



VINTAGE

THE PALACE OF DREAMS

ISMAIL KADARE

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About the Book

At the heart of the Sultan's vast but fragile empire stands the mysterious Palace of Dreams: the most secret and powerful Ministry ever invented. Its task is to scour every town, village and hamlet to collect the citizens' dreams, then to sift, sort and classify them, and ultimately to interpret them, in order to identify the "master-dreams" that will provide the clues to the Empire's destinies and those of its Monarch. An entire nation's consciousness is thus tapped into and meticulously laid bare in the form of images and symbols of the dreaming mind.

Kadare's *Palace of Dreams* stands as the symbol of the thought-police who have, through history, been the most effective instruments of oppression at the service of dictators.

About the Author

Ismail Kadare, born in 1936 in the mountain town of Gjirokastër, near the Greek border, is Albania's best-known poet and novelist. Since the appearance of *The General of the Dead Army* in 1965, Kadare has published scores of stories and novels that make up a panorama of Albanian history linked by a constant meditation on the nature of the human consequences of dictatorship. Kadare's works brought him into frequent conflict with the authorities from 1945 to 1985. In 1990 he sought political asylum in France, and now divides his time between Paris and Tirana. He is the winner of the inaugural Man Booker International Prize.

Also by Ismail Kadare

The Concert

The Pyramid

The File on H

The Three-Arched Bridge

The General of the Dead Army

Three Elegies for Kosovo

Spring Flowers, Spring Frost

Broken April

The Successor

Chronicle in Stone

Agamemnon's Daughter

The Siege

ISMAIL KADARE

The Palace of Dreams

TRANSLATED BY
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FROM THE FRENCH VERSION OF THE ALBANIAN BY
Jusuf Vrioni

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

I

Morning

THE CURTAINS WERE letting in the uncertain light of dawn, and as usual he pulled up the blanket in the hope of dozing on a while longer. But he soon realized he wouldn't be able to. He'd remembered that this sunrise heralded no ordinary day, and the thought drove away all desire for sleep.

A moment later, as he groped by the bed for his slippers, he felt an ironical grimace flit briefly over his still-numb face. He was dragging himself from his slumbers in order to go to work at the Tabir Sarrail, the famous Bureau of sleep and dreams. To anyone else the paradox might have seemed wryly entertaining, but he was too anxious to smile outright.

A pleasant aroma of tea and toast floated up from downstairs. He knew both his mother and his old nurse were awaiting him eagerly, and he did his best to greet them with some show of warmth.

"Good morning, Mother! Good morning, Loke!"

"Good morning, Mark-Alem. Did you sleep well?"

There was a gleam of excitement in their eyes, connected, no doubt, with his new appointment. Perhaps, like himself not long before, they'd been thinking this was the last night when he'd enjoy the peaceful sleep of ordinary mortals. From now on his life was bound to be different.

As he ate his breakfast he couldn't concentrate his thoughts on anything, and his anxiety continued to grow. When he went upstairs to dress, instead of going back to his room he went into the big drawing room. The pale blue tones of the carpet had lost their power to soothe. He went over to the bookshelves and, just as he had done the day before in front of the medicine cabinet, stood for some time gazing at the titles on the spines of the books. Then he put out his hand and took down a heavy folio volume bound in dark brown, almost black leather. It was years since he'd last opened it: it contained the history of his family, and on the cover some unknown hand had inscribed the title, *The Quprilis from generation to generation*, followed by the French word, *Chronique*.

As he turned the pages he had difficulty following the lines of manuscript, the style of which varied with the different authors. It wasn't hard to guess that most of the writers had been old men, or else younger ones confronting the end of their lives or on the brink of some great misfortune - the sort of occasion when people feel an irresistible need to leave some testimony behind them.

The first of our great family to attain high office in the Empire was Meth Quprili, born some three hundred years ago in a small town in central Albania.

Mark-Alem heaved a deep sigh. His hand went on turning the pages, but his eyes paused only on the names of viziers and generals. Lord, they were all Quprilis! he thought. And when he woke up he'd been stupid enough to wonder at his own appointment! He really must be a prize idiot.

When he came upon the words *Palace of Dreams* he realized he'd been trying both to find and to avoid them. But it was too late to skip to the next page.

Our family's connections with the Palace of Dreams have always been very complicated. At first, in the days of the Yildis Sarrail, which dealt only with interpreting the stars,

things were relatively simple. It was when the Yildis Sarrail became the Tabir Sarrail that they began to go wrong ...

Mark-Alem's anxiety, which a short while ago had been distracted by all those names and titles, now seized him by the throat once more.

He started leafing through the *Chronicle* again, but this time roughly and fast, as though a gale had suddenly started to blow through the tips of his fingers.

Our patronymic is a translation of the Albanian word Ura (qyprija or kurpija); it refers to a bridge with three arches in central Albania, constructed in the days when the Albanians were still Christians and built with a man walled up in its foundations. After the bridge, which he helped to build, was finished, one of our ancestors, whose first name was Gjon, followed an old custom and adopted the name of Ura, together with the stigma of murder attached to it.

Mark-Alem slammed the book shut and hurried from the drawing room. A few moments later he was out in the street.

It was a wet morning, with a light sleet falling. The tall buildings, looking down on the bustle in the streets with their heavy doors and wickets still shut, seemed to add to the gloom.

Mark-Alem buttoned his overcoat right up to the neck. As he glanced at the swirls of delicate flakes fluttering around the wrought-iron street lamps, he felt a cold shudder run down his spine.

As usual at this hour of the day the avenue was full of clerks from the ministries hurrying to get to their offices on time. Mark-Alem wondered several times as he went along whether he oughtn't to have taken a cab. The Tabir Sarrail was further away than he'd thought, and a thin layer of half-melted snow was making the pavements slippery.

He was now walking past the Central Bank. A little further on, a line of frost-covered carriages stood outside

another imposing building. He wondered which ministry it was.

Someone in front of him skidded on the pavement. Mark-Alem watched him as he tried to recover his balance, fell, picked himself up, examined - muttering an oath as he did so - first his bespattered cape and then the place on which he'd slipped, and finally continued on his way, somewhat dazed. Keep your eyes open! Mark-Alem said inwardly, not quite sure if he was warning the stranger or himself.

As a matter of fact there was no need for him to worry. He hadn't been told to present himself at the office at any particular time; he wasn't even sure he had to be there in the morning. He suddenly realized he had no idea of the hours that were kept at the Tabir Sarrail.

Somewhere in the mist, away to his left, a clock let out a brazen chime, addressed as if to itself. Mark-Alem walked on faster. He'd already turned up his fur collar, but now involuntarily made as if to turn it up again. In fact, though, it wasn't his neck that was cold, but a specific place in his chest. He felt in the inside pocket of his jacket to make sure his letter of recommendation was still there.

He suddenly noticed there were fewer people about than before. All the clerks are in their offices already, he thought with a pang. But he soon calmed down: his position was quite different from theirs. He wasn't a civil servant yet.

In the distance he thought he could make out a wing of the Tabir Sarrail, and when he got nearer he found he was right. It really was the Palace, with its faded cupolas which looked as if they'd once been blue, or at least bluish, but which were now almost invisible through the sleet. This was one of the sides of the building. The front must face on to the street round the corner.

He crossed a small, almost deserted esplanade over which rose the strangely slender minaret of a mosque. Yes, here was the entrance to the Palace. Its two wings stretched away into the mist, while the main part of the

building stood back a little as if recoiling from some threat. Mark-Alem felt his anxiety increase. Before him lay a long series of identical entrances, but when he got nearer he realized that all these great doors, wet from the sleet, were closed, and looked as if they hadn't been opened for some time.

As he strolled by them, examining them out of the corner of his eye, a man with a cowl over his head suddenly materialized beside him.

"Which is the way in?" asked Mark-Alem.

The man pointed to the right. The sleeve of his cape was so ample it remained unaffected by the movement of the arm within, and his hand was dwarfed by the enormous folds of cloth. Good heavens, what a strange get-up, thought Mark-Alem as he went in the direction indicated. After a while he heard more footsteps nearby. It was another hooded man.

"Over here," he said. "This is the staff entrance."

Mark-Alem, flattered at being taken for a member of staff, finally found the entrance. The doors looked very heavy. There were four of them, all exactly alike and fitted with heavy bronze knobs. He tried one of them and found it, strangely, lighter than he expected. He then found himself in a chilly corridor with a ceiling so high he felt as if he was at the bottom of a pit. On either side there was a long row of doors. He tried the handles of all of them until one opened, admitting him to another, less icy corridor. At last, beyond a glass partition, he saw some people. They were sitting in a circle, talking. They must be ushers or at least some kind of reception staff, for they were all wearing a sort of pale blue livery much the same colour as the Palace cupolas. For a moment Mark-Alem thought he could see marks on their uniforms like those he'd noticed in the distance on the cupolas themselves and ascribed to damp. But he didn't have time to pursue his examination, for the people he was observing had stopped talking and were

looking at him inquiringly. He opened his mouth to greet them, but they were so obviously annoyed at having their conversation interrupted that instead of saying good morning he merely mentioned the name of the official to whom he was supposed to present himself.

“Oh, it’s about a job, is it?” said one of them. “First floor on the right, door eleven!”

Like anyone entering a large government office for the first time, but all the more so because he had arrived in a state of numb uncertainty, Mark-Alem would have liked to exchange a few words with someone. But these people seemed so impatient to resume their confounded conversation he felt they were actually ejecting him back into the corridor.

He heard a voice behind him: “Over there - on the right!” Without looking round he walked on as directed. Only the tension he was under and the cold shudders still running through his body prevented him from feeling annoyed.

The corridor on the first floor was long and dark, with dozens of doors opening off it, tall and unnumbered. He counted ten and stopped outside the eleventh. He’d have liked to make sure it really was the office of the person he was looking for before he knocked, but the corridor was empty and there was no one to ask. He drew a deep breath, stretched out his hand, and gave a gentle tap. But no voice could be heard from within. He looked first to his right, then to his left, and knocked again, more loudly this time. Still no answer. He knocked a third time, and still hearing nothing tried the door. Strangely enough it opened easily. He was terrified, and made as if to close it again. He even put out his hand to clutch it back as it creaked open wider still on its hinges. Then he noticed the room was empty. He hesitated. Should he go in? He couldn’t think of any rule or custom that applied to this situation. Finally the door stopped creaking. He stood gazing wide-eyed at the

benches lining the walls of the empty office. After lingering a moment in the doorway he felt for his letter of recommendation, and this restored his courage. He went in. Dash it all, he thought. Seeing in his mind's eye his large house in Royal Street and the influential relatives who often gathered there after dinner in the huge drawing room with its tall chimney piece, he sat down on one of the benches with a comparatively casual air. Unfortunately the image of his house and relatives soon faded, and he was once more seized with apprehension. He thought he detected a muffled sound like a whisper, but couldn't tell where it came from. Then, looking around the room he discovered a side door, from beyond which seemed to come the sound of voices. He sat still for a moment, straining his ears, but the murmur remained as indistinct as ever. By now his whole attention was concentrated on this door, on the other side of which he for some reason supposed it must be warmer.

He put his hands on his knees and sat like that for some time. At any rate he'd managed without too much trouble to get inside a building to which very few people had access. It was said even ministers themselves weren't allowed in without a special pass. Two or three times he glanced at the door where the sound of the voices came from, but he felt he could stay there for hours or even days without standing up and going over to open it. He'd just sit on the bench and wait, thanking his stars for letting him get as far as this anteroom. He hadn't expected it to be so easy. But had it really been as easy as all that? Then he reproached himself: a walk through the drizzle, a few closed doors, some ushers in copper sulphate-coloured liveries, this empty waiting room - you couldn't really call that difficult.

And yet, without quite knowing why, he heaved a sigh.

At that moment the door opened. He stood up. Someone poked his head in, looked at him, then vanished again,

leaving the door ajar. Inside, Mark-Alem heard him say:

“There’s someone out in the anteroom!”

Mark-Alem didn’t know how long he waited. The door remained ajar, but instead of human voices he could now hear a strange crackling sound. The man he’d glimpsed before finally reappeared – a very short man holding a sheaf of papers which fortunately, as Mark-Alem said to himself, absorbed most of his attention. Nevertheless he did dart a searching glance at Mark-Alem, who was tempted to offer some apology for having made him leave what was probably a nice warm office. But the midget’s expression froze the words on Mark-Alem’s lips. Instead, his hand slowly plucked the letter of recommendation from his pocket and held it out. The other seemed about to take it when he suddenly snatched back his arm as if afraid of being burned. He craned forward and scanned the letter for two or three seconds, then drew away. Mark-Alem thought he detected a mocking gleam in his eye.

“Come with me!” said the little man, heading for the door that led into the corridor.

Mark-Alem followed him out. At first he tried to memorize their route so as to be able to find his own way out, but he soon gave up the attempt as useless.

The corridor was even longer than it had seemed before. A faint light reached it from other passages branching off it. Mark-Alem and his guide finally turned along one of these. After a while the little man stopped in front of a door and went in, leaving it open for the visitor. Mark-Alem hesitated a moment, but when the other beckoned he entered too.

Even before he felt the warmth he recognized the smell of red-hot coals coming from a big copper brazier in the middle of the room. A square-faced man with a morose expression was sitting at a wooden table. Mark-Alem had the feeling he’d been sitting waiting for them with his eyes fixed on the door before they’d even crossed the threshold.

The midget, with whom Mark-Alem reckoned he'd by now broken the ice, went over to the other man and whispered something in his ear. The man sitting at the table went on staring at the door as if someone were still knocking at it. He listened a moment longer to what the little man was saying, then muttered a few words himself, but in such a way that his face remained completely immobile. Mark-Alem began to think his enterprise was coming to nothing; that neither the letter of recommendation nor any of the other intercessions on his behalf carried any weight in those eyes, whose only interest seemed to reside in the door.

Then suddenly he heard himself being spoken to. His hand groped nervously inside his coat and brought out the letter of recommendation. But he immediately had the impression that he'd done the wrong thing and changed the atmosphere for the worse. For a split second he thought he must have misheard, but just as he was about to put the letter back in his pocket the midget reached out for the envelope. Mark-Alem, reassured, held it out nearer, but his relief was premature, for the other, as before, drew back and wouldn't touch the letter. Instead he waved his hand in the air as if to indicate its proper destination. Mark-Alem, somewhat taken aback, realized he was supposed to hand the letter directly to the other official, who was no doubt superior in rank to his escort.

Rather to Mark-Alem's surprise, the senior civil servant actually took the letter. Even more amazingly, for the visitor had begun to think he would never take his eyes off the door, he opened the envelope and began to investigate its contents. Mark-Alem scrutinized him all the time he was reading in the hope of finding some clue in his face. But instead something happened that he found really terrifying, filling him with the kind of faint but rapidly mounting panic that is often produced by an earthquake. And what Mark-Alem was feeling was indeed caused by a kind of upheaval.

For as he read the letter the official with the morose expression had slowly risen from his chair. The movement was so slow and so smooth it seemed to Mark-Alem that it would never end, and that the formidable official on whom his fate depended was going to turn into a monster of some kind before his very eyes. He was on the point of yelling, "Never mind! I don't want the job. Give me back my letter. I can't bear to watch you uncoiling like that!" when he saw that the process of standing was now over and the official was finally upright.

Mark-Alem was astonished, after all this, to find his host was of merely average height. He drew a deep breath, but once more his relief was premature. Now that he was standing the official began to walk away from his desk at a pace as deliberate as before. He was making for the middle of the room. But the man who'd brought Mark-Alem here seemed unsurprised, and moved aside to let his superior pass. Now Mark-Alem felt quite reassured. The man must just be stretching his legs after sitting down for too long, or perhaps he suffered from piles, or gout. And to think, Mark-Alem said to himself, I nearly let out a howl of terror! My nerves really have been in a terrible state recently!

For the first time that morning he was able to face his interlocutor with his usual self-assurance. The official still had the letter of recommendation in his hand. Mark-Alem was expecting him to say, "Yes, I know all about it - the job's yours," or at least to give him some hope, make him some promise for the next few weeks or months. His many cousins wouldn't have exerted themselves for nothing, moving heaven and earth for over two months to arrange this appointment. And perhaps it was more important for this functionary, by whom he'd been so unnecessarily terrified, to remain on good terms with Mark-Alem's influential family, than it was for Mark-Alem himself to get on the right side of *him*. As he watched him Mark-Alem was now so much at ease that for a moment he felt his face

might break into a smile. And he'd have allowed it to do so if he hadn't suddenly been shattered by a new and horribly unexpected development. The official carefully folded up the letter of recommendation, and just as Mark-Alem was expecting some kindly comment, tore it across, twice. Mark-Alem shuddered. His lips moved as if to ask a question or perhaps just to get some air, but the official, as if he hadn't done enough already, went over and threw the pieces into the brazier. A mischievous flame sputtered from the ash-choked embers, then died away leaving scraps of blackened paper.

"We don't accept recommendations at the Tabir Sarrail," said the official in a voice that reminded Mark-Alem of a clock chiming through the dark.

He was petrified. He didn't know what he ought to do: stay there, decamp without more ado, protest or apologize. As if he had read his thoughts, the man who had brought him here silently left the room, leaving him alone with the official. They were now face to face, separated by the brazier. But this didn't last long. With the same interminable movement as before the official moved back to his place behind the desk. But he didn't sit down. He merely cleared his throat as if preparing to deliver a speech, then, glancing back and forth between the door and Mark-Alem, said:

"We don't accept recommendations at the Tabir Sarrail. It's completely contrary to the spirit of this institution."

Mark-Alem didn't understand.

"The fundamental principle of the Tabir Sarrail resides not in being open to outside influences but in remaining closed to them. Not in openness but in isolation. And so, not in recommendation but in its opposite. Nevertheless, from today you're appointed to work here."

What's happening to me? thought Mark-Alem. His eyes, as if to make sure again of what had taken place, took in

the remains of the letter, lying in ashes on the sleeping embers.

“Yes, from this moment on you work here,” said the official again, having apparently noticed Mark-Alem’s appalled expression.

He drew a deep breath, spread his hands out over the desk (which Mark-Alem now noticed was covered with files), and went on:

“The Tabir Sarrail or Palace of Dreams, as it’s called in the language of today, is one of our great imperial State’s most important institutions ...”

He was silent for a moment, scrutinizing Mark-Alem as if to assess how far he was capable of taking in the meaning of his words. Then he went on:

“The world has long recognized the importance of dreams, and the rôle they play in anticipating the fates of countries and of the people who govern them. You have certainly heard of the Oracle of Delphi in ancient Greece, and of the famous soothsayers of Rome, Assyria, Persia, Mongolia, and so on. Old books tell sometimes of the beneficial effects of the seers’ predictions, sometimes of the penalties incurred by those who rejected them or accepted them too late. In short, books record all the events that have ever been told of in advance, whether or no they were actually affected by the forecast. Now this long tradition undoubtedly has its own importance, but it pales into insignificance beside the operations of the Tabir Sarrail. Our imperial State is the first in the history of the whole world to have institutionalized the interpretation of dreams, and so to have brought it to such a high degree of perfection.”

Mark-Alem listened in bewilderment. He still hadn’t quite got over the previous emotions of the morning, and this matter-of-fact flood of abstruse phrases crowned all!

“The task of our Palace of Dreams, which was created directly by the reigning Sultan, is to classify and examine