

P A I N T I N G P E R S I A

by

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Cast

Jules - A French painter

Xavier - A French geographer

Fara - A Persian princess

Adèle - A French writer

Schabas - A Persian guide

Shah of Persia

Haji - The Shah's Chief Counselor

Malek - Governor of Tabriz

Hasan - A Persian painter

Nedjeff - A Eunuch in the Shah's Palace

(Note: The play is written so that it can be performed with eight actors. If necessary, one actor can play the parts of Malek, Hasan and Nedjeff.)

Set

The set is a painter's studio in Paris, 1858, and various indoor and outdoor settings in Persia ten years earlier. The play requires three simple wooden chairs, a more ornate wooden chair, a wooden table with a small drawer, a divan, a large ornate wooden screen, an easel with a canvas on it and another canvas wrapped in brown paper and tied with cord. In addition to the set, the play, ideally, should have a screen onto which are projected the various images described in the stage directions. The set, props and costumes should be as minimal as possible.

Though limned by most skillful fingers, no pictures please
Unless the beloved's image is drawn therein

- Hafez
(Translated by Gertrude Bell)

Act One

Scene One

(LIGHTS UP on JULES, a 30ish painter with a boyish face. He stands before an easel with a canvas set upon it in the early evening light, intently studying a painted sketch attached to the canvas. As he studies the sketch, LIGHTS UP in front of him on a wooden screen inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and, standing beside it, staring straight ahead, expressionless, with his arms crossed, NEDJEFF, an imposing-looking eunuch. In front of the screen is a simple wooden chair. After several moments, BIRDS BEGIN TO SING. JULES, who is in his studio in Parc Monot, in Paris, 1858, looks up. For a second he is startled as he sees the screen and NEDJEFF standing beside it in a garden in the Shah's palace in Tehran ten years earlier, on the morning JULES first tried to paint PRINCESS FARA, whom he is painting now.)

JULES

(He puts brush down on the easel, paces for several moments, looking at the empty chair then away from the screen, waiting.)

It's a strange shape for a fruit, almost like an onion, though the color reminds me of a recently removed gall bladder. These are the first ones I've ever seen on a tree. I love the taste, that mix of tart and sweet, but I can't abide all those seeds.

(He pauses, waits for a response from behind the screen. There is none. NEDJEFF continues staring straight ahead.)

The birds obviously like them. It must be paradise for them here. All these bushes and trees, fountains to splash about in.

(He pauses, waits for a response. There is none.)

This is what painters call the golden hour, when the light

JULES (Contd)

has a range of yellowish tones. Before it becomes so bright it bleaches your visage out completely. That's why I asked Haji if you could sit for the portrait now. Another forty-five minutes and the sun will be so bright I won't be able to paint you at all.

(He pauses, waits for a response. There is none.)

He suggested we do it inside, in the women's quarters. He assumed my interest, like all Europeans, was lascivious. I gather he ascribes the basest motives to everyone, not just Frenchmen. I thought the garden would be more appropriate, since I've heard so much about your natural beauty.

(He pauses, waits for a response. There is none.)

I assume you do understand me. The Shah said you had a French physician, so you speak our language. Although he also said you were excited about the portrait, which you're obviously not. Unfortunately, I can not make much progress unless you allow me to look at you, *mademoiselle*. That is my job, to look. I have an excellent imagination, but you have to supply me with some raw material.

(He pauses, waits for a response. There is none.)

All right, if you are going to force me to work from imagination, then I suppose I'll have to conjure you up out of thin air.

(JULES picks up the paint brush.)

I'll close my eyes and wave my brush, and suddenly I see...

(NEDJEFF looks at JULES, who closes his eyes and twirls the brush.)

...a stately dowager with arching brows and silver ringlets dangling down her powdered cheeks...

(There is a GIGGLE from behind the screen.)

...dressed in a white lace gown, covering every inch from your chiseled chin to your toes, except for the enameled nails of your slender fingers.

(MORE LAUGHS from behind the screen.)

Around your neck a turquoise *carcanet*, in your ears looping threads of filigree, and sprouting from your ebony tresses an enormous peacock feather. Am I correct?

(MORE LAUGHS from behind the screen. He continues with his eyes closed, waving the brush as NEDJEFF looks at him askance as if he's become unbalanced.)

JULES (Contd)

Or perhaps you resemble the enormous wife of the desert chieftain from Herat I saw outside Qazvin, peering through the curtains of a compartment on a camel's back...

(FARA steps from behind the screen. She is a striking young woman of about 25, with enormous brown eyes and no make-up on her face. She is wearing a tan peasant skirt, a vest with braided trim, and over her head and shoulders a large white *chador*. She stands beside the screen, and she and NEDJEFF watch as JULES continues conjuring.)

...with jet black eyes surrounded by lines of kohl and corpulent cheeks adorned with tattoos, the flaring nostrils of your gargantuan nose twice the size of those of the camel who's carrying you.

(She LAUGHS, and he opens his eyes and sees both NEDJEFF and FARA staring at him.)

I see you've decided to participate in your portrait.

(He gestures toward the chair.)

Please.

(She walks to the chair and sits.)

We should start before the sun gets higher.

(He quickly begins sketching on the canvas.)

I thought you would be... older.

(He continues sketching.)

His majesty said you were his aunt.

(He begins mixing paints on the palette.)

I gather I'm not the first artist to try to paint you.

FARA

(After a pause)

I thought you would be older too.

JULES

You do speak.

FARA

My nephew's grand *vizier* says I speak too much. Once I start I do not stop.

JULES

Speak as much as you wish. If I'm to make any progress today, I'll need to work much faster than I usually do.

FARA

How old are you?

JULES

Twenty-three. Keep your chin up, please.

FARA

How old do you think I am?

JULES

I have no idea.

FARA

Guess.

JULES

I'd rather not. Turn slightly to your left. Perfect.

FARA

Twenty-eight.

JULES

I would have guessed younger.

FARA

How much younger?

JULES

Five years.

FARA

Twenty-eight is old in Persia. Is it also old in France?

JULES

No. Could you pull your...

(Gestures to indicate *chador* on her head.)

...back a little bit?

(She loosens the scarf.)

FARA

At twenty-eight, a woman here is past her prime. Her chances of marriage are nil.

JULES

You hardly look past your prime. Hold your head steady.

FARA

Are you married?

JULES

No. Look straight ahead.

FARA

And your companion, the geologist...?

JULES

Geographer. Yes. To a writer in Paris.

FARA

How old is she?

JULES

Older than twenty-eight. But also not past her prime. Chin up, please.

FARA

Don't you wish to know whether I am married?

JULES

It doesn't seem vital for the purpose of painting you.

FARA

I am not married. Would you like to know why?

JULES

I sense you are going to tell me.

FARA

According to the members of the court, I am too unruly for marriage.

JULES

Unruly women do not marry in Persia?

FARA

Do they in France?

JULES

It makes marriage more difficult, though not impossible.

FARA

Even if they are pure?

JULES

I don't know what 'pure' means.

FARA

I am pure.

JULES

Could you turn slightly to the left?

FARA

I have never known a man. Have you ever known a woman?

JULES

We know each other.

FARA

That's not what I mean.

JULES

I didn't think it was.

(Indicating NEDJEFF, who looks very imposing
with his stiff expression and crossed arms.)

Are you sure he can't understand us?

FARA

Nedjeff speaks only Pashtun, and a few words of Farsi. You
think I have impure thoughts, don't you?

JULES

I told you, I don't believe in purity.

FARA

(She gestures behind him.)

Look, there's your friend, the geographer. He has his head
in the well.

(JULES turns and sees XAVIER, a man in his
mid-thirties, dressed in a white blouse
and breeches--the attire of a 19th- century
scientist. He is LIT IN SPECTRAL LIGHT. He
is holding a device for measuring water
level in his hand.)

XAVIER

(Looks up from the well.)

It's from *qanats*. The water for the whole garden. For the
entire municipality of Tehran.

JULES

Xavier?

XAVIER

(Not responding to JULES.)

Underground canals, from springs in the Elborz. It's an ingenious engineering feat, all based on gravity.

JULES

(More emphatically.)

Xavier?

(XAVIER wanders off into the shadows, examining the measurement. JULES watches him disappear, then, disconcerted, he turns back in the direction of FARA.)

FARA

(Laughing)

I thought he was going to fall in the well.

JULES

(Still disconcerted)

Sometimes he gets distracted. He's a scientist.

(JULES paints.)

FARA

You like pomegranates, Monsieur Laurens.

JULES

I like to look at them.

FARA

But you don't like to eat them?

JULES

I find the seeds a nuisance, as I said. It's a huge amount of work for very little pleasure.

FARA

The seeds are my favorite part. I love to strip all the fruit off and spit them out.

(She sticks the point of her tongue between her teeth.)

JULES

I'd think that would stain your teeth pink. Could you pull the...

(Indicates the *chador*.)

...back from your face?

(She pulls the scarf back to her ear.)

FARA

Tell me, Monsieur Laurens, did you really think I'd look like a savage, with tattoos on my face and nostrils like a camel?

JULES

Of course not. I only said that so you'd come out from behind the screen.

FARA

What did you think I'd look like?

JULES

I had no idea. I'd heard all the stories of your legendary beauty.

FARA

Were you disappointed?

JULES

Quite the opposite. Could you turn your left shoulder slightly to the right? Perfect.

FARA

What will happen to this portrait when you finish it?

JULES

If I finish it, and you don't destroy it, I'll take it back to France.

FARA

You're not going to give it to me?

JULES

If I did that, what would I show the people in Paris?

FARA

Will you finish it today?

JULES

I'll be lucky to finish the sketching and color scheme this morning. The actual painting process could take a week.

FARA

You can come back tomorrow if you wish.

JULES

Fine, but let's begin a bit earlier. I don't want to expend all of my energy coaxing you from behind the screen.

FARA

Do you think they'll like my picture in Paris, Monsieur Laurens?

JULES

They'd be crazy if they didn't. Look straight ahead, please.

(LIGHTS FADE on FARA and NEDJEFF. SOUND OF BIRDS FADES TO CHOPIN NOCTURNE. After a few moments, LIGHTS UP as an elegant female writer with Mediterranean features, ADELE, enters JULES' painting studio in Parc Monot, in Paris, 1858. She is wearing an ankle-length pink satin dress, and around her neck are a ribbon pinned with a cameo and a reading glass on a string. In one hand she is carrying a cloth bag with several rolled-up maps sticking out the top, and in the other a large, leather portfolio full of prints and drawings. JULES continues working on the portrait as she enters. She turns the chair formerly occupied by FARA toward a table Upstage, sits down and takes a small painted box from the bag and places the box, some maps and the portfolio on the table. Upstage from the chair, wrapped in string and brown paper, leaning against a wall of the studio is what looks like a painting. AS CHOPIN NOCTURNE FADES, LIGHTS FADE UP, Adèle sits looking through the prints in the portfolio.)

ADELE

You don't like painting people, do you?

(JULES continues working on his portrait.)

JULES

Of course I like painting people.

ADÈLE

The society asked me to select fifty portraits for the volume. You don't have over thirty.

JULES

Choose some landscapes.

ADÈLE

They prefer people.

JULES

And buildings. I did many beautiful drawings of buildings.

ADÈLE

Too many, according to the academy.

JULES

I like buildings.

ADÈLE

You obviously like them quite a lot.

(She pulls drawings out of the portfolio,
glancing at each one as she speaks).

Palaces, gates, shrines, fortresses. Your portfolio looks like a boy's adventure book.

JULES

I was twenty-three, Adèle.

ADÈLE

I forget you actually were a boy. What's this one?

(She takes a bottle of wine and two glasses
out of her bag).

JULES

The mosque in Semnan. Its minarets shake.

ADÈLE

Shake?

JULES

Something about the elasticity of the brick.

ADÈLE

And this one?

(She pours two glasses of wine and hands one to JULES).

JULES

A pyramid of skulls in Isfahan I never finished. A Persian architect built it for Shah Abbas.

ADÈLE

Human skulls?

JULES

Animal. Except the one on top. According to Schabas, it belongs to the architect who built it for Shah Abbas. His crowning achievement, so to speak.

ADÈLE

I don't think it's what the society had in mind. Look, a portrait!

(She lays the print out on the table so they both can see it.)

Who is she?

JULES

A Turkoman commander we met in Mazandaran. When we arrived in Astarabad, she saw me sketching a...

ADÈLE

... building.

JULES

...a villa. She walked straight over to Schabas and said, "Tell him to draw my picture."

(She stands and hands him a glass of wine.)

ADÈLE

And you obeyed?

JULES

Of course I obeyed. She was fresh from massacring two hundred invaders from Georgia. They say during the uprising, she was 'the pure one's' military chief in Mazandaran.

ADÈLE

(Looking at the portrait.)

What's she holding in her hand?

JULES

It's a riding crop made of hippopotamus hide. The entire time I was sketching her, she chanted a terrifying paean and slapped her palm with the crop. I thought it was a war anthem, but Schabas told me she was singing a *ghazal*, a dessert love song.

ADÈLE

Who was the object of her affection?

JULES

Why do you think I was terrified?

ADÈLE

Where was Xavier while this musical wooing was going on?

JULES

Measuring the water level of the Caspian. That was the reason we were in Mazandaran.

ADÈLE

He and I stayed on the Caspian once, twenty years ago, on the way back from our expedition to the Steppes. In a cabin on a beach in Astrakhan. The peasants had no name for the Caspian. They called it "the sea". For them it was the entire universe. Was she pleased with her portrait?

JULES

Too pleased. She insisted I give it to her.

ADÈLE

How did you dissuade her?

JULES

I told her hundreds of people would soon be viewing her visage in Paris.

ADÈLE

That appeased her?

JULES

She'd never heard of Paris. But she seemed impressed when Schabas said it was five times the size of Tabriz, with taller minarets.

ADÈLE

(Indicating the portrait on the easel.)

Who's this one?

JULES

The shah's aunt.

ADÈLE

Aunt?

JULES

They marry young. For political reasons.

ADÈLE

Maybe we could use her for the frontispiece. She's quite stunning.

JULES

According to Xavier, it has to do with the Hindu Kush.

ADÈLE

The Hindu Kush?

JULES

He said Persia occupies a medial position, between the mountains, the desert, the Steppes and the sea. It's a natural crossroads, so the Persians have partaken of every race. Which is why they're so ravishing.

ADÈLE

Xavier had a geographical explanation for everything. Including his own lust.

JULES

He never looked at another woman in Persia.

ADÈLE

Too busy making measurements, I imagine.

JULES

When he found out what had happened here, he was worried sick about you.

ADÈLE

His concern was obviously misplaced.

(She walks to the table.)

Do you think you'll go back?

JULES

No.

ADÈLE

You don't miss it.

JULES

Yes. I miss it sometimes. But I prefer to paint.

(She places one the of rolled-up maps on the table.)

ADÈLE

I should have come.

JULES

Xavier was right. It's a treacherous country.

ADÈLE

(She unrolls the map and stretches it out on the table.)

We'd been to dangerous places before.

JULES

It's very primitive, especially for a woman.

ADÈLE

That never mattered to me.

JULES

He could be quite convincing.

ADÈLE

He loved to plot a course, check the coordinates, make sure they were all precise. But his plans were like his medieval maps. Magical, mysterious ... and absolutely unreliable. I shouldn't have listened to him.

ADÈLE

(She rolls the map back up and looks at
JULES.)

Why do you still paint her?

JULES

Because I like to look at her.

ADÈLE

I thought you liked buildings.

(LIGHTS FADE. ADÈLE exits.)