

ZULALIE LAILA
by Regina Miriam Bloch

"Death is a black camel that kneels at every man's door." -

EASTERN PROVERB.

" 'A beldame stained her hoary tresses black:
O little mother of old times,' I said,
'Most cunningly thou hast adorned thy head,
Yet never canst thou stretch thy crooked back.' "

SAUL

The muezzin cried aloud above the housetops, as though hailing the sun which rises in the East, where all things have dawned since the world's beginning. Thus once had the Egyptian priest stood, when he proclaimed the ascent of Khepra above the Nile; thus the Druid saw him and the Greeks beheld Phoebus Apollo driving his flaming team through receding, sable veils....And like a god the sun loomed above Akanir, the Persian city, while the chant of the muezzin drifted down from the minaret, bearing its message of the eternal resurrection and renaissance of Day.

"Allahu Akbar!" he droned; "Allahu Akbar! God is most great! God is most great!...I testify that there is no God but Allah!...I testify that Muhammad is the apostle of Allah. Come to prayer. Come to salvation. Prayer is better than sleep...La ilāha illa 'llah...There is no god but Allah!"

The crying died away on the air and light swept swiftly in its wake. Presently the city stirred and stretched upon the fringes of the desert. Flocks began to drink at the waterside, the barterers appeared upon the public places, the bazaar was opened and the bustle of morning began.

But Zulalie Laila slumbered fast, in her house that overlooked the city-wall and the river. For she was growing old and her eyelids claved more heavily to the boon of Sleep than of yore, whilst her lips from which the poppies were failing, sought greedily for his poppied draughts. So she lay upon her carpets, dyed magically with madder and camel-blood, her little dark face turned towards the wall.

Zulalie Laila was the daughter of Bedouin Arabs. Her father had been a date- and olive-seller to the markets of Persia and Arabia, and her first youth had been spent in tents and caravans crawling through the desert from town to town. She had lost her mother early in a sandstorm, that carried away half her nomad clan and all its beasts of burden. Zulalie Laila could yet faintly recall the whirl and stinging of the sand-monster. She still saw the opal clouds swaying, surging, leaping, like dancers in a ring, that swallowed up the sun in gulfs of blackness.

She was a very wayward child, with a strange beauty, and often provoked her father's wrath, for he was cruel and roving by nature. Her one love was her brother, a skilled musician, who could play night every kind of Eastern instrument from the claff and flute to the Indian zel and sitar. He taught her many tunes, which were a source of joy to the neglected girl. Often, when they reached a city, he would take her to hear the story-tellers in some Arabian café and she would squat on the floor at his side, amid fumes of incense and noisy hubble-bubbles, listening to Arab laughter; while she quaffed Mocca as thick as soup from tiny handleless cups held in a metal zarf, in which there were crescents and stars of gold that rose above the coffee as one drank. There would be some men, too, with skins drawn like parchment under their turbans, who smoked hashish or opium from pipes held to a blue flame. And over all would patter the talk of the professional story-teller, passing Persian puns that play upon his words with complex meanings, and speaking of Arabian Night enchantments, the miracles of Muhammad, Eastern anecdotes of prophes, hermits, seraglios full of odalisked fair, whose doorways were guarded by African eunuchs, or of Thibetan sorcerers with their dark rites.

Thus all had been fairly well with Zulalie Laila until Ali Khan, the horse-dealer's son, had come into her life when she was but twelve and a woman, as the East accounts its women. Ali Khan was her brother's friend and he showed her how to ride the barebacked Arab ponies. There was nothing Ali Khan did not know of horses, mules and Bisharin camels. He had been born among the saddlebags and he took untamed steeds from one end of the desert to the other. His father was a muleteer and bore the title of Hajji, having pilgrimaged to Mecca with the Faithful. But at horse-dealing and stealing, he was still the most cunning old rogue between the Red Sea and the Black. Ali Khan had inherited much of his father's temperament. And it was to be the Kismet of Zulalie Laila that he loved but two things – his horses and herself. At least, he loved her for three moons that made the waste blossom for her as the Garden of Shaddad, the King of Yemen. Of his horses he could never weary, for they were sold as soon as they were broken and new were bought. But when Zulalie Laila was broken and he tired, it was too late.

Then, fearing discovery of their intrigue and chiefly to be rid of her, partly to save her from the death that would surely befall her at her father's hands and which was lawful according to Arabian laws, since a woman's downfall destroys the *sharaf* or honour of her entire kin, Ali Khan, on his next horse-buying expedition into Persia, smuggled Zulalie Laila away among his baggage.

Once he had seen her safely into Akanir, he deserted her with characteristic callousness.

From that day, Zulalie Laila's career had been a chequered one. She did not long remain a beggar, for her beauty led her into other adventures and she became the greatest courtesan in Akanir, whose name was couple with viziers and the Caliph's son. Not that she was truly bad at the core, but she had wild blood within her and, above all, a capacity for love which Ali Khan and a heart forsworn had turned to the bitterness of the sea and the fickleness of the wind.

But now Zulalie Laila was aging – that crowning tragedy of all the sad life of an Eastern woman. She did not guess it yet, although the Caliph's son had had another mistress for a month. Still it was because of these insidious advances of time, that it was noon before she woke.

Zulalie Laila yawned with queer gasps. Next she rubbed her eyes and called her waiting-woman: "Fatma! Fatma!" When no Fatma appeared, she yawned again and rolled lazily from the rugs.

Presently she returned from the baths, smelling deliciously and wrapped in a blanket of white striped with red. She squatted down, Persian fashion, before her mirror and shook out her hair as she gazed upon her image in the metal.

Alas! it was then that Zulalie Laila met her greatest enemy face to face, the foe who had been lurking round her unawares and had caught her in nets as yet nigh imperceptible.

She looked upon herself and her eyes widened. Into them crept terror and an expression that confessed defeat.

As a dreamer aroused she saw the streak of grey across her tresses, like a snowflake upon their lake of blackness; the pallor of her mouth, the lines that spread fan-wise at the corner of her eyes, with all their wisdom and a grief they could no longer conceal beneath the brilliance of health.

Suddenly Zulalie Laila hid her face in her hands, as a sinner strives to hide his acts in darkness. Sobbingly, line one pronouncing a fatal spell, she whispered: "White hair – the Messenger of Death." She remember the coldness of the Caliph's son, which she had tried to laugh away because she had not understood it. A pang seized her heart, even as when Ali Khan had left her in her youth. She added, "I knew it not – " And gathering courage when these things were spoken, she gazed at herself again the mirror, feeling that she had never realized its relentlessness before.

Then coldly, she thus addressed her face: "O Rose of Ruined Gardens, thou hast joyed too freely in the sun and now thou art full-blown. None perceive it over-much, but to-morrow they will find thy petals strewn and whirled away, thy glory withered and thy tasseled bloom cast down. Who will then fly to woo thee, from among the flutterers of that Garden? Will the dewdrop fall upon thee in the dawn because the mists weep tears of joy in beholding thy beauty? Will the bee come humming to sip thy summery sweets? Will the butterfly and the dragonfly show thee their wings? Will the bul-bul forsake

the lilac-tree at thy ravishment, or the peacock strike this tail many times for pleasure of thy fragrance? Nay, they will all go chattering through the Garden, saying: 'The Rose who was so vain and proud, is dead, is dead!'

Zulalie Laila laughed mirthlessly at her own conceits: "I will indeed be was some worn wife of the harem, shrouding her wrinkles under the *yashmak*, while her eyes piteously watch her lord's last favourite, laden in the jewels and adornments which were hers ere the course of love had set. Verily it were better to die, before all the world knoweth of this, my shame. For a woman may sell her soul without shame, but the loss of her beauty she can never brazen out."

But then she shrank together. She ever been a coward, for all her Arab savagery. "Death!" she murmured, recoiling with lips grown bloodless, "woe is me... And yet it were the wiser choice." She clasped her hands, sobbing nervously and staring at the mirror with eyes that could not brave the drabness of her future.

"If Ali Khan had been as I deemed," she mused, "or if I had aught to love..." Then again there came this idea of dying before the world gloated upon her ugliness, her utter failure, ere she lost her lovers and must stay hidden from the sun as some book of dreams in a dusty cupboard. But as a spectre, the terror of death froze her to the very bone. Death the cold, the immutable, the throe-ridden. She thought of her limbs mouldering away in the earth and the judgment of sinners. Would she be sent hurtling down to Gehenna over the sharp bridge of the underworld?

But suddenly Zulalie Laila smiled weirdly and her eyes grew golden with inspiration.

"O Death," she said, "why do I make thee this ogre of dread? Art thou not merciful to save me from the loneliness of old age and sorrow, dragged out across my span of life? Yea, Death, to me thou shalt hold no horror. I have had many lovers and many long exquisite hours of love. But of all my lovers, I will make thee the last, the most ideal, the veriest Beloved. I will woo thee as a woman wooeth a priceless friend, and when thou art mine why should I heed thy hurt? Are there not such things in love and is it not both heaven and hell and half of it pain and forgiving? Doth lover spare his torment and does he not smite harder for the very beauty of his hand?...I will die for love as I lived for love, and thou shalt be my ultimate lover, my lord, my final mystery of desire."

The whiteness of her face was suffused with rose and she drew in her breath.

Thus, all that day Zulalie Laila was feverishly busied, as one who prepares her house for festival. Saying that she must go upon a journey, she sent Fatma, the dwarfed serving-woman, back to her people. With her own hands she washed the walls of her chamber, until all those little yellow tiles with their paintings of blue hoopoes and Sabin trees, gleamed again. She straightened the chess-board of black lacquer, with its riders, elephants, and towers of red ivory. She cast a cloth of black and gold woven with the gates of life, upon the floor. She burnished the silver water-ewer in orange-pulp and cast *nirgis* petals over a silken napkin on which she set a feast of dates and sweetmeats wrapped in leaves. She piled her bed high with Eastern cushions and placed camphor candles in sconces of copper about the room.

Then she took forth her jewel-hoard and her glass perfume phials, her toilet-box on which there were images of divs and genii from Mazinderan studded in gold, and her shining shoes and dresses.

She poured the essence of Khas or Indian hay, upon her body and painted her eyes with Egyptian *surma* and reddened her insteps with lac, even curling her eyelashes and deepening the little moles upon her chin and neck. Last she chose a garment of crimson, whereon there were silver ring-doves and cypresses and amulets of sea-crystal.

She said: "Sweet lover, the chamber is garnished, and I will bide here to enchant thee. For I have dissembled the traces of age and am young and radiant for thee to-night. Come and join me at my banquet."

She sat down before the table and put another cushion by her side as for a guest, speaking all the while to her invisible Beloved. She said: "These are dainties of honey and violet petals. There are almonds and nuts in cinnamon and sugar, figs, and wine from Shiraz. Which liketh thou best of these,

my master?"

When she had eaten, she laughed: "Mayhap thou hungerest not for food. Dost thou prefer the room light or darkened?" She ran altered the shutters and began to play upon a *taus*, that had been brought to her by a musician from Kashmir. This was an instrument of mango wood, somewhat like a guitar but most cunningly shaped as a peacock and inlaid with tinted ivory. The strings were of gold and the upright golden wires formed the comb of the bird, which she touched as she crooned a Persian love-song to herself:

"The nightingale of sorrows is singing in the night;
I hear its voice always.
It flitteth through the lilac and seeketh for the light,
But the False Dawn hath no day.

"O who will hear the nightingale and who will see the sun?
O where is the rare perfume-vase whose seal is broken through?
The roses bloom in Iran, the years and ages run
But still the lonely nightingale sings yearning 'mid the dew."

As she ceased, a wind shook the lattices and something creaked near by. Zulalie Laila smiled expectantly and madness crept into her eyes.

"He cometh," she whispered. But the wind trailed away and the room dimmed with the shadows of night. She shuddered suddenly; the stillness of the house oppressed her. "I will light the camphor-candles, that I may not miss thee, dear heart," she said. "Why dost thou loiter so long? Doth my dress displease thee? I will change it and see which garment snares thy fancy."

First she attired herself in a straw-gold gown with pearls and next, in a dress green as the vestments of Paradise and once in the blue of a Dervish's robe. When none of these brought the sound of his footsteps, she slipped into a garb of gulnar from India and hung silver veils edges with sunstones over her head; on her feet she put tip-tilted shoes of red and black, tinted like the tulip a lover giveth to his chosen one.

Then, fairer than a dream, she lay down upon her couch among the carpets of violet and apple-green and spoke soft love-words unto Death.

"My lover," she said, "thou art truer than the common roots of men. I see thou carest not for these vanities and hastenest neither for the snoods of my wimple nor the nooses of my shoon. But I will not sleep, lest I should miss the music of thy feet as thou speedest to my kisses. Do not fly me as Yusuf fled from Zuleikha, since I adore thee more than all the lovers of the past. Shut me not out from thyself, O my Gulistan, my Rose-Garden, my Bostan, my Garden of Perfume, for I would love thee as the roses cling to the hills."

She fell into quaint reflections, her eyes still scanning the doorway. A blue lamp swung in its arch, and it was draped by curtains of sable and gold.

"Lord," she said, "I feel thy beauty disturb me, though I have never seen thy face. Surely thou hast narcissus eyes and lotus hands and feet that bruise the lilies; thy skin is smooth, thy teeth as pearls enstranged. When thou enterest I will greet thee like a bride long plighted. Do not despise me if I swoon in happiness, for as the traces of the caravan are cut upon the desert, so thy kisses will ravage my spirit... Thou art more adored by me than ever King Suleiman by Balkaia, the Queen of Sheba."

Next she tossed, crying: "Give me of thy herbs of peace, for I weary towards thee beyond the endurance of love. I will pillow thee on my breast, and thou shalt listen to the beatings of my heart, as the demons who crept to the portals of Heaven stole the converse of the angels. I will pour musk of Khotan upon thy ebon locks; I will salute thee as the fire worshippers of Baku hail the sun. I will tend thee like the Simurgh-bird cherished Zol; thou shalt dream upon rugs of Khorassan and revel in my

arms.”

Once more she listened. But there was no movement in all the chamber except the hissing of the camphor candles in the half-light, the struck sparks of gold from the hangings and carpet. In the warmth, the aroma of Indian hay upon her limbs grew intoxicatingly intense.

Zulalie Laila moaned in a fit of weeping. “Thou single Phoenix of my heart,” she sobbed, “why dost thou baulk me? I will turn to thee, like the faces of the faithful towards the *mehrab* in the mosque. I love thee as Jamshid treasured his magic kirtle and seven-ringed goblet. Art thou sterner than the prophet Khizr guarding the mysteries of being, and must I wander lorn like Majnun of Laila, when he taught the secrets of love to the birds and beasts of the waste?”

Then she mourned still more, saying: “I shall wait for thee, for thy kiss will be of the tinge and nature of fire and consume me with all my yearnings. When thou comest, it will be to me as to the people who saw King Jamshid descend from the mountain-tops with the sunset-halo about his head and deemed that there were two suns in the world. For when thou gazest upon me, Zulalie Laila, who am ashining in the night, it will be as though there were two moons. Though thy splendor should smite me dead, being Death, even then I will feel thy dear hands touch me. Thou wilt gather up my body and bury it in a tomb of marble with a gilded pinnace, writing upon it in the letters of thy language:

“This was Zulalie Laila, who died for love of Death.”

Once again she lay mute, watching and waiting for the sound of his feet.

“The road must be long and drear,” she said slowly at last, “from the Kiblah of the night. What can I do to hasten thee? I cannot bear the disappointment of dawn without thee, nor tarry for thy advent through all the hours of day.”

She quivered and pined with sickness in her soul. Then, suddenly she stirred, wide-eyes and musing. Next she babbled and clapped her hands in glee.

“By Kaikhosru!” she said, “I have still a wizard potion left to hurry thee.”

She slid from the cushions and unlocked a casket set with Arabian carbuncles, which was concealed under the rugs. From this she drew an oblong cruse, wherein an emerald liquid glimmered.

Zulalie Laila held it to the sheen of the candles so that it shot into smaragdine, like the mythical crest-jewel in a serpent’s head. She kissed it fondly, saying: “Thou key to the Veiled Door, the world would name thee poison, but to me thou art a love-philtre.”

She unstopped the vial and drank deep and flung it to the floor. It broke on the tiles with a thin, metallic sound. Amid the Khas-scent of the room, stoke a faint redolence of almonds.

Zulalie Laila crept back unto the divan. Her cheeks were pale as snow, her fingers, ringed in Persian pearls, shook and clinched. Then illness convulsed her face; it turned livid and blood gathered upon her lips.

“Allah, forgive,” she groaned; “yet no great love is won without great sacrifice.”... She writhed and shrieked, while the sweat dripped from her brows. “When my groom is come to his bride,” she muttered wandering, “the musicians shall not wake us with their music in the morn.”

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The lattices rattled and the light of the camphor-candles blew together in the wind that rises ere the dawn. Something impalpable dispersed the silence of the house. It ascended the stairway, as if hastily summoned.

The blue lamp swung noisily upon its chains, the curtains of black and gold trembled. It was as though a Presence filled the chamber, its Shadow moved vaguely onward, there was a whirring of wings in motion.

The divan whereon Zulalie Laila rested was glowingly revealed in the flare, sharply outlining her distorted faced that waited – waited hungrily for all its anguish – her hair amid the sun-stones and the Kashmiri veils of silver.

Then, as the wind died down, the candles steadied and the divan was lost in gloom again. Only, over the walls a Radiance passed for a moment.

But Zulalie Laila sat up with eyes that were already filmy. Her face was waxen, but the blueness had faded now. All at once she laughed, a low mysterious laugh of love and held her arms wide and then closed them again, fast, fast, as a woman enlocks her heart's dearest. Her head fell back, disclosing her throat flecked with gems; her mouth trembled and framed a reckless kiss.

She panted a little and then lay quite still, like one who is faint for ecstasy.

The rustling of wings ceased in the chamber. The almond odour waned away and the air grew close and stifling from the guttering candles.

The room greyed, dulling their shimmer and, once more, the call of the muezzin floated down from the minaret above the city-walls.

But again Zulalie Laila overslept his cry and heeded it not. For her Lover had come overnight and stolen away her soul in that last tempestuous wooing. Her eyes were blinded by his glamour, though they held no fear. Her lips still smiles at the memory of his kisses as at things unutterably tender.

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A *dilruba* player passed the shuttered house, playing plaintively upon that instrument which is called "appealing to the heart." At noon, old Fatma clattered up the stairs...But Zulalie Laila had not yet returned from her journey.