music, the tinkling anklets, the cruelly glittering wine, did there not lurk the flash of daggers, the bite of poisons, the savagery of covert glances! Unlimited wealth; eternal imprisonment! Two maids either side of you, waving fly-whisks, diamond bracelets twinkling! Kings and princes sprawling before the jewel-and-pearl-studded slippers encasing your fair feet! At the entrance-door, a Negro like
10 Hell's messenger but in Heaven's garb, standing with sword unsheathed! Did you, O desert-flower, float away on that stream of wealth so horribly gleaming, so fraught with conspiracy, foaming with envy and smirched with blood, to meet a cruel death or to land on an even more regal, even more abominable shore?

'Suddenly Meher Ali, the madman, was shouting, "Keep away, keep away! All is false! All is false!" I saw that it was dawn; the chaprassi was giving me the mail; the
15 cook was salaaming and asking what he should cook today. "No," I announced, "I can't stay in this palace any more." That very day I moved all my things to the office. The old clerk Karim Khan smiled slightly when he saw me. Annoyed at his smile, I said nothing to him and settled down to my work.

'As the day wore on, the more distracted I became. I wondered what point there was
20 in going anywhere. Tax-assessment seemed pointless; the Nizam and his government meant little; everything coming and going and happening around me was wretched, worthless, senseless!

'I threw aside my pen, slammed my ledger shut, and quickly climbed into my pony-trap. As if of its own accord it took me to the palace, arriving as dusk fell. I rapidly
25 climbed the steps and went in.

'Today everything was still. The dark rooms seemed sullen. My heart was swelling with repentance, but nowhere was there anyone to speak to, anyone to ask for forgiveness. I roamed around the dark rooms blankly. I wished I could find a musical instrument, sing a song to someone. I would have sung, "O fire, the insect that tried
30 to flee you has returned to die. Have pity on it now, burn its wings, shrivel it to ashes." Suddenly two tears fell on my forehead from above. That day thick clouds had gathered over the Arali hills. The dark forest and the inky Shusta seemed paralysed with dread. But now, water and land and sky shuddered; and a lightning-fanged storm unleashed itself through distant trackless forests, roaring and howling and
35 rushing hither. Doors in the palace slammed; huge empty rooms boomed with a note of despair.

‘The servants were all at the office; there was no one to light the lamps. I distinctly felt, on that cloudy moonless night, in the jet-black darkness of the rooms, that a woman was lying face-down on a carpet at the foot of a bed, tearing her unkempt hair with tight-clenched fists; blood was pouring from her pale brow; sometimes she was laughing fiercely and hysterically; sometimes she was sobbing wildly; she had ripped off her bodice and was beating her naked breasts; the wind was roaring through the window, driving in rain that soaked her to the skin.

‘The storm went on all night, and the weeping too. I went on wandering through pitch-black rooms in fruitless remorse. There was no one anywhere; no one whom I could comfort. Who was it who was so distressed? Where was this inconsolable grief coming from?

‘Once again the madman was shouting, “Keep away! Keep away! All is false! All is false!” I saw that it was dawn, and Meher Ali even on this storm-swept day was circling the palace shouting his usual cry. I wondered now if Meher Ali too had at one time lived in this palace; even though he was mad now and lived outside, he was daily lured by its monstrous stony charm, and every morning came to walk round it. I immediately ran up to the madman through the rain and asked, “Meher Ali, what is false?”

‘He gave no answer, pushed me aside and, like a wheeling bird transfixed by the leer of a huge snake, continued to shout and wander round the palace, continued to warn himself over and over again with all his might, “Keep away! Keep away! All is false!”

‘Dashing through the rain and storm like a man possessed, I returned to the office. I called Karim Khan and said, “Tell me what all of this means.”

‘The gist of what he told me was this. Once upon a time the palace had been churned by insatiable lust, by the flames of wild pleasure. Cursed by those passions, those vain desires, every stone now hungered and thirsted, strove like a vampire to consume every soul who came near. Of those who had stayed for more than three nights in the palace, only Meher Ali had emerged, with his wits gone. No one else till now had escaped its grasp.

‘I asked, “Is there no escape for me?”

‘The old man answered, “There is only one way and that is very hard. I can tell it to you, but first I must tell you the ancient story of one who lived there, a Persian slave-girl. A stranger and sadder tale was never heard.” ’

At that moment, the coolies came and told us that the train was coming. So soon? We rolled up our bedding, and the train arrived. A sleepy Englishman stuck his head out

of a first-class compartment to read the name of the station. 'Hello,' he shouted, recognizing our companion, and he let him into his carriage. We got into the second class. We never found out who the gentleman was, and we never heard the end of the story either.

- 5 I said, 'The fellow took us for fools and was pulling our legs; he made the whole thing up.' My theosophist relative disagreed, and our dispute caused a rift which was never healed.