

The Insane Root

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by Rosa Praed

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Chapter I

THE AMBASSADOR'S PHYSICIAN

In the Abarian Embassy in London, Isàdas Pacha lay sick unto death. He was an old man, and upon several previous occasions when he had been stricken by illness it was thought that he could not recover. Nevertheless, when newspapers and Cabinets were speculating upon his probable successor, he had invariably risen up from his bed and had again handled the reins, continuing to transact the duties of Ambassador to the Court of St James's entrusted to him by his Imperial master.

He was greatly in the favour of his Emperor, and was, after his own fashion, a power in the courts of Europe. Though it was said, and indeed with truth, that most of the business of the Chancellery was carried on by his clever, fascinating and ambitious first secretary, Caspar Ruel Bey, it was the brain of Isàdas Pacha which inspired despatches, the hand of Isàdas Pacha—that shrivelled, forceful hand—which gave the last decisive touch to the helm.

Isàdas Pacha was old and had lived an unholy life. He had loved many women—the prey of some, the tyrant of others—had drunk much wine, had gambled and fought and rollicked, had nourished revenge upon the fruit of diabolical knowledge, had strange byways of intrigue, vice and of wisdom where was little good and much evil. He had, in fact, to quote an austere London surgeon who attended him, violated every law of health, morals and religion, and was a standing disproof of the power of those laws. For his marvellous vitality and his commanding intellect had brought him successfully through a varied career, to what now-at its close, seemed the very zenith of influence and popularity. Nor were the influence and popularity undeserved. He had been a faithful servant to an effete and demoralised civilisation—a state which from its geographical position was at that time one of the chief factors in Christian and Mahometan policy. He had done his country's work—not always righteous—in many lands, and had felt the pulse-beats of many nations. He had the wile of the East and the common sense of the West, and was consulted by both in hours of crisis and difficulty. The decorations heaped upon him had been genuinely won, and only a week before his illness, the last and crowning order of merit—the highest gift in his sovereign's power to bestow—had been sent him with an autograph letter

from that sovereign, by whom he was both loved and trusted. The ideal of an autocratic sovereignty was the ideal to which Isàdas Pacha clung. It had ruled his actions; and' the glittering jewel which represented it, was now placed by his desire, at the foot of his bed, and solaced his dying hours. Thus, a strong and lasting devotion had been inspired in him by the original of an oil painting—the portrait of a man with regular, refined features, dark haunting eyes, and an expression of the most profound melancholy, the most utter satiety to be seen on human countenance—which hung at the end of the long suite of reception rooms in the Embassy, its frame surmounted by the jewelled and gilded insignia of Eastern monarchy. This was the portrait of his most sacred Majesty, Abdullulah Zobeir, Emperor of Abaria.

It was in obedience to this devotion that Isàdas Pacha, when taken ill at a watering-place to which his doctors recommended him, had desired that he should be brought back to London in order that he might die under the Imperial flag.

The floated limply over the grey roof and straight unlovely walls of the Embassy. There was scarcely a breath of wind in the heavy, exhausted London atmosphere—the atmosphere of a London August. Certainly it was only the first week in August and Parliament was not up, and there was a stream of smart carriages drawing up in front of the corner house of that dull, old—fashioned London square, one patch of which had been for so long a piece of Abarian territory. From the carriages tired footmen alighted, and cards were left and inquiries were made. In some cases the answers to the inquiries were brought out and repeated to beautifully-dressed ladies, past their youth maybe—ladies whom presumably the Pacha had loved or admired. The Pacha was witty and amusing, while his position was such that women still liked to be admired, even loved, by him, though he was not very far from eighty. In other instances the inquiries were evidently merely perfunctory—official tributes to his diplomatic status. Royal messengers came and received with a becoming expression of concern the doctors' bulletin, and minor royalties called personally. One or two great ladies, still in London, left bouquets of flowers or scribbled on their cards messages of sympathy. All these were carried to the ante-chamber of the Pacha's room that he might himself be made aware of these marks of attention, upon which he laid much store. And the old man, even his great sickness, gloated over the cards and the flowers and the royal messages of sympathy.

It was just after one of these great personages had called and departed, that a

quiet doctor's brougham drove up to the Embassy. There had been other doctors' broughams there already. Specialists had been summoned in conjunction with the Pacha's regular attendant; but in August, many of the principal London physicians are out of town. Perhaps it was partly on this account, partly because he had already met privately and had interested the Pacha, partly because he was the cousin of Ruel Bey the first secretary, that Doctor Marillier had been called in.

Doctor Marillier was not a great London doctor—one, that is to say, who has won his position step by step and in accordance with the traditions of the College of Physicians and all the written and unwritten laws of British medical etiquette. Though to all intents and purposes, he was British, he belonged by descent to a Jersey family. His mother was a Greek and her sister had married the father of Ruel Bey, a man whose exact nationality it would have been difficult to determine. Doctor Marillier had taken his degree in Paris, and had subsequently practised in Algeria, where he had imbibed some out-of-the-way theories of medicine from his friend, that very singular Eastern physician known as the Medicine Moor. He had never followed the beaten track, and though during the last year or two he had settled himself as a consulting physician in London, he was looked upon as something of a quack by his medical brethren and suspected of unprofessional practices. Early in his career he had acknowledged himself, in a series of articles written under the shadow of the Salpêtrière, a follower of Charcot. Then he had become an eager disciple of the astronomer Flammarion, and later, an avowed student of hypnotism according to the methods of the Nancy school. Probably he would never have gained notoriety in London, had it not happened that by chance he was called in to an important public personage, and had cured that personage in defiance of the verdicts of other well-known physicians. This cure had caused him to be talked about. Moreover, his relationship to the delightful first secretary at the Abarian Embassy, had brought him into some social prominence.

Doctor Marillier's cousin, Ruel Bey, was one of the most popular young men in London. It was he who made the balls at the Abarian Embassy a feature of the London season. He acted well, he sang well, he danced divinely. In those days, the cotillon had just become a fashionable craze, and no hostess of the great world thought her entertainment complete unless Ruel Bey organised and led the figures. Doctor Marillier did not dance the cotillon, did not sing, did not act, had not that peculiar charm of manner which is found in both men and women of mixed nationality, but he had gifts of his own, powers of his own, even a certain

odd charm all his own.

Lucien Marillier stepped out of his brougham and rang at the great double door of the Embassy. The door was opened on the instant; the hall-porter being the one servant in the house whose office at that time was no sinecure.

Incongruously, as some people thought, there was no touch of the East about the Pacha's establishment. His hall-porter was like the hall-porter of all other persons to whom such a functionary is indispensable, and sat in a chair that might have been built—probably was built—in the reign of Queen Anne. For the Embassy had Adams ceilings and Georgian staircases, and panellings removed from a mansion in Bloomsbury, and it had been decorated and furnished in the early Victorian epoch, and was all loftiness, mahogany, gilding, bareness and anachronisms, with, all through, a touch of foreign lands and a suggestion, mainly under the surface, of the sensuous East.

The butler, with his following of footmen, who appeared in answer to Doctor Marillier's request that Ruel Bey might be informed of his arrival, was a bland, portly, and wholly English official, quite in keeping with the Adams frieze and the early Victorian decoration.

He ushered the visitor into a room leading off the central hall and there left him. Doctor Marillier waited. His portrait might have been drawn as he stood perfectly immovable against the marble mantelpiece. A short man, with shoulders disproportionately broad in regard to his height, thick, and slightly hunched. Out of the ungainly shoulders rose a head which, though ugly, would, had it been placed upon a commanding form, have made Doctor Lucien Marillier one of the most distinguished-looking men of his day. A striking head, with darkish hair getting grey at the temples, combed back from an intellectual brow and cropped close behind; rugged features, a thin, slightly beaked nose, and lips sharply curved, extremely flexible, the upper one in its defined lines and firm moulding, showing will, order and logic, the under one, protruding ever so little, hinting at the emotional; the face clean-shaven and giving a curious impression of greyness; the skin fine, the jaw strong, a cleft in the centre of the chin; the eyes grey, keen, penetrating, somewhat pale and cold, with a black line round the iris, and changing, when feeling was aroused, to a grey like that of dull steel. The hands were capable, deft, strong and tender, with broad, soft fingers, long and square at the tips, and a full flexible thumb—the typical doctor's hands.

A door opening at the end of this room disclosed the Chancellery, a long, sombre

room, decorously busy, where fezzed heads were bending over writing-tables set here and there beneath the windows. Ruel Bey himself could be seen, through a second folding door, in an inner and more luxuriously-furnished apartment, where he was writing hastily.

Presently he rose, saying a word or two in French to one of the attachés, and coming through the outer room, he closed the door behind him and advanced with outstretched hands to greet his cousin.

‘A thousand pardons. It was absolutely necessary it I should leave a despatch ready to be copied. The Pacha’s seizure throws a great deal upon me. You understand, Lucien?’

‘Perfectly. Your credit at the Court of Abaria depends upon the way in which you deal with this crisis, eh?’

‘Oh, as to that!’ The young man shrugged his shoulders in the inimitable French manner. ‘Isàdas left most things to me, but his was the responsibility. The Emperor was satisfied while Isàdas signed and, as he believed, inspired. It’s extraordinary the confidence they have over there in Isàdas. But now that he cannot sign!...And the whole wasps’ nest of intriguers will be buzzing round the Emperor’s ears...Well, the time is not ripe! His Excellency must not die, Lucien. For my sake do what you can to save him.’

‘I will do what I can, not for your sake, but firstly for the sake of my profession—secondly, for that of Isàdas Pacha himself, and thirdly, for that of European interests. Not to speak of the Emperor of Abaria, who relies at this political juncture upon his representative’s appreciation of the English national temperament.’

Doctor Marillier spoke coldly. His deep voice vibrated when he alluded to the sacred obligations of his profession. His accent had a burr, due probably to his foreign extraction. ‘Don’t let us waste time,’ he added. ‘Take me to the Pacha.’

Ruel Bey nodded and immediately led the way up the broad staircase, stopping, as he passed through the hall to speak to the butler, desiring him to inform Mademoiselle Isàdas that Doctor Marillier had come.

The double doors of white and gold leading to the reception-rooms seemed to be guarded by a large stuffed leopard looking as though it were about to spring.

Marillier stopped for a moment before it. He had been told that it was from the spring of this very leopard that Isàdas Pacha had saved the Emperor of Abaria, and thus earned the monarch's lasting gratitude.

'Mademoiselle Isàdas will wish to speak to you, said Ruel Bey to his cousin. 'She told me last night that she had great faith in you and that she believed you would cure the Pacha.'

'I trust that I may justify Mademoiselle Isàdas's faith,' replied the doctor, 'but the Pacha is an old man.'

'Yet he has the vitality of the devil. Ffolliot and Carus Spencer gave him over last time, and he recovered notwithstanding. But do what you can to reassure Rachel Isàdas. She is genuinely distressed at the thought that he may die, and, from the mere mundane and selfish point of view, well she may be.'

Doctor Marillier looked at the young man keenly and not altogether approvingly.

'Why? I ask from the mundane point of view.'

'Oh, well, her position would be different. One can never tell how far she would be provided for. Isàdas Pacha has lived like a rich man, but he has never been wealthy, and I believe there is a law in the republic of Avaran which requires that half a man's possessions must go when he dies to his legitimate kin. You know of course that Isàdas is Avaranese by birth, and I have no idea whether he has disposed of his family estates or if they were confiscated in the revolution. His real name is Varenzi, and Isàdas, so to speak, an official title. Though the Abarian Government employs few Abarians, it insists that its officials shall, technically speaking, be Abarian. By the way, however, talking of the law of inheritance in Avaran, I have never heard that Is-das has a single—legitimate—relation.'

Again Doctor Marillier's keen eyes searched his cousin's face. They were standing in the first of the—reception-rooms, a desert of gilding and upholstery, with a huge crystal chandelier in the centre, and at one end, just over the two men, that melancholy and haunting portrait of the Emperor of Abaria. A message had been sent apprising the Ambassador's nurse of Doctor Marillier's arrival.

'You imply what I have not altogether understood. I have only seen Mademoiselle Isàdas once—at the last ball here. I gleaned then that her position

was equivocal. What is her exact relation to the Pacha?’

Again Ruel Bey shrugged, and the shrug was eloquent. ‘The world will tell you that she is his niece—when it speaks officially. But all the world knows that she is not his niece, and would not hesitate to say so—unofficially. But even officially she is not recognised. It is a significant fact that Mademoiselle Isàdas has not attended one of the Queen’s drawing-rooms, and that she does not wear the order of the Leopard and the Lotus which the Emperor of Abaria always presents to a daughter of an ambassador, or to an officially-recognised niece of an ambassador, when she is the only lady in the Embassy—in that case even to the wife of the first secretary.’

Doctor Marillier made a gesture of extreme disapproval.

‘I dislike to hear you speak in that way, Caspar. You gave me the impression that you wanted to marry Mademoiselle Isàdas.’

Ruel Bey smiled.

‘The wife of an aspiring Minister, a potential Ambassador, must be, like Cæsar’s wife, above suspicion—at any rate, as regards her social antecedents. I confess that I should prefer to marry a lady with no haziness about her parentage...But—we are human, Lucien, and a pair of lovely eyes is apt to play the deuce with such prejudice.’

At that moment a nurse advanced towards the door of the second reception-room. Here were massed the bouquets, and here lay the cards and notes sent by royal, diplomatic and social admirers of the Pacha. Doctor Marillier at once proceeded to the door of the Ambassador’s bedroom, which opened off the furthest apartment of the suite—that which was his usual sitting—room. Ruel Bey remained in the second reception-room idly sniffing at a bouquet of orchids and sprigs of scented verbena. Here also, as he waited, an illustrator might have found subject and opportunity. In odd contrast to his cousin the doctor, striking as was the personality of each, Ruel Bey had the face and form of a Hermes—the Apollos seem mostly insufficiently virile for comparison. One could, however, imagine Ruel Bey with winged feet, and the muscular development presumably to be associated with an Olympian messenger. Certainly he might have been modelled as a Hermes, save for his Bond Street get-up, his moustache and the fez. The fez, however, gave a certain outlandish distinction, and its deep

red enhanced the brilliancy of his dark eyes, the clearness of his olive skin, and the sheen of a few curling tendrils of dark hair showing beneath it on neck and brow. As one looked at him one thought instinctively of grape leaves, of honey-throated song, of the love of women, and the glory of young-limbed strength. Yet though here was the old joy in life of the Olympians, there was something, too, of the later Hellenism, something of modern Greek craft, a touch of imported Eastern sensuousness; much, too, of self-interest. That was to be read at moments, in the shifty gleam of his full, soft eyes, in the ripeness of his fruit-like mouth, in certain charming mannerisms that did not breathe a wholehearted sincerity. He was less of a man's than of a woman's man.

Women are intuitive, but where they love and admire, they do not analyse. Probably few of the great ladies who petted him, of the nobly-born women who would have married him had he been a little richer, a little more highly placed—or of the less frailer creatures who idolised him for a year, a month, a week—were capable of analysing Ruel Bey. He appealed to the senses of women, not to the soul.

Chapter II

RACHEL

The door into the vestibule opened. There was a light step upon the parquet of the outer reception-room. Ruel Bey put down the bouquet, detaching a sprig of verbena, which he fastened into his buttonhole. His hand trembled as he did so; he knew the step, and he wanted to gain time and to conceal his agitation. Presently he looked up, apparently frank, bright, welcoming. A girl approached through the ornamented folding doors.

‘Monsieur Ruel,’ she began in formal, hesitating accents; then glancing round and seeing that he was alone, advanced less timidly. He put out his hand, and with that grace and charm which all women loved, drew her to a seat.

‘Dearest,’ he murmured.

She shrank a little.

‘No...I don’t think you ought.... Your cousin is here.’

‘I have told him you wished to speak to him. If anyone can save the Pacha, it is Lucien Marillier.’

‘I knew that...I felt sure of it. He will not mind telling me what he really thinks.’

‘I will leave you alone with him when he comes out. He will tell you the truth—as far as doctors ever I tell the truth. Remember that Excellency is an old man.’

‘Poor Excellence,’ said the girl, softly. ‘It must be hard to lie, perhaps dying, and to be—so unloved.’

Ruel Bey waved his hand over the heaped flowers and the array of cards. ‘He is honoured, and that is better than being loved.’

‘Do you think so? Oh, no, Caspar, you don’t really think so.’

‘No,’ he answered, coming closer to her, and bending forward so that his lips

touched her hair, 'I don't think so—when I look at you.'

The girl did not answer. She seemed to be pondering his words, and not altogether with satisfaction. He withdrew a pace or two, and leaning against the mantelpiece, his cheek upon his hand, looked down upon her admiringly as she sat at the corner of the fireplace in a large-armed, gilded chair. She was very beautiful. The most ambitious of men might well consider it more important to be loved by her than honoured by the world.

Her absolute claims to beauty set aside, there was something peculiarly attractive, and, at the same time, peculiarly pathetic, about this girl. She showed race in every line of her. Was it from the Pacha or from her mother that this was inherited? She was called the Pacha's niece; she bore his name; it was supposed that she was his brother's child. And yet, in the accounts printed of the Pacha's lineage and career, no mention was made of his brother. Besides, Ruel Bey had said, and all the world knew, that Isàdas was the titular name given with the honours that Emperor had conferred. He belonged to a family before it became a republic, had supplied rulers to the island kingdom of Avaran. The revolution had driven him thence, and in all the vigour of his manhood Count Varenzi had entered the service Abdullulah Zobeir, the youthful Emperor of Abaria. His brother's child, had there been one, would have inherited the name of Varenzi, but Rachel had never been known save as Mademoiselle Isàdas. That pathetic look in Rachel Isàdas came from the blending of evident dignity of race with an expression wistful, deprecating, shadowed, as of one impressed by a certain incongruity in her position, and not entirely free from a dread of being slighted, were she to assert that position. Mademoiselle Isàdas's proud little head had a timid droop; her slender form, in spite of its stately carriage, a shrinking air, as though she dreaded and wished to avoid observation; her eyes a startled, almost beseeching gaze, when she was suddenly addressed or taken notice of by a stranger.

Her head looked small for her body, though she was tall and very slight. Her throat, too, was unusually slender. She had pretty, soft, dark hair, the brown which shows reddish glints; her face was oval, the nose finely chiselled and a little short; the upper lip short too and extremely sensitive, like that of a child, alone in the world's fair, and scarcely knowing whether to laugh or to weep. The eyes were brown, soft, and plaintively appealing, with something of the expression in the eyes of a St Bernard dog.

They were not the bright black eyes of the Avaranese, but had a suggestion of the East in their long almond-shaped lids and their dreamy intensity when her face was in repose, though they would light up at moments with a childlike gladness, and had, too, the limpid purity which one sees in the eyes of a child.

Suddenly now, she glanced up at Ruel Bey's face. The two looks met, and both underwent a curious change. In both pairs of eyes a flame was kindled. A magnetic impulse drew the man and woman together. She had risen, and now moved, frightened, it seemed, of that very impulse, half evading his outstretched arms. A dimple in her throat attracted him. He put his lips to it, brushing the satin skin as if savouring its sweetness, and ardently kissed the flower-like hollow at the base of her throat.

'I love you,' he whispered.

Trembling slightly, she shrank away from him, and stood with bent head and cheeks faintly red. Again, he would have embraced her, but she refused the caress, not without dignity.

'I love you, sweet,' he repeated.

'You say so...but...' she spoke with hesitation. 'It is not fitting that you should tell me so in this way. It is not the custom.'

'The conventual custom!' he said, with a laugh. 'Dear nun, we are in London—not in the convent.'

'I wish that I were back in the convent,' she said, 'for many reasons.'

'But you would not wish to be a nun?' he asked.

'No. I have not a vocation. But one is safe in the convent.'

'And you are not safe here? Is that what you mean?'

'I was peaceful in the convent,' she exclaimed. 'I was not torn and troubled and frightened by strange thoughts and feelings—feelings I had never known before.'

'Foolish one, is it of the feelings that you are afraid? Why fear what is the only

thing worth living for—love?’

‘There should be peace in love, joy in love—not terror and unrest.’

‘Yet you love me, Rachel? You cannot deny it?’

‘I don’t know. How can I tell? Your love is not the love I have dreamed of—read of. It is not holy, pure, spiritual. It is not—’ she stopped short.

‘Not the love you have read of in the journals of Saint Theresa—or in the Meditations of St Thomas à Kempis? No, I grant you that. It is a more human sort of thing. A thing of the world—possibly of the devil—not of the Church.’

Rachel shrank again, and there was puzzle and deeper dread in the straight gaze of her brown eyes. ‘Oh, it is when you say things like that—it’s that strain in you which makes me afraid. Why should you say “not of the Church—possibly of the devil?” I don’t understand. The blessing of the Church, should be upon all true love. Marriage is a sacrament.’

Ruel Bey gave the nameless gesture—the instinctive gesture of the sceptic. ‘How many London marriages are what you call a sacrament? But I don’t want to argue that point. It is enough for me that I love you. Your prayers, dear saint, may call down the ecclesiastical blessing. Assuredly mine—will not. I am content—for the moment—with love itself, love in its least spiritual aspect, its most human joy.’

The girl blushed more deeply. She was struggling to get out some words which were difficult.

‘I suppose that you feel as a man feels. I cannot tell. But—I don’t know what it is in you that draws me, almost against myself, and then repels me. You do not speak of love as—’

‘As Saint Theresa and St Thomas à Kempis speak of it?’ he rejoined with tender raillery. ‘No. I speak of it as the diplomat, as the man of cities, as one who belongs to the world of men, and not to the cerulean heaven, must speak of love. I have blood in my veins, not celestial lymph. I would clasp the flesh rather than adore the spirit. I love you as the old Greeks loved, as the modern man loves—not after the fashion of the mediæval monk. Except Fra Lippo Lippi. He had the courage to carry off his nun. I give him grace, and salute her memory.’

Ruel Bey laughed and touched his finger tips, blowing a kiss to the fair, frail Madonna whom Lippi had loved and painted, with that enchanting mannerism which, in the drawing-rooms of a certain set of women, had gained him the reputation of culture of a kind.

Still Rachel had not said what she wished to say; and still the red in her cheeks, which was that pale red peculiar to such a type, deepened, and her speech faltered.

‘I did not mean what you seem to think. I cannot explain myself to myself—how much less to you! I have told you that you draw me to you—and yet, at the very moment, it is as though an invisible barrier were placed between us. And I do understand. Though you laugh at the conventual customs, I am not so ignorant as you fancy of the ways of the world. You forget that, though it is only a few months since I left the convent, I am nearly twenty-five, and that is not very young. I have had friends among girls who were married, and I have seen how such things are arranged even in London. You...It is now two weeks since you... told me that you loved me. I have no mother—no one but my uncle, and he seems strange and far away—but he is my guardian. And...and ... you have not asked me from him.’

‘My child, is it that which is troubling your simple soul! The foreign blood in you speaks, as well as the French bringing-up. You expected a conseil de famille—the bargaining about settlements—the exact amount stipulated for pin-money—all the ordinary preludes of matrimony. Well, let me tell you frankly that I have no private means; that it has always been expected I should marry a fortune instead of bestowing one; that, in short, from the worldly point of view, there would be many difficulties; that for the moment—till I am appointed Minister to the Court of—some little minor kingdom—and that’s a poor enough basis of negotiations in the matter of pin-money and settlements—I can’t—’

‘Oh! No! No!’ the girl interrupted, overcome with shame. ‘How could you suppose that I thought of such things? You know...you know...’

‘I know that you are adorable. I know that I you. I know that when we are alone together, I cannot bow and give you my finger tips as if we were dancing a minuet. I know that the temptation of that fascinating dimple, and of those sweet lips, remind me somehow of the Song of Solomon, can’t be resisted. I know that I want to sip the honey, to snatch the joy, and to forget the sordid details which,

in any case, dear, should not be forced into the critical hours of a serious illness. Wait! Listen to what Marillier has to say. I think I hear him coming out now from the Pacha's room. I will leave you to have your talk.'

Chapter III

THE DOCTOR AND THE WOMAN

The girl sat down again resignedly, pale now, not greatly reassured, still, obliged to confess that there was reason in Caspar Ruel's words, and partly ashamed of what she thought he must have fancied her own grasping attitude.

'Forgive me,' she murmured, and he gave her a long, ardent look, kissed her hand, and went out through the folding doors, just as the curtains separating this room from the Pacha's sanctum were drawn aside by the nurse for Doctor Marillier to pass through.

Rachel rose at his entrance and advanced. As she faced him, her eyes eager, her whole countenance moved and softened by the emotion she had been experiencing, Marillier was almost taken aback by her extraordinary beauty. He stood awkwardly, the hunch of his shoulders accentuated by his hesitation, his strong face reflecting both sides of his nature, the human and the professional. He had been deeply interested in the Pacha's case. His brain was working out theories; he was weighing the forces of disease and life with which he had to deal. For the moment he had forgotten everything else, and the sight of Rachel, setting into vibration chords in him, of which he had hardly suspected the existence, was unexpectedly disturbing.

'Doctor Marillier, she said, with her air of timid self-possession—of withdrawal into her own sanctuary which was so marked when she spoke to a stranger, 'Ruel Bey said you would be kind enough to tell me exactly what you think of the Pacha's condition.'

She held out her hand, not waiting for him to answer. 'Though I did not speak to you, I think we have seen each other before,' she went on. 'I am Rachel Isàdas; of course you know.'

'Yes,' he replied, it seemed to him mechanically. 'Of course I know.'

'And you were at the Pacha's last ball?' she said.

'Yes.'

He remembered her well, and the indefinable attraction she had even then had for him—the curious pity that he had felt, and his vague wonder about her; for it had struck him as strange that she should be at once, so near to the Pacha and yet outside the state and ceremony with which on this occasion he was surrounded. There were no other ladies belonging to the Abarian Embassy, for none of the secretaries were married. She was a comparatively new arrival on the scene, it being her first season in London, thus the fact of her isolation, so apparent to him, might not have impressed the casual crowd. He recalled the scene—the great gilded ballroom, with mirrors at intervals along the walls, reflecting back the lights and diamonds, the forms and faces, all the throng of beautifully-dressed women and of men in uniform with ribbons and orders on their breasts. The Pacha had stood just outside the doorway, above which was a great emblazoned shield with the Star of the Empire and a motto in the pictorial Abarian character, receiving his guests as they came and passed through to the ballroom. The Pacha's breast glittered with many decorations; in truth he was the most picturesque and striking figure present. It seemed almost by design that he was so stationed as not to admit of another person between himself and the door, and the people entering, might not at first have noticed the tall slender girl a pace within, who stood behind the Pacha, and who looked, as Marillier had put it to himself, like an angel dropped down from heaven.

An angel not entirely at ease, however, but bewildered by the situation in which she found herself, and unconsciously realising that, though making a tiny part of this splendid world of fashion and diplomacy, she nevertheless did not belong to it. His physician's eye told him that she was nervous, and that it was by the greatest effort that she maintained her calm dignity. For she was very dignified. Her quietude, her simplicity, the slight droop of her head, and her involuntary shrinking from observation which, erectly though she held herself, was so evident to him, only enhanced the dignity. How beautiful she looked! Her brown eyes shone like stars. Her clear pale cheeks, slightly tinged with pink, reminded him of the inner petals of a certain white rose, her long slender neck of the white calyx of a tropical flower, and the sensitive lips with their pathetic droop, a thread of scarlet, were, in the phrase used by Ruel Bey, as the lips of that fairest among women in the Song of Solomon. She had worn a white satin gown with soft fillings and draperies, and some lilies at her breast. She carried a bouquet of the same Eucharis lilies, and round her neck was a single string of pearls, her only ornament. She had no orders nor ribbons, and her little head bore neither stars nor tiara. So she stood, an exquisite and, to him, pathetically forlorn figure, and no one seemed to remark the pathos and forlornness of her except himself.

Once or twice, the Pacha would turn and informally introduce her to some lady whom he greeted, but she was not presented to the greatest of the royal ladies whom the Pacha had descended the stairs to welcome, and it had been quite clear that, officially speaking, she was not recognised. Doctor Marillier observed that one great lady, a lesser light among the royal people, looked at the girl with a motherly curiosity and kindness, and made an occasion to notice her. That royal lady was ever afterwards endeared to the heart of the doctor, and he had been pleased with the grace of Mademoiselle Isàdas's curtsy, and the soft shy lighting up of her pensive face. Later on, when the dancing began, a bevy of would-be partners crowded round the girl, and after that, he had only seen her as she whirled round in a waltz or played her part in the cotillon led by Ruel Bey. He had noticed his cousin's admiration, and a word or two that he had by chance overheard pass between them, made him feel sure that Ruel Bey loved the Ambassador's niece and desired to marry her.

He was hardly aware, as his memory went back to this scene and the thoughts it had evoked, how awkwardly he stood now after that monosyllabic 'Yes,' and how long the girl, too shy to ask him more directly his professional opinion, waited for him to deliver it.

At last she said, seating herself again in the big gilded chair, and motioning him to a settee opposite,—

'Doctor Marillier, you will tell me how you find the Pacha—what you really think of his state?'

'That is a little difficult for me to put into clear words, Mademoiselle Isàdas.'

'Perhaps,' she went on, 'you are afraid; you think it may be too great a shock for me to hear the truth. But I would always wish to know the truth about a thing that concerns me deeply, even though it might be a shock.'

He remembered those words of hers long afterwards. At the time, he was gauging her with those keen doctor's eyes, weighing in his mind, her capacity to bear the shock of a cruel truth, and he came to the conclusion that her words were literally true, and that she was one of those women with whom a doctor may be candid.

'I ought perhaps to tell you,' she said, mistaking the motive of his slight hesitation, that if—if you thought ill of his condition, the shock would not be so

great to me as though I had lived always with the Pacha, as though I were his daughter, or had been his companion for many years.

I have been just a few months at the Embassy, and before that, I can only remember seeing the Pacha three or four times when he came to my convent. So we have not been very close to each other. I don't want you to think,' she added hastily, 'that I am not sincerely attached—that I do not appreciate the Pacha's great goodness to me. He is all I have in the world, and if Excellence were taken away, I should be lonely indeed.'

The little note of emotion in her voice touched him inexpressibly. She must in very truth be lonely if the loss of that cynical, selfish old reprobate would be the loss of her only natural protector.

'I trust, Mademoiselle Isàdas, that his Excellency will be spared to you for a little while yet, if I am correct in my diagnosis, and am permitted to carry out the treatment I propose. In fact I may say that I am sure his life can be saved—for the present.'

'Can anyone be sure?' she said wistfully, struck by the masterfulness of the man's tone. 'Only God can be sure. But oh! Doctor Marillier, I am very thankful for what you say, and I believe it. You make rue feel that you would not speak like this unless you were confident of your power.'

'I am confident,' he replied. 'I will tell you why. You say that no one can be sure but God; and it may be that we doctors have a different conception of the Force which made life and ordained death than that which has been taught you in your convent. Perhaps it is that we have no conception at all; that we are agnostics in the true sense of the word; that ecclesiasticism is to us so much mummery, and creeds and dogmas all equally meaningless and unsatisfactory. But there is a Force we cannot deny, a Something outside ourselves which rules life and decrees death, and it is only when, in some dim manner which I can't explain even to myself, I come into relation with this Force—only then that I can be sure. That does not always happen; it happens rarely. But when I have made my diagnosis and am sure, not the whole College of Physicians against me would shake my opinion. I can cure the Pasha. For how long I will not say. He is a very old man, and already his life has reached the ordinary span.'

Her look of wistful wonder deepened to one of childlike trust.

‘You are strong,’ she said. ‘I like a man to be strong; and there are so few—so very few men upon whom one can lean.’

‘You might lean upon me,’ said Doctor Marillier, ‘and I should not fail you. Of that, too, I am sure.’

He bent a little forward, and as he uttered the words, put his two hands down flat upon his knees as though to emphasise the declaration. She could not help noticing his hands.

‘You are strong,’ she repeated; ‘your hands are strong.’

‘They ought to be,’ he answered; ‘they have performed many difficult operations.’ And then he was inwardly jarred by his own professional plain-speaking. This was not the way to talk to a young delicate girl. What should she know about operations? His bluntness did not appear to have struck her. She was interested, and her eyes remained still fixed upon those firm deft hands.

‘If I were very ill, and needed to have an operation performed that would cure or kill me, I would ask you to do it,’ she said; ‘that is, if you said to me, I know—’

‘If I said, “I know that I can cure you”!’ he returned. ‘Oh, then it would be easy to trust me, for doctors do not say “I know” about operations unless they feel sure. But if I said, “I do not know, and you must run the risk of life or death,” what then?’

‘I would trust you still,’ she replied. ‘And it might be,’ she added thoughtfully, ‘that the trusting would not be so difficult, nor the uncertainty so hard to bear. I do not think that life is very good, and sometimes one might almost prefer death if it were God’s will. Then one would be sure of being happy.’

‘That is what your Church teaches you. You are a Catholic, of course? So am—so was I. But how about Purgatory?’

‘Perhaps,’ she said, ‘to some, life is the worst Purgatory God will call upon us to endure.’

He gave a queer little laugh.

‘That’s true. I wouldn’t ask a worse Purgatory for my bitterest enemy, supposing

I had one, than certain portions out of my own life. I, too, have known what loneliness is, Mademoiselle Isàdas... But this is not business, and I don't know why I'm talking to you in such an odd way. You must think me a queer sort of doctor. Yet I'm very glad we've talked so, for it makes me understand you better. Your saying that you would trust me if I said "I know" in the case of an operation, or, what is better, if I said "I don't know," makes it much easier for me to tell you that the Pacha's life depends upon an operation that I wish to perform and which I know will succeed. Perhaps I should say that it depends even more upon an after treatment which I fancy few English physicians would endorse... But there's no use in talking technicalities to young ladies—they wouldn't understand them.'

'I don't want technicalities. You are quite right, I shouldn't understand them,' she said, with her sweet girl's laugh, that sounded to the doctor like distant bells over snow. 'I trust you absolutely, Doctor Marillier, and thank you—thank you. You have lifted a weight from my heart. Now I can be almost happy again.'

'Almost happy!' The sense of pathos in connection with her, returned to him with that 'almost.' He got up; she rose too, and the girl and this man stood facing each other as the other man and the girl had faced each other. Ruel Bey had towered a head and a half above this tiny head upon its calyx throat. As Doctor Marillier stood erect, with frame squared, his strong, determined face was, if anything, on a lower level than her own. The contrast came upon her with an odd impressiveness. How was it possible that the two men were so nearly related? In temperament, in character, no two beings could be more apart. And each man in his way had a forcefulness which she could not withstand. She felt, in a frightened manner, that Ruel Bey would exercise complete control over one side of her nature, and that side, the one she least comprehended. Another side of her would, she knew, be affected to an enormous degree by Doctor Marillier, and this side she was not afraid of, though it, too, she did not quite understand.

He took her hand in his. The little sensitive hand, which seemed to him like a bundle of nerves tied together, thrilled at his touch—thrilled for a second only, then quieted under the consciousness of mastery and of restfulness. His medical knowledge told him that he could healthfully magnetise the girl. Certain nerves in her, responded sympathetically to a power which he was aware he could wield. That power was in himself and yet was outside himself. He associated it in some way with the Force of which he had spoken, and which was his synonym for her conception of God. Doctor Marillier did not believe in the

Churches' God, but he believed in a Force, just as he believed in the law of gravitation, in the law of chemical affinities, of mental affinities, such as were exemplified in telepathy and hypnotism, in the law of evolution, in certain other even more subtle, more occult laws, that his medical experience had compelled him to recognise—mysteries of the universe only to be attributed to the action of a First Cause, expressed by words and symbols that were but words and symbols, and after all, never really touched the heart of the mystery. These were realities to be admitted, but not to be explained as either spiritual or material—though his tendency, as that of most scientists, was to the explanation that all is matter in a more or less rarefied form. Rachel Isàdas herself was sensible of the soothing effect of his touch. She withdrew her hand slowly. 'You feel strong,' she said. 'Yes, I trust you.'

'Trust me always. Trust me in the matter of this operation upon the Pacha. There you are safe. I can be trusted in the most elementary sense because I know. But trust me, too, where I don't know.'

'Doctor Marillier, that seems a strange thing for you to say to me on the first occasion of our speaking together, and yet, though it is strange, it is natural.'

'It is natural,' he answered, 'because it comes out of that faculty I possess of seeing with my inner eyes things beyond. Don't ask me to explain the faculty. That way madness lies. I do not attempt to reason about it, even to myself. But it is a fact—one that I have tested sufficiently to have scientific evidence of its truth. It is natural for me to bid you trust me, because this inward vision foreshadows a time when you will be required to trust me, and when perhaps—I can't say—but when probably I shall not know. Of this, however, I am certain—in the end, your trust will be justified.'

A spirit seemed to him to be looking out of her eyes.

'I, too,' she answered, 'have something—I cannot call it inward vision. I can only call it instinct. Something which draws or repels me, encourages or warns. I can rely upon it almost always.'

'Almost always!' he repeated. 'There should be no "almost" There is no "almost" with me. If I am standing by the bedside of a patient doomed by the Faculty to death, and that inward vision shows him to me safe and sound—there is no question, it is so. If, on the other hand, I see Death at the back of even a

trifling ailment, that also is sure, and I do not question, because I know that to Death my science must bow.'

'You speak of patients—they are not a part of you. I have heard before, that a doctor is only unerring when he does not love. But if you loved—then could you be sure?'

Marillier was silent. If there were a spirit in the girl's eyes, one seemed to be peering forth into futurity from his. Their grey had deepened to the colour of a mountain-locked pool.

'Could I be sure? I cannot tell you, for till this day of my life I have never lived beyond the restrictions of reason and science. My interests have been centred in my profession, Mademoiselle Isàdas, for circumstances have limited them. I have never known love.'

'Till this day of my life.' He had uttered the words deliberately, and while he uttered them, the inward monitor seemed to be pointing out to him their immense significance. To Rachel Isàdas they had no such significance. They seemed the ordinary expression of a cool-headed, steel—hearted scientist, who had not had time for the softer emotions. She knew he was unmarried; she fancied that Ruel Bey had told her that he was himself Marillier's nearest relation. The remembrance spurred her speech.

'But you have—is it true that you are the only one of your name?'

'Quite true. My father was an only child and an orphan; my mother had one sister. Ruel Bey is that sister's son. He represents to me, therefore, all the ties of kindred.'

'But—' she hesitated again. 'Ruel Bey is lovable.'

Marillier interrupted her sharply.

'You find him so, Mademoiselle Isàdas?'

The girl started as if he had struck her, and the blood rushed to her face. She recovered herself and replied,—

'That seems an even stranger thing to say to me.'

‘I do not think so. At the Pacha’s ball his admiration of you was evident enough. I was naturally interested in observing how you received his attentions. Perhaps it would be well that I should tell you what he himself does not know—I am not a poor man and he is my heir. If you loved and consented to marry him, and the provision made by the Pacha or required by the Pacha were riot adequate, I would supplement it.’

The trouble spread over Rachel Isàdas’s face—the faint alarm.

‘Oh, I don’t know—I don’t know.’

‘Tell me,’ said Marillier, ‘is it with him as with me—when you don’t know, can you trust?’

‘I don’t know—I don’t know,’ she repeated helplessly.

The sight of her perplexity roused in Marillier something of which he had never before been conscious.

‘If you can’t trust him you may trust me. That’s perhaps the meaning of the foreshadowing I have about you. I’ll be true to it. Trust me, Mademoiselle Isàdas! Trust me; and by the Force that you call God, I’ll protect you against him, if need be; against your own heart, if need be. If need be, too, against myself.’

Before she realised the meaning of his words, while still under the spell of the look he gave her out of those clear grey eyes, in which it seemed that two little electric sparks suddenly blazed, Rachel Isàdas found herself alone. He had abruptly turned from her and vanished through the open half of the folding doors. When she looked through them she was confronted by the sensuous face with its fateful Eastern melancholy, its terrible satiety of the flesh, which gazed out at her from the eyes of the Emperor of Abaria.

Chapter IV

THE PHILOSOPHY OF ISÀDAS PACHA.

The operation was over. It had been wholly successful, and a new cure was added to those which were rapidly making Doctor Marillier famous. But there were dissensions among members of the Faculty; the Pacha's regular physician in especial was opposed to Marillier's view of the case. Isàdas Pacha, however, decided the matter. Quickly comprehending the situation, his brain became alert as ever, and that wonderful power in him of diagnosing men, to which his brilliant diplomatic career was largely attributable, now made itself felt.

Isàdas, after the consultation, requested to be left alone with Marillier. It was a strange interview, during which the Pacha's gleaming eyes shining out of cavernous orbits from beneath the wrinkled brows remained fixed upon the face of Marillier, reading the man's soul as, it seemed to the doctor, no human eyes had ever before read that closed book. The Pacha discussed his own symptoms, weighed the arguments of the consulting physician and surgeon, demanded reasons and details, and the grounds which Marillier had for his conclusions, differing as they did from those of Mr Ffolliot and Dr Carus Spencer. In his questions he displayed a knowledge, not only of ordinary medical science, but of certain occult methods taught in the East, but not generally admitted in Western schools, which greatly surprised the doctor. Still more surprised was he when, after he had explained his proposed treatment, the Pacha remarked in that deep yet faint voice, which seemed already as though it issued from a tomb,—‘I see that you have studied under the Medicine Moor.’

Marillier started.

‘It is true; but I did not know, Excellency, that you were acquainted with that singular personage.’

A grim expression—an odd distortion of the features as by a spasm of pain—passed over the Pacha's face as he answered,—‘At one period of my life I knew the Medicine Moor intimately. I have spent days with him in the Kabyle hills. His was, as you say, a singular personality. He knew many secrets of Nature and effected some wonderful cures. If he were alive I would send for him now, for I believe that if my life is to be prolonged he could do most to prolong it. And yet

—’ A dreamy note came into the old man’s voice; he paused, and the distortion of his features was more painful, while the gleam in his eyes hardened and intensified.

‘And yet,’ he went on, ‘in my greatest emergency, that science, that skill in which I trusted, failed me.’

Marillier said nothing. He felt that here he was treading upon the thin crust of a still active volcano.

‘They failed me,’ the Pacha continued, ‘as skill and science must always fail when emotion prevents the will from aiding them. I cannot altogether blame the Medicine Moor, though I think he might have done more. Even the dread sentence—as he put it, “Will of Allah”—might have been defied. Had I but understood then the power of human will—’ The metallic glare in the old man’s eyes flickered. Weakness of the body overpowered him for a minute or two. Marillier administered a restorative and presently he went on.

‘Doctor,’ he said, ‘do you not know that there are two supreme forces by which man may, to an almost incredible extent, control his own destiny. Those forces are Love and Will.’

Marillier smiled a little grimly.

‘Love!’ he repeated. ‘That force at least is not within my control.’

‘Yet you are one of those so constituted as to be able to absorb and concentrate subtle energies of Nature. Take an old man’s prophecy. Believe that you have capacity to draw down power to accomplish your desire. Do not, as was the case with me, realise that capacity when it is too late.’

There was a short silence. Marillier’s grim look had given place to a puzzled one. The Pacha watched him carefully. Presently the old man spoke again, this time with fiery determination.

‘Now to business. If I live, we will talk of these things by-and-by. I foresee that we shall have interesting subjects in common. Doctor Marillier, I have decided. I place myself unreservedly in your hands. Save me for a few years, a few months—it may be even a few weeks. Strange as it may seem to you, I still find life sweet. The Immensities spread beyond, yet I cling to this prison of flesh. I know

that there is one master to whom all must bow—the master Death. When Death gives his sentence its execution cannot be delayed. But in my case the fiat is perhaps not yet delivered. Stay it for awhile if you can. Have no hesitation. Act. Perform the operation you propose. Carry out the after treatment you have described. I care not a jot for the opinion of Ffolliot and Carus Spencer, since they do not offer me life. They may go to the devil. They shall hear from my own lips, however, that I consent to what they consider useless and dangerous. Have the goodness to ring.’

A strange scene followed. The Pacha summoned, as though to his deathbed, Mademoiselle Isàdas, the first secretary, his body servant and others of his immediate entourage, including a man of law; and in their presence had it affirmed by the physicians that he was in full possession of his mental faculties—a point they could not dispute.

He then, in the most courteous terms, announced his intentions, and took leave of the physicians, who departed, indignantly repudiating responsibility, and leaving Marillier in possession of the case.

Before the operation, the Pacha again spoke privately to Marillier, placing in his hand a sealed packet inscribed with directions that the enclosure should be delivered to his Majesty the Emperor of Abaria.

‘It is possible that I may die under the knife,’ he said, ‘though I do not think it likely. Will you do me the favour of keeping this letter until the operation is over. If successful, you will return it to me. If not—, He paused, and for a few moments seemed to be calculating possibilities.

‘I know that the operation will be successful,’ said Marillier. ‘How long you may live after it, Pacha, depends, as you have said yourself, upon whether Death has or has not, delivered his sentence. I believe that you will live.’

‘Nevertheless,’ replied the Pacha, ‘I should prefer that the letter were in your keeping. It is important, and it is of a personal and strictly private nature. I do not care to run any risk of its being found and sent in the ordinary official course. It must be delivered by private messenger into my Emperor’s own hands. Within the outer covering you will find another letter addressed to the Grand Chancellor, who is my friend, by which an audience will be assured. You will also find a sum of money amply sufficient to cover all professional loss and

expenses incurred, but totally insufficient as an expression of my gratitude for the fulfilment of a most sacred trust. Will you undertake this trust?’

Doctor Marillier hesitated. He had no mind to be mixed up Abarian state intrigues. The Pacha Eagerly waited for his reply.

‘If you will permit me, Excellency, to suggest—surely, since the document is a State matter, and of importance, your first secretary, my cousin Ruel Bey, would be a more proper custodian than I.’

The Pacha blazed out in fury. An imprecation was smothered before he could find utterance.

‘Have I not said that it is a private and personal matter, and that I do not wish it to reach his Majesty in the ordinary official course? And what do you think of me? Where is your penetration? Do you not credit me with at least some knowledge of the nature of men? Ruel Bey is the last person I should choose for such a trust. I ask you to take charge of this letter in order that it may run no risk of falling into the hands of my first secretary. I have studied Ruel Bey. I know to what heights his ambition soars. I have read his pleasure-loving nature. He has Greek blood in his veins—’

‘And I also,’ quietly observed Marillier.

‘But you have none of the modern Greek characteristics. Forgive me, doctor. In my diplomatic career I have had reason to distrust Greek subtlety. And I am an autocratic old man, unaccustomed to be contradicted or argued with. Besides, you know I am ill—I am very ill.’

The confession of weakness appealed to Marillier much as the confession of fractiousness from a wayward child might appeal to one who held the temporary place of guardian to the child. He gently put his hand on the old man, and his touch seemed to soothe the Pacha and to give him strength. But Marillier said nothing. He wondered whether the Pacha was aware of the attachment between Ruel Bey and Mademoiselle Isàdas, and the old man’s next words seemed to answer his question.

‘I have been watching Ruel Bey closely—more closely than he has any idea of. I have seen the conflict between passion and ambition...and I have seen the influence he is exercising upon Mademoiselle Isàdas,’ went on the Pacha, while

it struck Marillier as odd that he should speak of his niece in so formal and indifferent a fashion.

‘Let Ruel Bey marry Mademoiselle Isàdas if he pleases, or let him not marry her if he so please—assuming that it be also the pleasure of mademoiselle to marry or not to marry Ruel Bey. That is equal. I place no compulsion on either in their wooing. I wait to give my consent or my refusal as conditions dictate, when the matter is referred to me. But I may die before I am referred to. That is also equal.’

The old man had lapsed into French, a frequent habit at the Embassy, though English was the usual medium for social converse.

‘Nevertheless,’ he continued, ‘this is important, for I may tell you that Ruel Bey has emissaries at the Abarian Court, and his ambition does not stop short at the attempt to succeed me. That will be as the Fates decree, and as his Majesty may decide; but it is important that Ruel Bey should have no temptation placed in his way to discover the contents of this document if I die before he and Mademoiselle Isàdas have made up their minds to marry or not to marry.’

The Pacha sank back exhausted. Clearly, he was unfit for further discussion. Something in the old man’s tone, in his cold-blooded allusion to Rachel Isàdas, in his hint that the letter affected her destinies in connection with those of Ruel Bey, caused Marillier’s heart to leap and made him decide to accept the responsibility. He thought it possible that Isàdas Pacha also suspected the disinterestedness of Ruel Bey’s love for Rachel, and that he intended to put that love to the test, while at the same time guarding the girl in some manner of which Marillier could have no definite notion, but with which the letter to the Emperor of Abaria was evidently concerned.

‘I will take your letter, Excellency,’ he said. ‘I feel that I may safely accept the trust, and am prepared to fulfil it. For I am confident that I shall not be called upon to do so, and that before long this letter will be returned into your hands.’

Marillier’s statement proved to be the case. Isàdas Pacha received back his letter as soon as the doctor pronounced him out of danger. His convalescence, however, was slow. Even Marillier, while he sedulously pursued the treatment which was as necessary as the operation had been, sometimes asked himself whether he had not been too sanguine, and whether Death were not merely

awaiting a convenient season for carrying out the already pronounced sentence. This thought seemed vaguely also in the old man's mind. He was gay, cynical, apparently not concerned with any idea of making his salvation, causing thereby some uneasiness to the Catholic priest who attended him; and yet the sense of impending finality was upon him, and often he would preface some witty and unusually sacrilegious story with the remark, 'Before I join the Immensities I must tell you this anecdote, which will amuse you.' And then would follow some cleverly-pointed profanity, which generally had the effect of driving away Nurse Dalison and leaving the doctor alone with his patient.

Nurse Dalison was a lady trained in surgical cases, who had worked for some time under Doctor Marillier, and had been chosen by him to supersede the Pacha's former nurse as being possessed of a good manner and tact, and therefore more likely than another to adapt herself to the patient's peculiarities. He had reflected also that she might prove an agreeable companion to Rachel, who, except for her own maid, was without female company at the Embassy.

Nurse Dalison was graceful and sympathetic. Tall, slender and refined-looking, she had the sensibility of a woman towards the sufferings of man or beast, but the nerve of a man where her professional duties were in question. She was at once practical and romantic, therefore the luxury and social importance of the Embassy, the distinction of the Pacha and the timid sweetness of Rachel appealed to her worldly wisdom and to her imagination. Moreover, she was professionally interested in the success of Doctor Marillier's methods.

One of her chief recommendations to the Pacha was that she had a good French accent and read aloud extremely well, but Marillier was often amused when he paid his calls to see the pained and bewildered expression on Nurse Dalison's face as she read to the Pacha from some one of his favourite authors, and the evident relief with which she put down the book on the doctor's entrance. The Pacha would give a sardonic smile from among his cushions. Upon one occasion he remarked,—'My thanks, nurse: we'll continue later. I hope that I am helping to assuage your thirst for Eastern knowledge. Mrs Dalison is devoted to the East, doctor. She once nursed an English attaché through a broken leg at Constantinople. That gave her a taste. I am introducing her to *The Arabian Nights*—not the original version, bien entendu—but a most discreet translation; and entertaining, nurse, eh—entertaining?' 'Oh! very entertaining, Excellency. Most quaint. Only not quite English in the way of putting things, you know,' pleaded the nurse; then turning to Marillier, 'It is in French. Reading things in

French makes such a difference.’

The Pacha chuckled.

‘Dear Mrs Grundy! She is a most curious lady, your Mrs Grundy. She will leave the newspapers in the schoolroom; she will bowdlerise Shakespeare; she will put the Old Testament unexpurgated into her young daughters’ hands; but she won’t stand *The Arabian Nights*—except in French.’

Marillier laughed and relieved Nurse Dalison’s embarrassment by asking for her report. Most days, after this was given, he remained for a chat with Isàdas.

Thus a good many hours were passed by Marillier in the Ambassador’s private sitting-room—that room at the end of the suite which adjoined his bedroom, and which was separated from the other apartments by folding doors and heavy velvet curtains. Here the old man, as he got better, would sit in state, clothed in a gorgeous dressing-gown, his red fez surmounting the keen, wrinkled and yet indescribably-attractive face—so old and yet ever young with the immortal youth of intellect and of a psychological capacity for passion, scarcely weakened by the impossibility of material gratification. To the doctor, he was a strange—occasionally a revolting—study, as he told his stories of amours and intrigues in the cynical manner of an Eastern sensualist turned philosopher. Then quickly perceiving the effect he produced, Isàdas would launch upon some wholly intellectual stream of talk, astonishing Marillier by his learning, and more especially by the grasp he had of occult subjects, out-of-the-way bits of knowledge in relation to the properties of plants and minerals, the meaning of old myths and superstitions, and the practical application of these in modern medicine, which was to Marillier a subject of unflinching fascination.

The Pacha’s room was lined on one side with cabinets of Eastern design, gem-crusted and of extraordinary value, and with bookshelves containing rare editions, mostly of works on mysticism, as well as many old manuscripts and parchments in Hebrew, Arabic and other characters with which Marillier was unacquainted. He had seen such manuscripts inscribed also as some of these were, in astrological figures, in the library of the Medicine Moor.

On the other side of the room, flanking the fireplace, and in ironic contrast to these treasures, were ranges of ledges on which, closely massed, were photographs and portraits of lovely women—the acknowledged beauties of most

of the European capitals, and of others, fairer and perhaps more frail, who presumably had not such social distinction. One of these, a snap-shot, taken evidently by artificial light, of an Eastern dancer, attracted Marillier's attention. The attitude was one of incomparable seduction, yet with nothing in it of coarseness, while the face of exquisite Oriental loveliness had a fascination which seemed not of the earth and yet not of heaven, but rather of the soulless underworld. This was the idea which came into Marillier's mind. The face seemed that of some spirit enchained to flesh by a love which only in satisfying its mortal claims could attain deathless peace. The Pacha did not at once answer his question concerning the photograph; the old man's eyes took that far-away gleam which, as Marillier had found occasion to observe, usually precluded the revelation of a side of his nature not apparent to most people. Marillier spoke of his own vague fancy about the photograph, and the Pacha nodded approvingly.

'You are right. I am glad to see that you have intuition of a certain kind. One does not often meet with it. That little picture represents my own sudden conviction of truths I had always doubted, and which I then realised—unfortunately too late. I'll tell you something about it—the whole story is too long, and if it were not, I am bound to secrecy in some of its details. You have lived in Algeria, and you knew the Medicine Moor. Well, it is not improbable that you have heard of a peculiar sect living in the Kabyle hills, who still worship, according to almost prehistoric rites, the Great Generative Power in the Universe, and who use the same symbols as are found graven on the monoliths of Yucatan—symbols which belong to a civilisation and a faith extinct in that region centuries before the Spanish conquest. Have you heard of this sect?'

'I have heard of the people,' Marillier replied. 'I was interested, just lately, in tracing the correspondence you speak of between the hieroglyphs of Central America and those of Northern Africa. But what has that to do with this portrait of the dancer?'

'I will explain as far as I can. Nearly twenty-five years ago, there came into my life a phase of utter scepticism—a sense of abandonment by all spiritual powers, whether of good or evil. The desire of my soul had been taken from me beyond the possibility of recall, and all other things were as nothing to me—neither God nor the devil of greater or lesser account, for I scarcely believed in either.'

The Pacha's sepulchral voice vibrated as if it were the echo, Marillier thought, of some bygone agony which had well-nigh rent body and spirit asunder.

‘I am not sure,’ the Ambassador went on, ‘that I now acknowledge God and the devil as anything more than the opposite poles of an unknowable force, which, for anything I can tell, may be blind, unreasoning, relentless as its material counterpart, electricity. Then, all was as naught to me; and yet, I would, for the mere sake of sensation, and especially for certainty of something beyond matter, have penetrated Hades, or pledged a phantom Helen. It was in this mood that I fell in with some members of that particular sect I spoke of. My curiosity, my intellect, were aroused. I was present at one of their evocatory ceremonies, held to the strains of music which is indescribable, and which, once and for all, made me realise the truth of that science of vibrations which has been practised by all occultists from time immemorial. You know that strains of music, in varying and peculiar rhythm, played a large part in the Mysteries of old, as well as in all necromantic ceremonial. Witness the mere modern instances of snake jugglery and Obi-worship. Anyone who has studied these subjects must acknowledge that phenomena can be produced through the operation of certain vibrations of sound upon corresponding vibrations in the unseen universe.’

‘Of course,’ said Marillier, ‘there must be X sounds as there are X rays. We need only the apparatus by which to test them.’

Again the Pacha nodded. His voice had now become more even, and had its usual metallic resonance.

‘Well, to go on with my story. I attended, as I said, one of the evocatory ceremonies of that particular sect. I may not speak of the rites, but I may say that the spectacle was one of the weirdest and most impressive I ever witnessed, and, as you may now imagine, I had already gone through some strange experiences of the kind. I wanted to be convinced of the existence of something beyond matter, and I had my wish, though not to the gratification of any personal desire. A phantom Helen—that dancer, whose picture you see, photographed by myself—was called forth from the vapours above earth or the deeps of the underworld—which, I cannot tell—to prove to me the might of those forces I spoke to you of not long ago—the two supreme forces, Love and Will. She was doubtless an emanation from the Vital Energy which creates and maintains life on the universe, and it was shown to me how, by means of love and will,—the indestructible principle may be drawn upon and used by those who have been initiated into a special form of magic, so that by it, life can literally be infused into that which was dead and inanimate. Had I but known the secret a few months earlier, I, too, might have tasted, if but for one short hour, the fruit of my

heart's desire.' Again the Pacha's voice thrilled his listener with that echo of bygone passion and pain.

'But it was too late! God or Satan mocked my unavailing agony, and if I had never before understood the full meaning of that hackneyed phrase, "The irony of Fate," I understood it then. With my own eyes I beheld that fair phantom, vitalised from the central source of life, pour living fire from her warm bosom into the cold breast of a corpse. I saw her, in one glowing kiss upon the lips of a dead old man, restore the dried-up mummy to youth and vigour, to the joy of life and the ecstasy of love. So, for rapturous moments that to him and her might well have seemed eternity, the dead man lived. The moments passed; the phantom vanished; the dead became lifeless once more. But to me the great secret of Nature had been revealed, and I knew the latent power which exists in man, and by which, if he has learned the way, he may almost master his destiny. Had I practised that power in earlier manhood, I, too, might have called down the Promethean fire. Had I learned the magic evocation—had I conquered my own weakness and turned love from my tyrant to my slave—had I, in truth, loved with such knowledge as well as such intensity, that, to secure my desire, I could have put forth my very soul in an effort of will which neither man nor angel nor demon might have gainsaid—oh! if I could have done this—'

The Pacha's skinny fingers beat the coverlet in a feeble paroxysm of excitement, and for a moment or two he seemed, as he had himself phrased it, to be face to face with the Immensities.

'Marillier,' he resumed more quietly, 'if I could have done this, I, too, standing by the corpse of one who, living, was to me as the vision of distant heaven, and dead, the realisation of hell, might in a kiss have instilled life into the inanimate form, and lifting it breathing to my breast, have drunk of immortality! It is the mystery of mysteries, doctor, that transfusion of life into death by the magic of love. Ponder it. Yearn for its key—the key which you hold almost in your hand—and by the strength of your will, wrest its secret from God or Nature or the Devil—what matter whose it be, so that you make it your own. But remember that, to accomplish such an end, you must project your very soul, as it were, out of your body upon the object of your desire. Take the prophecy of an old man who has overstepped the border of an unknown land. The desire will be born in you—the germ already lies in your heart; the hour of struggle will arrive, and with it the force, if you choose to put it forth, which will give you the mastery. Bear in mind the words of one who has failed.'

The Pacha's wrinkled eyelids drooped over his brilliant eyes, and but for his quick breathing, he himself might have been taken for a corpse. While he spoke strange emotions surged up in Marillier's breast. He, too, seemed on the borderland of a region hitherto untrodden. A fierce craving seized him and an immense regret. The regret found utterance.

'Look at me, Excellency,' he cried. 'Compare me with such a man as, say, Ruel Bey, your first secretary. Is it likely that I shall ever inspire love, much less subdue it, to serve my desires, though it is true that I have always despised its lower gratifications. The only love I could ever feel would be one all-embracing—a blending of flesh and spirit, and yet unsatisfying; for though I might give my all to save the woman I loved suffering, I could scarcely dare to claim any recompense.'

The Pacha opened his eyes and scanned the strong moved face, the thick-set, awkward figure. As he studied Marillier a faint smile hovered about his lips.

'That is the love which conquers,' he said. 'Wait till your time comes and then recall my words. The hour, the desire and the knowledge will arrive together. In my case the hour and the desire ran a race with knowledge, and were stopped on their course by Death. Knowledge won the goal at last, and knowledge has served this body, and has given glory and power and a certain sense of satisfaction to a career that would otherwise have been barren. We are told that when matter ceases to be, it changes into a higher form. I have found the process reversed. In my case, spirit has degenerated into matter. Twenty-five years ago I had a soul; I too, scorned the lower loves. I understood that spiritual love of which you speak. Then the soul died, but the flesh flourished exceedingly. In fact, I have barely regretted the loss of an ideal. So agreeable, indeed, has matter proved, as a substitute for spirit, that I am extremely anxious to retard its disintegration. And it strikes me that you are forgetting the patient, doctor, and that my medicine is due. I had intended to-day to show you some uncanny possessions of mine that I mean to leave you in my will as a token of gratitude for keeping me in the world a little longer. Another time, however. Will you ring? I am inclined to sleep. And do you, as you pass through, ask a cup of tea from Mademoiselle Isàdas, whom you will, no doubt, find at this time in the outer salon. Should Ruel Bey be with her, inform him, please, that this week's despatches are to be brought to me in good time for corrections, and send him about his business to the Chancellery.'

Chapter V

‘I WONDER WHY’

The heavy curtains of the Pacha's sitting-room closed behind Marillier, and with a dazed sensation, as though he had been breathing some heady Oriental perfume, he lingered for a moment or two in the second reception-room, which was now used as a sort of ante-room to the Ambassador's private apartments. It was strewn with flowers, and had the usual row of cards of inquiry laid upon the inlaid centre table. The portière which divided this from the further and more generally used drawing-room, was slightly parted; he could hear the rattle of tea-cups, the gentle tones of Mademoiselle Isàdas, and the mellow voice of Ruel Bey. So absorbed were the two, that they did not hear the approach of Marillier, and he, standing with the curtain in his hand, could see the scene framed as if it were a picture.

A pretty picture. The tea-table was set beneath a tall palm, of which one of the fronds hung over the portrait of the Emperor of Abaria, casting a shadow upon the refined features and the melancholy eyes with their haunting, world-wearied expression. As Marillier's gaze dropped from the Emperor's portrait to the face of the girl below it, he was struck in a sudden and, as he thought, incongruous fashion by a faint similarity, an indescribable likeness in the oval contour of both faces, and in the shape, and, he fancied, the expression of the eyes. He could not define the likeness to himself, but accounted for it upon the supposition that Mademoiselle Isàdas must be, upon her mother's side, of Oriental descent.

He had, of course, seen her many times since the occasion of their first interview; indeed, it had become almost a habit that when leaving the Pacha he should, after his afternoon visit, receive a cup of tea at her hands; but beautiful as she had always seemed, never had her beauty struck him so forcibly as to-day. There was a tinge of pink upon her cheeks, and a brighter light shone in her eyes, while at the same time, he noticed a suggestion of emotion, held in check, no doubt, by the presence of the butler, who was only now closing the door behind him. Marillier wondered at the sudden tightening in his own chest as he guessed the cause of the emotion. Ruel Bey was standing by the tea-table, his Greek head thrown a little back, his eyes lowered towards Mademoiselle Isàdas, as he held

towards her in one hand a peach, in the other a bunch of purple grapes, and asked her which she would prefer.

She chose the peach, and he seated himself and began to peel it, while just then Rachel perceived Marillier.

She welcomed him with her soft, friendly smile—no words. It was one of Mademoiselle Isàdas's peculiarities that her eyes and smile were often more eloquent than her utterance. She made him his tea, Russian fashion, as he liked it, and pressed cakes upon him—little wafers encrusted with nougat.

‘Do you know,’ she said, ‘these are made after a receipt I brought with me from the convent. We were allowed to have them upon certain fête days, and when we had specially-favoured visitors—not that this often happened to me.’

‘So you had not many visitors?’ asked Marillier, helping himself to a wafer.

‘No, not many. During all those years, they were so few that I could count them on my fingers. Thanks, monsieur,’ as Ruel Bey handed her the peach, and with a new sensation of delight Marillier watched her little white teeth meet in the luscious fruit.

‘How is the Pacha?’ asked Ruel Bey

‘Better,’ replied the doctor. ‘A little tired just now and going off to sleep. By the way, he asked me to tell you that he wants the despatches brought him in good time for correction.’

Marillier did not add the last part of the Pacha's injunction. It was not necessary, for the first secretary got up at once.

‘Then I must go down to the Chancellery, for I am altogether behindhand. A thousand thanks, mademoiselle. You will permit me to find you here this evening when I come to the Pacha after dinner? It would be delightful to have some music.’

Marillier saw the two pairs of eyes meet. Ruel Bey's full of ardent beseeching and of a meaning at which he could only guess: the girl's troubled, he fancied reproachful.

‘I don’t know,’ she answered. ‘Sometimes my singing annoys Excellence instead of pleasing him.’

‘That is only when you sing Irish songs,’ said Ruel Bey, lightly. ‘Mademoiselle, two things puzzle me. How have you—brought up in a foreign country—learned to sing Irish melodies with an entrain that seems born of the very soil, and, in truth, with the faintest touch of the Irish brogue, which is the most fascinating of all accents in a woman’s speech? And why should our cold, cynical Excellence show angry emotion over “Love’s Young Dream”—the effect of which he might be supposed to have forgotten. But no—’ and, with a whimsical shake of the head, Ruel Bey sang softly,—

‘He’ll never meet A joy so sweet In all his noon of fame.

Another glance at Rachel, and the whimsical manner changed to one of scarcely-veiled tenderness as he sang on, still more softly,—

‘That hallow’d form is ne’er forgot

Which first love trac’d;

Still it lingering haunts the greenest spot

On memory’s waste.

‘Twas odour fled

As soon as shed;

‘Twas morning’s winged dream;

Oh, ‘twas light that ne’er can shine again

On life’s dull stream.’

A quiver passed over Rachel Isàdas’s sensitive features. Marillier saw that she was thrilled to the quick by a peculiar emotional note in the voice of Ruel Bey, and he thought of what the Pacha had said concerning the power of musical vibrations. Then came, too, into his mind a remembrance of what Tolstoi has written on this subject in his novel *The Kreutzer Sonata*. There was silence for a

few moments. Mademoiselle Isàdas, recalled by Ruel Bey's reiterated question, uttered in a tone of daring which annoyed Marillier, said gently,—

'I cannot tell why the Pacha should have been so moved as he was the other evening by those words. But for myself, it is not strange that I should be able to sing Irish melodies, even with a touch of the brogue, as you say. We had an Irish nun in the convent, and she taught me how to sing that very song, which was one of many that I found in an old bundle of music left me by my Irish mother.'

'Your mother?' exclaimed Marillier, startled out of his previous theories.

'Yes; my mother was an Irishwoman,' answered Mademoiselle Isàdas, 'but, of course, I cannot remember her, for she died in Algeria soon after I was born.'

Both men gave an involuntary exclamation. To both, the mystery of the Pacha's emotion seemed solved. But Marillier felt still a little perplexed, and unconsciously his eyes were again lifted to the portrait of the Emperor of Abaria. How then could he have detected the trace of Oriental descent in the features of Mademoiselle Isàdas? And it was there! Now that he had once observed this, it appeared to him to proclaim itself remarkably. Yet the Pacha, he knew, belonged to an old Avaranese family.

Again, Marillier was annoyed with Ruel Bey for his daring, knowing the thought which must be in the young man's mind as well as in his own.

'And you do not remember your father either, mademoiselle?' asked the first secretary.

'No, answered the girl, simply. 'No one has ever spoken to me about my father. I know nothing of him. I suppose he must have died before I was born. That, at least, is the explanation I have given myself. When I once asked Excellence to tell me about my father he seemed to shrink so from the subject that I concluded it was a painful one to him and I never asked again. After all,' she added with an unconscious cynicism, which seemed to Marillier infinitely pathetic, 'when one has been alone from babyhood there is no great need to distress the living by questions about a parent for whom his child had no existence.'

'That is true,' said Ruel Bey. 'Isàdas Pacha would be the first, I imagine, to appreciate your sound philosophy. Mademoiselle, I shall bring up my violin this evening in the hope of having some music. For the moment, adieu.' He stooped

and raised the girl's little hand to his lips. 'Excuse me, Lucien,' he added, 'we shall meet tomorrow.'

Ruel Bey went down to the Chancellery, and Marillier Mademoiselle Isàdas were left alone. She offered him some more tea; he accepted it mechanically and mechanically also ate some grapes she which handed him.

'Mademoiselle Isàdas,' he said suddenly, 'my cousin is more fortunate than myself. I have never heard you sing.'

'That wish can be very easily gratified, doctor,' she answered with the sweet friendliness she always showed him. 'But I must not sing just now, for if the Pacha is going to sleep, it would disturb him. I wish I could do something better than that to prove to you my gratitude.'

'What have I done, mademoiselle, that can deserve your gratitude?'

'You have saved Excellence. His death would mean a sad loss to me.'

'And yet you are not greatly attached to your uncle,' said Marillier, bluntly.

'Am I not? How deeply you read into people's minds! That, I suppose, comes of your power of diagnosing patients. I have heard that it is wonderful.'

'I am right then?'

She hesitated, but seemed compelled to frankness by his searching eyes.

'The Pacha frightens me,' she said in a low tone. 'Sometimes he repels me, and yet sometimes he almost fascinates me. I have often tried to analyse my feelings towards him, and I cannot. I think that I could love him if he only cared for me.'

'You think he does not care for you?' asked Marillier, intensely interested in the girl's confession.

'I feel that there are moments when he positively hates me,' replied she. 'I have never said this to anybody; not even to—' she paused and blushed. He filled up the gap.

'Not even to Ruel Bey?'

‘No,’ she almost whispered.

‘Are you frightened of Ruel Bey too?’ he asked, with a roughness of which he was scarcely aware till the girl’s startled eyes met his own.

‘Why do you ask that?’ she said agitatedly. ‘Is there any reason for your question—any reason why I should not feel myself safe with Ruel Bey?’

‘So that thought has occurred to you, and there have been moments in which you have feared the fascination of Ruel Bey?’

‘Oh, that is true—that is true!’ she cried. ‘How is it that you know? Doctor Marillier, there is no reason why I should fear Ruel Bey; there can be none. Tell me that I may trust him.’

‘I cannot tell you that, Mademoiselle Isàdas, for I—I do not know. Your own pure instinct must that question. Trust your instinct, and remember what I said to you the first time we ever talked together. Trust me also, for I will defend you against him if need be; and, if need be, even against myself.’

‘There could be no need for that,’ she answered, and, as in their first interview, a childlike faith in himself which stirred the depths of his heart, shone from her eyes.

‘Mademoiselle,’ he cried, ‘tell me this—only this. Do you love Ruel Bey?’

A deep flush suffused Rachel’s cheeks; her eyes dropped, and she reared her small head with, as he fancied, something of outraged dignity. He had the sense of virginal pride aroused in her, of maidenly passion which had been unwarrantably laid bare.

‘That,’ she said, ‘is a question which no one but he has any right to ask.’

‘I am answered,’ said Marillier, gently, and yet with some bitterness. ‘I am rebuked for my presumption as I deserve to be. And yet I have some claim to your confidence and his; for, as I told you before, if practical difficulties should arise to interfere with your joint happiness, it might be in my power to smooth them. He may be—is your lover, your future husband; think of me, to whom he stands in nearest blood relation, as your friend. Forgive me,’ he went on, and ventured to touch the hand which Ruel Bey had kissed. ‘I am much older than

you, Mademoiselle Isàdas—older than the man you love; and then, my profession, and all the graver interests of life which it forces me to consider, removes me from the circle of ordinary acquaintanceship, even of ordinary friendship. Grant me its privileges; they shall not be abused. I am deeply sympathetic with you. I long to know more of your inner feelings. If I understood them, I might be able to help you in circumstances we can neither of us fully foresee. The power to do this would be a compensation for the loss of joys, which from the conditions of my life have been forbidden me. To be of service to you, no matter in what capacity, under what limitations, would be one of the greatest pleasures I could know.’ She was moved by his appeal, and her slim fingers grasped his, as a child’s fingers might grip the strong hand of one whom it recognised as a protector of its weakness. Again he was thrilled by contact with, as he phrased it, that little bundle of nerve fibres.

‘I thank you,’ she said. ‘I trust you, as my friend—my best friend.’

‘That is agreed.’

He held her hand for a moment against his breast, and she could feel his heart throb, but he did not kiss it as Ruel Bey had done. Then he released it, laying it gently back upon the tea-table.

‘We understand each other, and we are friends—always. Mademoiselle Isàdas,’ he added in a different tone, ‘it seems to me that you have not many friends.’

‘You are right,’ she answered. ‘I have scarcely any friends, as you would use the word. None at all in London.’

‘And yet you must have made friends since you came to the Embassy, among the English ladies whom the Pacha knows.’

She shuddered slightly.

‘I think I must be different in my thoughts and feelings from the ladies whom the Pacha knows. And you are mistaken if you think that they come to see me at the Embassy. Of course they come very often; but they talk chiefly to the Pacha and to the secretaries, and they admire the trophies and the leopard outside, and the Abarian shields, and ask to have the inscriptions translated; and they say it is all very foreign and interesting, and they look at me strangely, and some patronise me in a way I do not like—as though I were a part of the foreign *mise-en-scène*

—odd and rather interesting too. But that is all. They do not make friends with me.’

Marillier mentally went over his own list of women acquaintances. He too had few intimate friends. He did not know one woman of the world whom he could ask to befriend Mademoiselle Isàdas. He regretted that he had lived like a hermit absorbed in his profession and his books.

Mademoiselle Isàdas went on,—

‘There has scarcely been time to know anyone intimately. It is only three months since I came to London. That was the middle of the season, when everyone was busy. Then we went to Scarborough and the Pacha got ill. But it does not matter. I am used to feeling lonely; only I can’t help missing the convent life sometimes and the dear nuns.’

‘Yet that life must have been cramped and depressing for one so young, who was not a nun,’ he said.

‘Cramped and depressing?’ She gave a little laugh. It seems to me that London life—its banal fashionable life—is much more cramped and depressing. My nuns were not at all the kind of persons you might imagine. They were full of intellectual interests. The Reverend Mother was wonderful. She had been a great lady; she knew the world and yet was not of it. Many well-born girls were educated at the convent; and the Reverend Mother and the Sisters were quite proud when their girls made good marriages. You see we were not out of the reach of Parisian echoes.’ ‘I see. It seems strange to me that you were not one of those fated to make what you call a good marriage. Did you never go away from the convent?’

Rachel blushed slightly.

‘I stayed with my friends in their homes sometimes; but I had no thought of marriage. I could not marry unless I loved. It would have been impossible for me to marry as some of the girls did. All were not happy; the outside brilliance meant very little in reality. I had one or two friends who wrote to me afterwards, and they were miserable—miserable. I always said to myself that, at least, should not be my fate. At one time I thought I had a religious vocation, but it was not so. The Reverend Mother herself questioned me and pointed out to me that I did not understand my own nature and that I should be making a mistake.

She told me that I should wait and cling to my ideals and hold myself apart till the time came, if it were God's will that it should come, when my heart would be really touched.'

The girl's eyes dropped; she took up from a worktable near her a doll she had been dressing, no doubt, when Ruel Bey interrupted the occupation, and her fingers played with it in a manner intensely feminine.

'This is for the Children's Fete at the convent on New Year's Day,' she said. 'I used always to dress the dolls. The Sisters said I did it better than any of them, and I am going to send a boxful this year. Each doll is to represent a flower. This'—and she held up the dainty wax thing for him to admire—'is one of the family of anemones. There will be red and pink, and pale and dark blue, and mauve and purple. You know how the anemones grow under the olive trees in the South? There were woods and olive groves round my convent.'

'Where was your convent?' asked Marillier.

'Not very far from Toulon. The Convent of the Assumption. You may have heard of it?'

'No,' said Marillier, touched and amused by the girl's simplicity. What should he know about convent schools for girls?

'I thought it possible,' she said, 'because, for one thing, the music was so famous. People used to come a long way to the services. And there were lay Sisters who went about as nurses, and who were sent for to nurse sick people—Catholics—at Hyères and some of those winter places. And beside, I heard you telling the Pacha that you had lived in Algiers, and this convent was connected with one in Algiers, where I was taken as a little baby and kept till I was old enough to be sent over to the school.'

'You were born in Algeria,' said Marillier, thoughtfully. 'And your mother was an Irishwoman? You don't remember your mother, Mademoiselle Isàdas?'

'I have told you; she died a fortnight after I was born.'

'So the Pacha has been your only guardian—your only relative? He ought not to hate you, mademoiselle. That is a strange fancy of yours.'

‘I cannot help it,’ she answered in the low, timid voice in which she spoke of her relations with the Ambassador. ‘Do you remember my telling you that I had a sort of second-sight, something like that which you described to me by which you know whether your patients will live or die.’

‘Stay!’ he said. ‘I spoke too confidently. I told you at first that I knew in connection with the Pacha. Now I am obliged to tell you frankly that I cannot say I know.’

‘Do you mean,’ she said, with a startled glance up at him from the doll she was still caressing with her fingers, ‘do you mean that you are not certain whether Excellence will live or die?’

‘Yes, I am obliged to say that I am not certain. I hope and think he may live for several years yet, but my power of diagnosis in his case seems curiously blurred. I cannot say I know.’

There was a little silence.

‘I am very, very sorry,’ she murmured distressfully. ‘Do not think too much of it. I will do all that my medical science enables me to do. Beyond that, trust and wait. I was obliged to say this, because I must be true to you, and I could not let you remain under even the slightest misapprehension. But I bade you trust me. Trust me still.’

‘Yes, I will trust you.’

‘And now go on telling me. You spoke of your inward vision in regard to your feeling that the Pacha had no real love for you.’

‘Love! Oh, no, no. It has never been love, but I have interested him. He has felt, too, that he has a duty to perform towards me. I have read all that in his face. It was the sense of duty that made him come and see me when I was twelve years old. He was then Abarian Ambassador to the Court of Italy. I shall never forget the expression of his eyes when he took my hand and looked into my face.’

‘He was moved at the sight of you?’

‘Yes, strangely moved. I could tell that. And he seemed to be searching for something. I wondered afterwards if he was trying to find a likeness in me to

somebody he had loved—or hated. I wondered if that could have been my father, and if he had hated him. For, oh! Doctor Marillier, he did find something which made him hate me.’

‘Surely you must have been mistaken. Or, if there were that momentary feeling, it must have passed?’

‘Yes, it passed. After a little while he became, just—Excellence, as you know him, only younger and handsomer. But the strange thing is, Doctor Marillier, that even when I knew that he hated me I did not hate him. I was sorry for him. Every time he came to see me, though I shrank from him at the time, I always felt sorry when he went away. And when at last, he sent for me to come here, though I was miserable at leaving the Reverend Mother and the Sisters, and the dear old happy life, I was glad in a curious way—glad at the thought of being with him and of perhaps doing something to make his life less lonely. He has never, you know, had wife or child of his own.’

‘He has had other things,’ said Marillier.

‘Oh, yes, he has had power and grandeur and the confidence of his Emperor and the friendship of princes. He has had everything, I suppose, that a successful diplomatist could have desired. But what has it availed him now that he is going into the darkness? And he loves life.’

‘Yes, he loves life,’ repeated Marillier, his mind going back to the talk he had had with the Ambassador a little while back. ‘I will do what I can, mademoiselle, to preserve his life for him.’

‘I should have liked,’ she said thoughtfully, ‘to make the darkness lighter for poor Excellence, but he still hates me, Doctor Marillier; he hated me the other evening when I sang that Irish song. And I wonder why! I wonder why!’

Marillier echoed the words ‘I wonder why!’

Chapter VI

MANDRAGORA

The Pacha did not till some time later fulfil his promise to show Marillier the legacy of uncanny possessions to which he had referred. October was advancing. The autumnal mists were creeping over parks and squares, and leaves were yellowing and fluttering to earth. London was beginning to fill again, and often, when Marillier paid his semi-professional afternoon call, he found the outer reception-rooms at the Embassy fairly full of visitors, the most important and attractive of whom were admitted one by one to the further sanctum, where the Ambassador, prepared by a careful process of massage, curling, dyeing, and other mysterious toilet arrangements, carried out by Soranzo, his accomplished body-servant, sat in invalid state, and made himself still interesting and agreeable to the charming women who sought his society. He was sprightly, cynical and witty, as they had always found him, and yet scarcely one left him without feeling in an indefinable way that Death's wings hovered over the chamber.

In Marillier's mind this feeling was present at all times. He could not say, medically speaking, that his cure had not been successful. There was no flaw to detect. The special treatment upon which he and the other doctors had disagreed, appeared to be doing its work, but Marillier was not satisfied and could feel no assurance within himself that the old man might not at any time collapse. He was unremitting in his attentions. The treatment was carried out under his own supervision by a young medical student whom he had himself trained and who had been his assistant in the operation, and by Nurse Dalison, in whom he had full confidence. These two, devoted to Marillier, believing in his methods and jealous of his professional reputation, were, like himself, perfectly aware that these slightly unorthodox methods might be called in question overtly, if not openly, by the London faculty if it should not be that the Ambassador's complete recovery put the seal on their efficacy.

At that time also, certain diplomatic complications called for greater activity in the Chancellery and more frequent communication with the Abarian capital. An affair of moment in the East, concerning the treatment of Christian subjects upon a province in the dominions of the Emperor of Abaria, gave Ruel Bey an

opportunity for advancing himself at the seat of government, upon which the Pacha effusively complimented his first secretary, but which Marillier divined he secretly resented. For it happened that Ruel Bey had been formerly a resident of the place in question, and had a peculiar knowledge of the intricacies of the affair which was at the moment specially valuable. He had received a message of commendation from his Imperial master, which the Pacha duly delivered; and was frankly exultant, informing Marillier that his promotion was now certain, and that it would not surprise him were he, in the event of the Pacha's death, to be appointed his successor. Political intrigue and press of diplomatic work seemed just then to have thrown into the background his suit for the hand of Mademoiselle Isàdas and Marillier found himself wondering whether Rachel Isàdas, who was not officially recognised be considered a fitting mate by the ambitious embryo ambassador. Rachel looked pale and wretched, and seemed to shrink more than ever from touch with the world around her. Once or twice, Marillier found her dispensing tea to the Pacha's visitors, but it was with a shy reserve, a timid hauteur, which accentuated her equivocal position, since it showed her consciousness of it.

No one doubted that there was some tie between her and the Pacha, but to all, it was clear that the Pacha himself felt no anxiety that her claim should be recognised, also that often her presence was distasteful to him. He did not seem at any time to greatly desire her company, and almost the only occasions upon which she appeared to give him any pleasure were when, after the reading over of despatches and transaction of the day's business with Ruel Bey, he requested that the curtains between the rooms should be opened, so that his vexed soul, like that of Saul, might be soothed by her music, which, oddly enough, he preferred to be of a devotional character. Rachel never again sang Irish melodies, but she and Ruel Bey would perform some portion of a stately mass, the two voices blending, or he accompanying Rachel on the violin.

More than once these performances were timed so that Marillier might hear them, and Rachel would smile up at him as he entered and begin again, as though in friendly recognition of his right to be considered and of the claims of their compact of friendship. When he went back to his own house in Harley Street after these evening visits to the Embassy, Marillier would sometimes ask himself whether his pain did not counterbalance his pleasure; yet he made no attempt to cut them short, and would not for the world have missed the experience.

It was clear, however, that Ruel Bey had made no formal proposal to the Pacha for Mademoiselle Isàdas's hand in marriage.

Early one afternoon in the beginning of October, Marillier found the Pacha standing by one of the bookcases peering at the titles of some volumes bound in old leather. One of these he had just taken from its place.

'Can I help you?' asked Marillier. 'I see that you are looking up authorities.'

The Pacha returned to his chair, still holding the volume.

'Do you know this?' he asked. 'It should be in your line of study.'

Marillier took the book from the shrivelled hand which trembled with its weight.

'The Herball of John Gerarde, 1636,' he read. 'Yes, of course I know it. What shall I look up for you?'

'I want to find a passage which relates to a belief held by some ancient writers concerning the mandrake,' he answered. 'I mean the property it was supposed to possess of restoring life to the dying.'

'I don't know that superstition,' replied Marillier. 'I thought the qualities of the root were thought to mainly aphrodisiac.'

'And you look upon the whole thing as most people do, who have had no personal experience of the matter,' said the Pacha, a note of irritation in his voice. 'To such people the mandrake is a mere peg for superstitious legend, as mythological as the ingredients of Circe's potion, with which some old writer identifies it. They forget that there has never been a myth or a mythological being, without some foundation of fact.'

'I agree with you,' replied Marillier. 'It has always been my opinion that myth never gathered round any production of nature unless there were in it something to justify the superstition. That question of occult properties in plants and minerals has always interested me. Take the wychhazel, for instance, medicinally, and in the shape of the divining rod. Take some of the ancient prescriptions in which the virtue of certain plants consisted in their being gathered under particular phases of the moon, and in which human and animal ingredients were used, with magical formulæ. Modern science has left out

magical incantations, but it restores exhausted nerve force with a decoction of rabbits' brains, and it employs the blood of bullocks, the thyroid gland and other organic preparations, in the treatment of diseases. As for the moon, its influence on vegetable and animal life cannot be disputed.'

'You remind me,' said the Pacha, 'of that Slavonic superstition—if you call it so—as to the power of a three-leaved fern grown and gathered with the aid of magical incantations on St John's day at midnight. You know the idea that St John's plants attract wandering spirits, and that other special plants repel them. Then there are the miracle leaves of the Catholic Church, which have made cures as well authenticated as any in the Acts of the Saints, and the holy tree of Kumbum, which grows leaves printed with sacred Thibetan characters. Do you know the plant drosera, which is affected, even at a distance, by particular metals? One might multiply examples. Why did the Sibyl of Cumæ wear a wreath of verbena—a plant that was much used in the temples to stimulate imagination? Have you ever, by the way, tried it on sensitives? Why did the Delphic Pythoness chew laurel to produce ecstasy? Why were beans forbidden to the initiates in the Eleusinian Mysteries, and a special injunction laid upon the Flamen Dialis not so much as to mention them? And then you remember the Greek superstition that beans hidden under manure become living beings?'

'That brings us back to the mandrake,' said Marillier, 'and the old idea that it is engendered under earth, of the corpse of a person put to death for murder. Of course,' he went on, 'we all know the medical properties ascribed to the mandrake. I have often wondered that the root has not a more prominent place in the modern pharmacopoeia. Chloroform has superseded it as an anæsthetic, but I have sometimes thought of verifying the ancients' use of it in surgical operations.'

'How can you suppose that a root of which sorcerers made philtres and that witches fashioned into familiars, would be welcomed into the respectable modern British pharmacopoeia?' said the Pacha, sneeringly. 'Have you seen a genuine mandrake? Most of the little fetiches one buys in the East have been faked.'

'That is clear,' replied Marillier. 'No, I have often wished that I could have seen one gathered.'

'And heard it shriek,' said the Pacha in a peculiar tone. 'I have done so, and I can

show you one that I plucked from the earth with my own hands.'

'And did not die after it?' said Marillier, smiling. 'That's the superstition, isn't it, in the Lebanon?'

'No, I did not die,' answered the Pacha. He was silent, and Marillier seemed to see in the old man's face an almost diabolic suggestiveness. 'I lived and flourished,' he added with a queer little laugh. 'The mandrake, you know, is said to bring love and health and fortune to its possessor. My mandrake is my fetish. I confess to the idolatry. Some day I'll tell you my story. Now, as the thing interests you, I'll show you my little oracle. That is perhaps the most uncanny of the possessions which will be yours when I die. May it serve you as faithfully as it has served me.'

While he spoke, the Pacha unlocked a cabinet near, but seemed to hesitate in his intention, and finally pulling out a tray of curiously-shaped stones, began show them one by one to Marillier, and to utter fascinating discourse on the virtues of the snake stone, of the mysterious smalagrana which is perforated as though by invisible worms and is said to possess the gift of prophecy, also the animated ophite that the Greeks interrogated, and a miraculous stone found in the Lebanon, whose voice in answer to a seer's invocations resembles that of a new-born babe.

All these things and others which Isàdas exhibited were remarkable and most rare, but Marillier's fancy was set upon the mandrake, and he again begged the Pacha to let him see it.

The old man seemed still to half repent his promise. It was perfectly evident that he regarded his fetich as something sacred; and Marillier began to speculate fantastically on other legends he had read concerning the power of the mandrake to induce insanity.

Presently, with a solemnity which contrasted with the wildness of his eyes and the fearsome trembling of his claw-like fingers as they fumbled in a dark recess at the back of the cabinet, the Ambassador drew out a box which appeared to be of gold, of Eastern workmanship, and to be inscribed with Arabic characters. He touched a secret spring cunningly concealed beneath an uncut topaz, which formed part of a design in cabalistic figures ornamenting the four corners of the box, carefully calling Marillier's attention as he did so to the special stone

covering the spring, and bidding him impress its position upon his memory. The lid flew open, revealing a piece of fine silken tissue laid over the vaguely-defined outline of what seemed to be a doll within. Isàdas's fingers trembled even more as he touched the fabric, and the pallor of his face increased. He looked almost afraid to lift the coverlet. When he did so, there lay exposed a strange little brown image, a root of the potato species distorted into human shape, with grotesquely human features, nose, lips, the indication of eyes, and hairy filaments falling from the sides of the head and forming a kind of beard upon the shrivelled jaw and chin. The creature appeared a distinct miniature effigy of a man. The shape of the limbs was clearly traceable, and two little brown tentacles of arms with rudimentary hands lay, one by the side and the other half over the breast. Bits of the earth from which it had been torn, still clung in the indentations of the shape, and on the top of the head, mingling with the tufts of hair, were the shrivelled remains of a stalk which had been removed or had mouldered away.

Marillier examined the thing with intense curiosity, at the same time revolted by its quasi—human appearance. He was startled by an exclamation from the Pacha—a sound resembling a groan of despair. The old man was bending close over the box, peering down into it with an anxiety that had brought drops of sweat to his forehead beneath the red fez he always wore.

‘Do you see—’ he gasped. ‘Does anything strike you?’

‘What?’ asked Marillier. ‘I see a vegetable monstrosity which is more extraordinarily human than I could have imagined possible in a root plucked straight out of the ground. Why should it cause you any disquietude, Excellency?’

‘Why!’ repeated Isàdas, ‘why! Because—can you not see? It is alive!’ And in truth, as Marillier looked at it, one of the little tentacles seemed to move, and the mummy-like breast to flutter slightly.

‘I have not dared to open this box since I was taken ill,’ the Ambassador went on in the same horror-stricken accents. ‘I knew that as the root gave me its life, so, when my life dwindled, its own would return to it again. See! See! The skin has filled out! It seems fleshy, soft, pulsating as when I gathered it, not the shrivelled inanimate thing it was three months ago. Marillier, my doom is fixed. Death's fiat has gone forth. You have deceived yourself and not all your science can save

me. It fails, and that of the Medicine Moor himself, if he were alive now, would fail, even as it did before in the hour of my greater desolation. Life! life!' the old man cried, stretching out his arms as though beseeching an inexorable deity. 'Is all to end—to vanish like the morning glory, to rot away like dead autumn leaves? Must the soulless shell of me join the Wandering Ones, hungering in vain for the mortal joys they have lost?'

The Pacha staggered and sank into a chair, his eyes closed, his frame shaking. Suddenly, in deep sepulchral tones, which seemed those of some strange spirit in possession of his feeble frame, he gave forth the Biblical utterance, 'What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?'

His breathing grew laboured, and Marillier, fearing failure of the heart's action, administered a reviving draught, and supporting him to his couch, laid him upon the cushions.

After a few minutes the old man recovered his ordinary speech and consciousness. His eyes turned upon Marillier with their usual alert gleam, and in obedience to his injunction the doctor rose, and sharply closing the lid of the jewelled box, put it back into the cabinet.

'Excellency, we must have no more of this,' he said. 'Your nerves are shaken; you have imagined what is not. Put the mandrake out of your thoughts. Forget your superstitious fancies, for they will retard your recovery. The root has no more life in it than a potato would have which had been gathered—how many years?'

'Twenty-five years, all but two weeks,' replied the Pacha. 'You forget, my friend, that the germ of life is in the potato as it is in the grain of corn which for six thousand years may have been enclosed in a mummy case. Life is everywhere—in everything save in the putrefying body of man, and out of that, arises new life in lower form. Life is the one all-pervading essence, and the aim of all magic has been to master the secret by which it can be concentrated, recreated and renewed—the secret that has ever eluded my efforts, and that for me must now remain unsolved. Marillier,' he went on, with fatalistic conviction, 'mark my words. I shall die on the anniversary of the day on which I plucked that mandrake root in the hills behind Milianah.'

'Excellency,' said Marillier, 'you have talked to me of the power of will to

accomplish what it pleases. Exercise your own will, and dismiss that phantom fancy. Otherwise, it will take hold of you, and possibly fulfil itself. Remember what you said to me not long ago of the capacity inherent in man, by which he may ally himself with subtle forces of the universe.'

'I spoke of two Forces,' replied the Ambassador. 'One is omnipotent, the other subservient to it, and yet its master. Have you forgotten? They were Love and Will. Love is of two kinds, Marillier, the lower and the higher. It has two forms, the spiritual and the material. For me, twenty-five years ago, the spiritual part of love ceased to exist—nay, I never gained it. It vanished in the hour when I might have made it mine. What was left to me? The pride of life, the lust of the flesh, of which that root—my fetich, my familiar, is a sort of degraded personation. The lust of the flesh dies—it may be to live again in subtler form a Tantalus existence, I know not—I scarcely care; and the pride of life is extinguished. There is no use in telling me to dismiss my phantom fancy, for it is no fancy, but a reality that has made me its slave. I am better now, and let me talk; it clears my brain. Listen, and I will tell you the story of how I plucked that mandrake root.'

Chapter VII

THE GATE OF GHOSTS

Marillier had seated himself by the couch. He felt the old man's pulse, which was beating more steadily, and seeing that it was wisest to humour him, moved himself also by extreme curiosity, he asked the Ambassador to proceed.

Isâdas Pacha put his hands over his eyes for a minute or two, and his mouth quivered, as with past anguish re-born in his memory. When he dropped his hands again, they fidgeted and picked at the embroidered rug which Marillier had laid over his knees, while he spoke in a tone at first low and monotonous, but which gradually deepened, filling his listener with a sense of tragedy.

'Twenty-five years ago, come two weeks from now,' began Isâdas, 'I was wandering in the Kabyle country among the hills behind Milianah. You know that district and the wildness of it?'

Marillier nodded.

'I don't suppose, however, that you have been to an old Moorish fortress perched on the edge of a precipice called Bab-el-Khâyalât, otherwise the Gate of Ghosts? No, it is not likely. That place was my headquarters during some weeks of delirious seeking—I can think of no better phrase to describe my mood. I was seeking from man, nature, or the devil, after a clue which should guide me in my own flesh, or through the Gate of Ghosts, to the kingdom of the dead, and so satisfy me that there was some existence beyond the material. It was to one of those days and nights of frenzied search that the experience of which I once told you—the photograph of that wraith-dancer—belongs. What did I find? Matter, always matter—in subtler form, capable of revivification, of assuming some former shape for a greater or lesser space of time, and of being resolved again into its primal elements—but still matter, always matter. Beyond it, only the secret of recreation, revivification, which is outside the ken of ordinary humanity, and which, all my life, has baffled me. Don't ask me to dwell in detail upon that time of crisis. A crushing sorrow had befallen me. You have heard me allude to it, and perhaps before I die I may tell you what that sorrow was. Yes,' the Ambassador added, as though a new thought had struck him, 'it will be necessary that I should do so before the end comes. At this moment I need only

speak of its effects. For some nights following the blow, I lay in a merciful stupor; then came the maddening restlessness, during which for nights and nights I never closed my eyes, but laid down my wearied body drugged with some narcotic, only to find my brain more and more active, and my limbs twitching with the craving for movement. And then I used to get up and stride along the ramparts of the castle overhanging a deep gorge, scarcely able to restrain my longing to throw myself down and end my torments. Nothing except the dread that they would not cease, and that I should be condemning myself to a fiercer hell, kept me back. So I watched for dawn in order that I might again tramp the mountains and forests in the vain hope of lulling mental pain.

‘I was mad in those days, Marillier; at least, a continuance of them would have driven me quite out of my senses, or I should have died from sheer bodily exhaustion.

‘One late afternoon I came upon country unlike any that I knew in those parts. It was on one of the almost inaccessible spurs of Khâyal—you know the mountain of course?’

Marillier nodded again. ‘I have seen it from a distance.’

‘Bab-el-Khâyalât faces it on a jutting promontory, immensely high, which commands all the plain of the Bahira; it must have been an impregnable position in old days. There’s a wild ravine between. One early dawn I started from the ramparts and climbed down the ravine up the opposite precipice—a feat for an antelope, but I was a good mountaineer in those days. I lost myself on Khâyal—wandered for hours in the forest that goes round her middle, then was stopped by another deep gorge, which I was obliged to head in order to carry out my idea of making the half circuit of the mountain and coming down into a village that I knew. There was a stiff piece of Climbing, then I rounded a volcanic sort of knoll and found myself with my back to Khâyal’s hump, on a gently sloping hill, which bordered desert land and faced westward, where the sun lay like a red ball on a bank of angry clouds. I can see the place now as though the whole scene had been photographed on my memory. The country had an appearance of peculiar desolation. The hillside undulated so that it seemed ploughed into irregular furrows, and the ground was grassless and of a greyish colour. It looked in the distance as though ashes had been vomited upon it, and rose here and there in small Protuberances, which, when you trod upon them, crumbled beneath your feet.

‘There was no grass, I said, but spread sparsely along the sides of the furrows were strange plants—low tufts of big fleshy leaves, green enough to make the soil almost white in contrast. A thin forest of trees grew upon the hill, spreading down a great way and slanting to the sun. They were queer trees, Which cast weird shadows, a sort of pine, but quite unlike the straight pyramidal pines you know on Zakkar and the mountains in that district. These trees were gnarled and twisted, looking hundreds of years old; a kind of distorted umbrella pine with no foliage except a crest at the top, and with great naked boughs beneath—misshapen, witch-like limbs of a livid grey, for the bark had peeled off from age. These stretched out, as though they were the arms of a host of monstrosities, forking at the ends into huge fingers that I fancied were pointed at me in derision.

‘I flung myself beneath one of these trees—almost a skeleton, with only a half-withered bunch of foliage on the top, and white twisted branches, quite bare. It was on the edge of a bank of the grey, crumbly earth, and half way down the bank grew two or three clumps of those odd-looking plants I have described. My legs tottered so that I could walk no further; my whole body was utterly weary, my brain dazed, and yet the anguish of my grief was keener at that moment than it had been since the hour of my first desolation. A new and even more horrible despair seized me now. Marillier, do you know what it is to yearn for physical pain, so that you could gash yourself, bruise yourself, if only you might thus still for a moment the inward torture? That was how I felt then. I remember that I dug my nails into the palms of my hands till the blood spurted. I beat my limbs against the ground which offered them no resistance, and dashed my head against the skeleton trunk of a tree behind me. There was something in the atmosphere of the place which drove me to frenzy—the black shadows of the trees, the eldritch shapes of them gibbering at me, the clouds every now and then coming over the face of the sun and making an eerie darkness, the feeling of electricity in the air, and the low rumble of thunder. A wind got up and came in gusts, making a rattling in the dead branches that reminded me of chains and gibbets, gusts that moaned and wailed in the pine crests overhead. The trees tossed and bent beneath each heavier blast, and their crackling and shrieking sounded to my tortured imagination like fiends shouting in derisive laughter.

‘A blasphemous wrath overcame me. In my rage I upbraided God for having deserted me, and I called upon Satan to give me, out of the treasures of his kingdom, at least forgetfulness—since Heaven denied me that boon. Out upon that desolate expanse of hill and forest and desert plain beyond, I hurled unholy

imprecations. And the low growls of thunder rebuked me, and the devils' chorus which the wind made, answered me with what I fancied promises of sacrilegious gifts...'

Isàdas stopped. His eyes were fixed and glaring, and he seemed quite unconscious of Marillier's presence. He was talking to himself, and all the time his hand plucked uneasily at the coverlet, as is the way with a man in a fever. Suddenly he threw out his arms again in a paroxysm of blind anger, and brought them sharply back, the clenched hands striking the couch upon which he reclined. An oath burst from his pallid lips. The agony of remembrance seemed more than he could bear.

Marillier waited, spellbound, not daring to check by a word this extraordinary ebullition of pent-up feeling. Presently the old man's face ceased working, his voice calmed and sank, it had an awed accent, and was hardly more than a whisper.

'The wind dropped. There came a stillness—the stillness you must have felt before a storm bursts. You know how strangely distant thunder sounds in that brooding quiet—how it rumbles and reverberates at intervals. How terrible it is! How supernatural! You've seen the livid glare of forked lightning when it darts out of the blackness, cleaving the clouds, and piercing down into the forest. I thought then—I remembered—'

Isàdas's eyes softened as he seemed to gaze beyond the walls of the room out through the mists of the past. Presently he recited in rhythmic tones,—

“And ever and anon some bright white shaft
Burned through the pine-tree roof,
here burned and there, As if God's messenger through the close wood screen
Plunged and replunged his weapon at a venture...”

'Bah! I never could recollect English poetry. That bit has stuck, because there was a woman—I once knew a woman who used to read Browning. She read me those lines...It was the last time. We were sitting in the open court of an old Moorish palace—our summer parlour. It was roofed with roses and bougainvillea. I remember she had some of the flowers in her left hand; she held the book with her right. There was a fountain splashing—I used to think her laugh was like the trickling of the water. The scent of the orange blossoms came from the old harem garden; she would never go into that harem garden...'

The Pacha stopped; he had been talking as though he were in a trance, his eyes fixed on vacancy. Marillier recalled him.

‘Was the palace in Algeria?’ he asked.

Isàdas started. ‘Eh? The palace! It was not a palace altogether. It had been a fortress—the place I told you of—Bab-el-Khâyalât the Gate of Ghosts—the Gate of Ghosts... There was a tower, a very old tower—it went back to the Romans. A tower of memories. The place is shut up now—all the part of it that she lived in. I suppose the terraces are in ruins and the garden a wilderness. But the tower was of solid masonry, and will defy centuries yet.’

Marillier asked no question. Presently the Pacha went on—still brokenly. ‘I bought the place, but I’ve never gone there since, for it’s a tomb, Marillier. It’s the tomb of my soul.’

Again there was a pause.

‘I remembered those lines when the lightning pierced down into the forest. I wished at that moment that it had found me and struck me dead, but God’s javelin aimed wide of the mark. And I could hear myself laughing! As I cursed Heaven in my impotent fury, I struck my foot against the crumbling bank on which I lay. Then a fear came on me—I held my breath, for in the stillness I heard a most curious sound; it was like the feeble wail of an infant. It reminded me... I seemed to hear again the cry of a child whom I... the cry of a new-born baby whom I hated—a cry that had knelled my own doom! I kicked the ground again... and again... and once more... and each time there was the same cry, only louder and louder, till it became a shrill shriek of pain.

‘I looked down—it had come from the earth beneath me—and I saw that I had kicked at a clump of those queer, fleshy-leaved plants I told you of, and that the root of one of them lay exposed. I stooped down and examined it. There was something very strange about the root. A little brown, human face seemed to peer at me, the features writhing—I swear to you, Marillier, that they writhed—and the lips moving. I scraped away more earth till the lower part of the root was revealed, and I saw that it was half human too. Then I remembered stories of mandrakes which I had heard in Abaria, and the legend that if a man plucks a mandrake he calls down a curse upon himself and invokes the devil. I had heard how peasants, wishing to possess or to sell the roots, chain dogs to the stalk, and

stand away, whipping on the beasts with a long whip, but keeping their ears stopped that they may not hear the screams the plant gives as it is torn from the ground. So this, I knew, must be a mandrake.

‘At any other time I might have hesitated, but now all human and religious feeling seemed to have left me. I had only an intense curiosity, an over-mastering impulse to defy all powers of good and evil. Let them do their worst. What did it matter to me? I felt an outcast from humanity, deserted by God and man, and ready, if I could be sure there were a devil, to swear him allegiance. Even the star of the empire, the emblem of my adopted country, which has always been to me the emblem of honour and loyal servitude—yes, has been and still is so, in spite of disillusion,’ Isàdas repeated solemnly; ‘even that star, that ideal was fading in my breast. I had a wild thought that by destroying the mandrake I might somehow wreak vengeance upon the infant whose life had been fatal to me. I put out my hand and grasped the tuft of leaves...The thing shrieked again . . it wailed piteously...it clung to the earth...with difficulty I tore it forth and held it in my hand...the root shaped as a man which you saw a little while ago. .

‘It was soft and warm, succulent, well nourished. I fancied that its breast palpitated, that its little arms moved, and that its legs quivered as if it still suffered from the violence of the wrench. Close beside it, where the soil was misplaced, I saw part of another root, and this seemed to have the shape of a woman, and each of her little brown arms clasped what looked like the tiny forms of babes. You must have seen mandrake roots which roughly represent a mother with one or two children—that is, if you have ever examined the specimens one is shown at the stalls of curiosity dealers in the East. I, at least, can vouch for their not being altogether spurious. I would not pluck the mate of my mandrake root. I needed for myself all the vitality that he could give me. Let her and her offspring die, or let her grow on widowed—it was nothing to me. I shovelled the earth back on her with my fingers, and got up from the bank, holding within my arm the root I had gathered.

‘Already I felt less wearied, and, what was more strange, the awful horror of desolation which had weighed me down seemed lighter, and my brain less dazed. I became alive to the danger of being caught in a storm and obliged to spend the night among those wild hills, in which, as you know, panthers and even lions are hunted. The storm, however, was passing, and the sun shone out redly from amidst the now broken bank of dusky cloud. Overhead the sky was clear, though there was still a distant rumble of thunder. The wind had risen once more, and

moaned again in the crests of the pines, while the trees bent and swayed beneath the gusts and rattled their dead limbs afresh. As I walked away, they stretched out their grey monstrous arms, seeming to be calling after me in fiendish exultation over what they thought my triumph or my subjugation—which, I could not tell.

‘I left the ghostly hillside behind me and went on round the mountain, striking into more open country, and better able, as the moon rose, to guide myself by the landmarks around. I walked quickly, with no overwhelming sense of fatigue, at which I wondered, considering my wakeful nights, the scanty food I had taken, and the long days of aimless wandering. In order that my arms might be freer, I thrust the mandrake root inside my coat; it felt as though something living were clinging to my breast, clutching at me with sensitive hands; and the tremulous beat of a small heart fluttered against my own. It was very late when I reached the village, and put up at an Arab rest-house. I took the mandrake root straight to my room, and, as well as I could, cleansed it of the soil which still hung round its limbs. As I did so, the thing again seemed to me alive, and I could have believed that, as I touched it, its features were drawn up in a most woful and gruesome expression. I laid it in an empty tin box in which I had carried food; it just fitted into it. I closed the lid, and then, after eating a more hearty meal than I had managed to do for many days, went to bed, and slept for the first time soundly since the stupor into which I had been plunged when the crashing blow fell upon me. I awoke in the morning refreshed, and more like my old self. Again I ate heartily. I felt less restless, and had no longer any craving to tramp the hills. I could not understand this change, but supposed that Nature was asserting her need, and that when I had taken in new strength, the former condition of things would return. I took off the lid of the box which contained my mandrake, and was startled at the alteration I observed. Its skin appeared to have shrivelled in the night, and all suggestion of life to have departed from it. I saw only a dry brown root—a vegetable monstrosity, as you said, in human likeness.

‘And I was sorry! It troubled me that the thing which I had felt living against my breast, as I had carried it from the forest, should now be dead. A vague remorse stirred me, and I remember my own surprise at finding myself moved by pity for the suffering I had caused and regret for the life I had taken—I, who only yesterday would almost have delighted in the infliction of pain, for the sight of it would have acted as an anodyne to my own agony. Now I was mourning over the premature cutting off of a mere vegetable growth. Yet it is true that from the time the mandrake died my own personal grief lessened, and I began to take a

keener pleasure in animal existence. It was as though the mandrake had given me its vitality, and not its vitality alone, but the luck which, according to both Eastern and Western superstition, attends anybody who possesses one of these homunculi. Certainly it is a fact that, from the date of my discovery of the mandrake, riches and honours poured upon me, and also, in a remarkable degree, the favour of women. Love, in its spiritual essence, could never more be mine, but love, with all its lower satisfactions, was heaped upon me. I became a cynic and a sensualist, and any vestiges that remained in me of the soul of love I deliberately killed. In these twenty-five years, during which that root has gone with me wherever I have journeyed, and has dwelt with me in all the houses I have inhabited, the power of attracting women has been mine in an extraordinary degree. I may say this without vanity, for, understand, that I attribute it to no merit of fascination of my own. I may also say that I have not made untrue professions, and that if any woman has suffered through me, it has been her own fault, not mine. I have never agreed to pay for favours I received, in coin not of the currency, or jewels of unmarketable value. I have never pretended to feelings and sentiments that I knew were dead in me. And so, for twenty-five years my career has been one of uninterrupted success and pleasure.

‘Call it superstition; call it insanity; call it what you will, but the conviction remains, and coincidence—if you admit nothing else—supports it, that all this I owe to the mandrake! I can only repeat, may my familiar serve you as faithfully as it has served the master who wrenched it from the earth and from its earth-love, and absorbed its life into his own being. That’s true, doctor, though you and many others might say it is a mad fancy. “The insane root,” you know, they called mandragora. But hasn’t the practice of your profession shown you that the world’s insanities approach often the eternal verities? My idea grew in me to be an established truth, a fixed faith, and, in proportion, so also grew my knowledge and the will-power to literally fulfil my belief. Ah! if I had known a few years sooner all that I now know of the forces in man and in nature, I would have concentrated my own vital energies, not upon my desire, but upon the cultivation of will-strength, by which I might have secured it.

‘Mark that, Marillier! Man is a demi-god, but only a demi-god. His powers and opportunities are great—greater than he can dream of, but they are limited by time, bounded by death. There is finality in everything that manifests itself here below. If man does not seize the opportunity when it is offered him, the opportunity will not return. The chance to gain is always offered those on the verge of knowledge—that is one of nature’s laws. Had I not been blinded,

engrossed, by the desire which held me captive, I might have learnt how to impart vitality to one I loved, and so for a time have held death at bay. Thus, in subordinating desire to will, I should have gained both. The Gate of Ghosts would have been opened to me for ever, and the fleshly union have become the everlasting blending of spirit.

‘Too late! Too late, Marillier! Death has been my triumphant rival, and is now my executioner. Death is lord of all things in the material universe, and I have long realised that a day must come when that life-giving force in my mandrake root will return to its original source. When that day comes, I—Isàdas, whom you have known—shall cease to exist.’

Chapter VIII

THE SHRINE OF THE FETICH

The fateful fortnight was nearly over. Manlier, knowing well the influence of imagination upon bodily conditions, took Mademoiselle Isàdas into his confidence, suppressing the story of the mandrake, but telling her of the Pacha's superstitious idea that his days were numbered. He begged her to encourage every form of small dissipation practicable in the sick chamber, and to do her utmost to divert the old man's thoughts from what he believed his impending doom. Acting upon his suggestion, the girl often made transparent pretexts for coming into the Ambassador's presence, for devising some little amusement, and for asking his opinion and advice upon various matters about which she would never formerly have dreamed of consulting him. She was frequently rebuffed by his hard indifference, or by the cold-blooded insight into her motives, which he allowed to be apparent. Then she would shrink into herself and leave him, tears of disappointment and pity in her eyes; for she most sincerely compassionated this strange old man, who seemed so shut off from the ordinary human affections. At these moments, she felt the hopelessness of her efforts, and remained patiently in the furthest drawing-room waiting a summons, but not daring to intrude uncalled for. To her surprise Isàdas sometimes sent her a message in which she saw signs of relenting. Often he would ask her to sing to him the Ayes and the Glorias, and other parts of the masses in which, oddly enough, the godless old sinner seemed to find some satisfaction.

It happened that during this especial fortnight the little knot of European diplomacy tightened and Eastern complications involved a certain tension at the Abarian Embassy. Of this Marillier was glad, for Ruel Bey was too well occupied with business to spend much time in the society of Mademoiselle Isàdas, and the doctor's vague feeling of distrust in regard to his cousin's wooing of this unprotected girl, had deepened into a repulsion which he could barely control. He knew that no formal proposal of marriage had been made, and sometimes he fancied that the Pacha, like an ancient spider watching from its web, noticed this hesitancy on the part of his first secretary with a somewhat malign interest, drawing his conclusions therefrom, and enriching with them his evil knowledge of the game of life.

It maddened Marillier to think that neither of the men took into consideration Rachel's lonely position at the Embassy. This jarred against his own conventional ideas. He hated the Eastern attitude, as he conceived it, towards women, and it made him angry and sad to think of the girl alone among a set of dissolute attachés, as he, perhaps unjustly, put it to himself, and with no guardian but that callous old man to whom her happiness appeared to be a matter of complete indifference. Once he ventured to hint to the Pacha that, in the circumstances, a chaperone might be desirable for Mademoiselle Isàdas, but his suggestion was received with a cold smile and the assurance that Mademoiselle Isàdas had her own maid, a superior girl whom she had brought with her from France, and that she saw nothing of the attachés and secretaries, except, of course, Ruel Bey.

'And to that exception,' added Isàdas, with a keen glance at Marillier, 'I do not imagine that mademoiselle greatly objects.'

Marillier was obliged to remain silent. It was, however, the greatest relief to him to usually find Rachel alone at her outpost when he made his afternoon call. Sometimes she was embroidering or dressing dolls for the convent fête, sometimes at the piano singing softly or aloud as the Ambassador's mood dictated.

Another reason why Marillier rejoiced at the tangling of diplomatic threads was, that apparently it roused the Pacha from his pessimistic mood. The Ambassador stirred like a sick war horse at the trumpet sound, his keen intellect at once on the alert, his long training in various courts quickening his flair for political intrigue, and giving him a grasp of the points at issue which astonished and inspired Ruel Bey, now brought into frequent counsel with his chief. Isàdas insisted upon writing despatches with his own hand, held interviews from his invalid couch with a high Foreign Office official, and had much telegraphic correspondence with the Abarian Chancellor and even the Emperor; while latterly, he seemed especially anxious for the arrival of a messenger from the Abarian capital with documents of importance, which, he informed Marillier, were for his own private perusal. This was the only occasion during these twelve days of waiting when Marillier heard him refer even distantly to the date upon which he expected his death to take place. He then said that he sincerely trusted the Abarian messenger, whom he called Akbar, would be in London before he (Isàdas) had gone to join the Immensities, repeating, with a sardonic smile and careless shrug, his euphemistic phrase for the end of all things.

It was the thirteenth day, and when he made his afternoon call Manillier found the Ambassador restless and disturbed in mind.

‘Akbar has not arrived,’ he said, ‘and the sand runs down in the hour-glass.’

Marillier expostulated. The old man shook his head.

‘A conviction that it has taken twenty-five years to mature cannot be disposed of in occasional feeble chatter. Perfunctory chatter,’ he added, ‘like the molasses in which one’s nurse used to try and persuade one that there was no jalap at the bottom of the teaspoon. My dear Marillier, it is very easy to see that you are watching for the fall of the scythe, and that you know yourself powerless to stay it. What is the time?’

Marillier glanced at the west window. It overlooked the formal garden of the Embassy, beyond which across the roofs of the houses, the sun, a ball of fire, glowed amidst a line of dusky clouds.

‘Near sunset, as you may see, Excellency.’

‘I said that I would give Akbar till sundown,’ said the Ambassador, petulantly. ‘Very well, we will wait till the sun drops. In the meantime do me the favour, doctor, of telling Mademoiselle Isàdas that I desire her presence, and also that of Ruel Bey.’

Marillier moved to the curtained doorway, but the Pacha recalled him.

‘A moment! There is something I must ask you to do first. Will you open the cabinet and take out the box which contains my familiar? Here is the key.’

Marillier unlocked the cabinet and laid the golden box on a table beside the Ambassador.

‘Let me beg you, Excellency, not to give way to your superstition. Don’t ask me to open the box.’

‘No, I will not do so just yet. You are sure that you know the stone which hides the secret spring?’

Marillier touched the topaz with his forefinger.

‘That is the one,’ said the Pacha. ‘You are right, Marillier. We won’t encourage superstition, and I do not ask you to open the box now. Leave it there, close to me, and await results. I have not looked at the mandrake since the day on which I showed it to you. When I am dead—when the life of the mandrake has returned to its source—you shall judge for yourself whether my superstition was justified. I have left you that box in my will, as well as other properties, some of which you know of I wish you to open it as soon as you conveniently may after my body has been committed to the ground. For that purpose I desire that you shall take it into your possession when your medical knowledge makes you certain that life in me is extinct. Now, will you kindly ask Mademoiselle Isàdas to come, and summon Ruel Bey.’

Marillier found Rachel in the outer drawing-room, and with her, Ruel Bey. They were quite near each other, Rachel seated in her usual place, a settee beneath the portrait of the Emperor, Ruel Bey half standing, half leaning, one arm resting on the back of the couch. At Marillier’s entrance they both started, and the doctor guessed that his cousin’s arm had been suddenly withdrawn from the girl’s waist. Both looked agitated, Ruel Bey flushed and pleading, Mademoiselle Isàdas pathetically reproachful. What had Ruel Bey been saying to her? In what manner had he been urging his suit? A spasm of rage contracted the muscles of Marillier’s chest. He gasped for breath, and Ruel Bey noticed the livid look which came over his face.

‘At your old game of overwork, Lucien,’ he said lightly. ‘You should be more careful of that heart of yours. Mademoiselle Isàdas, may I offer the doctor some liqueur?’ Ruel Bey poured out a little glass of green liquid, which looked like an emerald dissolved, and handed it to his cousin.

‘Physician, heal thyself,’ he said.

Marillier controlled himself, and accepted the cordial. It was true that this was not the first time he had been seized in Ruel Bey’s company with an attack of this nature His voice was quite calm and his face impassive as usual when he turned to Mademoiselle Isàdas, and, with apologies for his momentary weakness, delivered the Ambassador’s message.

Rachel went at once to Isàdas’s room, the two men following her.

‘I will not detain you many minutes,’ said the Pacha, his eyes moving rapidly

from one to the other, and Marillier felt that he, too, noticed the agitation in Rachel's face and the passion which spoke so eloquently from the eyes of Ruel Bey.

'Mademoiselle, I ask you to witness, and you also, Ruel Bey, that I give this box in your presence as a gift to Doctor Marillier—a small testimony, among others, of my gratitude for the service he has rendered me and of the friendship in which I hold him. I offer him this tribute before my decease, firstly, because at my age life is uncertain, and with all respect to Doctor Marillier's professional acquirements, death might seize me unawares; and secondly, because I desire your witness also to my request that he carries away this box from my side, or the receptacle he knows of, in which it may be placed at the time of my death, on the earliest occasion after he has convinced himself that the breath of life has gone from me. You, Ruel Bey, especially, as one of the executors whom I have appointed in my will; and you, Mademoiselle Isàdas, will bear in mind this request of mine, and will see that no obstacles are opposed to it.'

'Your Excellency honours me more than I deserve in having chosen me for such a trust,' replied Ruel Bey at once, and the gleam of gratification and of triumph in his eyes could not be suppressed. 'Be assured that, whatever your commands may be, I will obey them to the letter. Mademoiselle Isàdas also—'

Ruel Bey stopped confusedly, checked by a satirical smile which he saw upon the Ambassador's lips. He had for the moment forgotten himself in the elation he felt at this coupling of his own name with that of Mademoiselle Isàdas in such a connection. For sometime past he had been trying in various ways to ascertain the Pacha's intentions towards this girl who was known as his niece. Now he felt certain that Isàdas had made her his heiress. This new-born certainty caused him to assume an air of proprietorship not warranted by his position. Ruel Bey forced himself to remember that he was not yet an openly acknowledged suitor.

'Mademoiselle Isàdas will answer for herself,' said the Pacha, grimly. 'Though it is no great thing that I ask of her.'

Rachel kneeled down impulsively at the side of the couch, and kissed the old man's hand.

'Oh! Excellence!' she cried piteously. 'Is there nothing—nothing more than this that you will let me do to show you that I am not ungrateful?'

The Ambassador's lips quivered; his smile vanished and his face darkened suddenly.

'Go!' he said hoarsely. 'Don't look at me like that. You remind me—' He snatched his hand away. The girl got up, white from nervous distress.

'Pardon, Excellence. I did not mean to offend,' she said, and moved away.

Ruel Bey affected not to observe what passed, but Marillier, hot with indignation, crossed the room to her side. The Pacha intercepted his glance of pity and pain, and was recalled by it to a sense of the situation. He gave a strange little laugh, and making an evident effort, answered with formal courtesy, his face once more an inscrutable mask, out of which his black eyes shone dully.

'It is I, Mademoiselle, who ask pardon. Your voice—something in your look brought back to me an unpleasant episode in my life for which you are not personally responsible. I crave your indulgence for a sick man who does not often forget the respect due to a lady.'

He spoke in French, the language he ordinarily used when talking to either Rachel or Ruel Bey. 'Do me the favour of returning a little later when I shall send for you,' he went on. 'You will then receive certain proof of the consideration you seem to desire, and which I am happy to give you.'

The old man's frigid tone had no spark of warmth, and Rachel's wounded heart leaped in revolt.

'I desire nothing, Excellence, but a little tenderness, and that is the one gift you have withheld from me. Everything else you have bestowed freely, but I would rather stand bereft of all that I possess in the world, all of which I owe to you, than feel, as I do, that it has been grudgingly given. Why have you been so kind—and yet so cruel?'

Rachel stretched out her hands and let them drop to her sides in an appeal full of pathos and dignity, which Marillier thought might have melted a heart of stone. Even Isàdas seemed touched, for he answered more softly,—

'Be comforted, my child. A beautiful woman possesses charms which must command tenderness from those who can bestow it to better purpose than a worn-out old man. Nevertheless, I have told you that a little later you will

receive proof of my affection, and in the further future you will find that I have not been unmindful of your welfare. Permit Ruel Bey to reassure you. And now do you both leave me to Doctor Marillier's ministrations. Caspar, reconduct Mademoiselle Isàdas to the salon. I have a message for below. Should Akbar arrive let him be sent to me immediately.'

Ruel Bey bowed.

'At your command, Excellency.' And with elaborate deference, in which pleasurable emotion and gallantry mingled, he offered his arm to Mademoiselle Isàdas, and they passed out through the velvet curtains.

'Close the doors,' said the Pacha, 'and then come here, Marillier. I have something to say to you.'

Marillier obeyed. As he shut the double doors he fancied that from the room beyond, he heard the sound of stifled sobbing and of Mademoiselle Isàdas' voice, protesting piteously, 'I cannot bear it, Caspar! I cannot bear it!' and then the murmur of lover-like soothing in broken words of endearment, which to Marillier, seemed more than he could endure.

He came back abruptly to the Pacha's side.

'What is it, Excellency?' he asked roughly. 'Surely you have said enough.'

'Enough!' repeated Isàdas, with his strange smile. 'You think so? In what way?'

'Have you not given sufficient pain to that unfortunate girl who has no protector but yourself?'

'You feel for the girl, Marillier?'

'I do,' answered the doctor, bluntly, 'with my whole heart.'

The Ambassador seemed to be pondering his words.

'She appeals to you,' he exclaimed. 'She is very beautiful, and though you are not a young man, doctor, she has power to stir your heart.'

Marillier, self-convicted, was silent.

‘You speak of me as her only protector,’ the Pacha went on. ‘You know that I am dying; and you have come to the conclusion, as I have done, that she is in love with Ruel Bey. Ah! doctor, when a woman loves a soft sleek Oriental she is doomed, unless a strong hand be stretched forth to guard her. You have a phrase in your English law—‘the dead hand.’ I shall stretch forth the dead hand to protect Mademoiselle Isàdas.’

Marillier nodded sympathetically. He thought that noiv he grasped the Pacha’s meaning.

‘You are concerned,’ continued Isàdas, ‘at the thought of that timid, helpless bird delivered into the snare of the fowler—in other words, thrown upon the honour of Ruel Bey. Is not that your feeling?’

Marillier hesitated.

‘I have no right to make any imputation upon my cousin’s honour.’

‘A perfectly natural sentiment. The honour of one’s relatives is always taken for granted. Well, we’ll take Ruel Bey’s honour for granted, and assume that Mademoiselle Isàdas is safe in his keeping. I ought to have some insight into human nature, Doctor Marillier, though you never give me full credit for acumen in that respect, and, as I told you once before, I know something of the nature of the modern Greek. Ruel Bey, unlike yourself, who have harked back to the sturdy Jersey stock, is Greek to the core. There is one thing in him far stronger than honour, and that is self-interest. It is from this that I wish to preserve Mademoiselle Isàdas—cruel as my treatment of her may seem to you. Ruel Bey, in common with the rest of the world, believes Mademoiselle Isàdas to be my illegitimate daughter.’

The Pacha waited as though desiring that Marillier should speak.

‘It is certainly not my business, Isàdas Pacha,’ the doctor said at last, ‘to ask you whether that belief is founded upon fact.’

‘No, it is certainly not your business to put such question,’ replied the old man. ‘Nevertheless, I will answer it. Mademoiselle Isàdas, as she is called, is not my daughter.’

Chapter IX

‘TO THE EMPEROR!’

Stricken with astonishment, Marillier awaited further revelations.

‘Are you prepared to have a secret with regard to the birth of Mademoiselle Isàdas confided to you?’ asked the Pacha. ‘It must, for the present at anyrate, be kept from Ruel Bey.’ As he spoke, the old Ambassador did not attempt to hide his eagerness for an affirmative reply. With piercing eyes fixed upon the doctor he paused breathlessly. Marillier gave a rapid gesture of assent.

‘This secret involves a trust,’ continued the Pacha. ‘You will remember how, before the operation you performed, I asked you to take charge of a packet in which I told you was enclosed a letter to the Emperor of Abaria.’

‘Yes, yes.’

‘You felt yourself insured against any difficult consequences from the acceptance of the trust, for you knew that the operation would be successful. You did not calculate upon the after decay of vital power.’

‘Excuse me, Excellency. I do not yet admit that decay of vital power.’

‘The admission will be forced from you before long,’ replied the Pacha. ‘Never mind. It is of no consequence now except so far, that I am again obliged to throw myself upon your kindness. Akbar has not arrived. His train is overdue; I gave him till sundown.’

The Ambassador glanced at the western window, through which the outline of trees in the garden and of the grey roofs and chimney tops of the houses beyond, were now only softly visible in a descending twilight. The red glow had departed, the sun had sunk, and the room was in shadow except for a shaded electric light above the Pacha’s couch.

‘Yes, it is too late for the early Continental express, but there is still a later one.’

‘I will not wait I am a fatalist, as you know, Marillier, and when I throw my die

against destiny I abide by its cast. It is best that I should take you into my confidence. Had Akbar come sooner I might not have done so.'

'Who is Akbar?' asked Marillier. 'Let me understand with what I have to reckon in this matter.'

The Pacha shrugged his shoulders.

'Akbar is an automaton—a messenger of proved qualifications—that is all. But I will explain. A fortnight ago—the evening of the day on which I showed you the mandrake—I despatched Akbar with a letter to the Emperor in which I told him of my approaching death and begged him as a last favour to give me his promise that he would dispose of my property according to private directions that he would receive after my decease. I told him that there was concerned in this wish of mine a dying request on the part of another which I could not reveal even yet to him, but which I would stake my hopes upon his respecting. Akbar was to have brought me the Emperor's answer at latest by to-day—he should have been here two days ago.'

'But,' said Marillier, 'there appears the possibility that the Emperor may decline to grant the favour you ask.'

'He will not do so. I have reminded him of claims he will not disregard; of my long and honourable record of services to his throne, of an occasion—a hunting expedition—when I saved his life at risk of my own, of more private matters between him and me, of promises that he has made me. No, he will not refuse. I am certain of this. And were he to refuse, it is all the more important that you—who are not his subject—should know the secret, and should have the power, if you choose to exercise it, to protect Mademoiselle Isàdas.'

Marillier's mind was already made up.

'I accept the trust,' he said. 'If it be necessary I will protect Mademoiselle Isàdas even against the Emperor himself.'

Again the Pacha gave him one of his long, keen looks. A shade of doubt crossed the old man's face, and he did not at once reply. He seemed, as was his way, to be rapidly weighing possibilities and arguments for and against the course he contemplated taking. Evidently the scale dropped in Marillier's favour.

‘I thank you,’ he answered simply. ‘That matter is settled, and now I may speak more plainly. But have no fear. You will not be called upon to carry a crusade against infidel tyranny. I know that his Majesty will never break his word, once given. My ideal has not been all illusion, Marillier. I could not else have served faithfully, as I have done, an autocratic sovereign who was once my noblest friend and my greatest enemy.’

Marillier was startled by the exceeding bitterness of the old man’s speech.

‘I have loved Abdullulah Zobeir,’ continued the Pacha, ‘and I have hated him with the hatred of hell. I would have died for him as a monarch, and yet I should have taken a savage joy in killing him as a man, for he robbed me of the desire of my heart.’

‘Excellency!’ exclaimed Marillier, ‘I cannot pretend to misunderstand you. I suppose that the Emperor has been your rival in the affections of a woman you loved; but what has this to do with Mademoiselle Isàdas?’

‘Everything. Mademoiselle Isàdas is the living proof of what I am telling you. The girl whom you know as Rachel Isàdas is the daughter of the Emperor of Abaria, the only child of his favourite wife, born after she had escaped from the imperial harem.’

‘She escaped!’ Marillier repeated in a bewildered manner.

‘I helped her to escape,’ said the Pacha. ‘I took her to Algeria, and there settled her in the Moorish palace I have described to you, where her child was born.’

‘You say that this woman was the Emperor’s wife,’ said Marillier, thoughtfully. ‘Her escape must have been difficult to accomplish.’

‘It was difficult of accomplishment,’ replied the Pacha. ‘Only a man who loved her and hoped to win her ultimately for his own, would have dared such an undertaking. But Fate favoured me. I resigned my post—or, rather, obtained unlimited leave of absence, in order that I might, as I said, reclaim some ancestral property in Avaran. No one ever knew that I had not been to Avaran. When I returned to Abaria, the Emperor’s well-known friendship for me and my position in the court sheltered me from suspicion. The Emperor never dreamed that I had been concerned in his wife’s flight.’

‘And the child?’

Marillier paused. His mind seemed dazed by the unexpected revelation. And yet, had it been unexpected? He fancied now that he must always have suspected the truth. How otherwise should he have been so persistently struck by the vague likeness between Mademoiselle Isàdas and the portrait of the Emperor of Abaria—that suggestion of Orientalism in her which haunted and puzzled him every time he had looked at her?

‘The child, as I have told you, is called Rachel Isàdas. She is, in reality, a princess of Abaria.’

‘But if this woman were really, the Emperor’s wife,’ said Marillier, ‘why should she have wished to escape from him? Surely she must have counted the cost before she entered the Seraglio?’

The Pacha shrugged his shoulders.

‘She may have tried to. It was not possible. Only experience could teach her what life in the Seraglio meant. Rachel O’Hara was young, ignorant and poor; she was absolutely friendless in a strange country; she had suffered indignities, and was, for no fault of her own, turned out of the house of a Russian diplomat, to whose children she had been nursery governess. She was not a Russian subject; it was nobody’s business; she never thought of applying to her own ambassador. I was not at hand, or I would have helped her. At that time, I had been suddenly sent on a six months’ mission to the Lebanon. There is no need to tell you how she was brought before the Emperor’s notice. He was attracted by her beauty, and she, dazzled by his splendour, fascinated by a magnificent personality, consented to enter his harem as his most favoured wife.

‘Well, can you not understand how such a fascination might grow almost into loathing? Can you not imagine how a poetic, high-spirited and pure-minded Irishwoman, brought up in all the traditions of liberty, and having led from childhood a free, open-air existence, would revolt against the Eastern system of which she had now become a part? Think of the effect upon such a nature, of the harem life, with its avowed sensualism, its debasing intrigues! Can you not conceive how the wild Northern bird pined for freedom, and how she entreated it of her Oriental despot, only to be met with gifts of diamonds, ropes of pearls, vehement promises that every wish should be fulfilled, except that one desire for

liberty? Then think of the young Irish girl about to become a mother, perhaps of a woman child, whom she knew must be reared among these corrupting influences, to be immured like herself within harem walls, and even at the best to become one of many wives, a husband's plaything, if not his victim. Picture such a woman, determining at all costs to set herself and her child free, and appealing to a man who, though an Abarian subject, was a European, and had then, at least, some sense of the sanctity of womanhood, to help her in her desperate attempt I was that man, Marillier, and my own wild words, as well as her woman's instinct, had told her that she could make me her slave until death.

'Well, you know the rest. You know how soon death put an end to that joyous servitude. You know how the cry of a puling infant sounded the knell of my hopes.. Am I melodramatic? I am the last of my race, but I come of an old stock which has bred tragedies, and I have in very truth passed through mine. Rachel O'Hara lived only a few days after her child's birth. Before she died I made her two promises. One was to bring up the child as a Catholic according to Western ideas, and to keep her existence a secret from her father till she was twenty-one. The other, an injunction which I equally agreed to fulfil, was wrung from her by some lingering sense of duty—perhaps of affection, who knows—to the man she had once cared for. Had Rachel been a boy she would have sent him back to Abaria, and would probably now be heir-apparent to the throne. Happily, or unhappily, the child was a girl. The injunction was that I should, after the girl had come of age, take her to the Abarian Court. With her dying hand, the Emperor's wife wrote a letter to her husband, which she bade me then deliver, and in which she claimed a pledge he had once given her, sealing the pledge by the gift of this ring which I wear on my little finger. You will observe that it is an emerald, and that on it are some Abarian words which will remind the Emperor of his oath to grant any request, short of parting with her, that she chose to make. Her request, I need hardly tell you, is that her daughter, brought up a Christian and according to Western ideas, should be freed from the restrictions imposed upon Abarian women, free to follow her own religion, free to marry subject to the Emperor's approval, according to Western laws, a man of her own creed. Now, you can form an idea as to the contents of the packet I am going to give into your charge.'

'You wish me to deliver it to the Emperor in person?' said Marillier.

'Yes. I have already explained that you need be at no professional loss in rendering me this last service, and so enabling me to fulfil my promise to the

dead woman whom I loved. I always meant to do so before I died, but you will readily comprehend why I preferred to wait until I was dying. The Emperor's vengeance might have fallen heavily upon my head.'

'What do you anticipate will be the Emperor's attitude?' asked Marillier.

'He will be true to his oath. As for you, my friend, you are safe, unless—Well! you are a British subject, and would put yourself in jeopardy with your eyes open.

'I do not follow you.'

'No? Yet my meaning would be obvious enough if Ruel Bey were not in love with the Emperor's daughter, and the Emperor's daughter in love with him. You may have Greek blood in you, but you have not Greek guile, and though you are the cousin of Ruel Bey, and though I feel somewhat like the old serpent coquetting with Eve, in placing temptation in your hand, I think that I may trust you to guard the Emperor's daughter; even as you yourself put it, "if need be, against the Emperor himself."'

'I have given you my word,' said Marillier, stiffly, and as he spoke the blood rushed to his forehead, for he knew now to what temptation the Ambassador alluded.

Isàdas looked at him again in that questioning manner as if he were asking himself, 'Can I trust this man who is but human?' but he dropped the subject, saying only, 'I must give you the letter.'

Manlier would have postponed the moment.

'I shall be here later, Excellency. I must leave you now to attend to some other patients, but before midnight I shall see you again.'

'Before midnight!' the Ambassador repeated. 'That may be too late. No, time flies, and Akbar has not come. I will delay no longer. Let me have your arm, doctor.'

Marillier assisted the old man to rise, and supported him as he walked with a fairly firm step to a masked fireproof safe let into the wall. Isàdas opened the safe with a key attached to his watch—chain, and took from it the same packet

which he had previously given into Marillier's keeping.

'You will take it at once to your house,' he said, 'and you will put it into your own fireproof safe till the time comes for you to carry it elsewhere.'

Marillier received the packet, and with some solemnity promised to guard it as the Pacha desired. The old man gave him his hand, which Marillier gripped silently. Some impulse, of which he was glad later, made him raise it to his lips. As he did so his eye fell upon the emerald ring.

'And this, Excellency?' he said.

'That,' replied the Pacha, 'will be my last gift to Rachel O'Hara's daughter.'

Marillier left, waiting only to give some directions to Nurse Dalison, who, according to the Pacha's wish, he had bidden disturb the old man as little as possible by her ministrations. Isàdas had lately come to dislike the grey-robed, white-capped figure hovering about him, and preferred the attentions of his own body-servant. Thus the nurse remained in the background, in a little set of rooms connecting the Ambassador's apartments with the great empty ballroom, ready if the call were made, but not otherwise obtruding herself. She was not sorry, and she now saw more of Rachel, who interested her greatly.

The Ambassador's servant came in after the doctor had gone, drew the curtains, arranged the lights, and settled his master in an armchair by the table, where presently, dinner was served. Contrary to custom, of late, the Ambassador had appeared to take some interest in the details of his dainty repast. He ate with gusto, and sent down a complimentary message to the chef. Then he ordered some wine of choice quality only drunk at the Embassy on State occasions.

'A bottle of the imperial vintage, Soranzo,' he said, 'and the Emperor's cup. This is a fête day. I will drink the health of his most sacred Majesty in the company of the official household. Tell Mademoiselle Isàdas also that I request she will do me the honour of appearing.'

Rachel came in quick obedience to the Ambassador's summons, from her solitary little dinner which, during the old man's illness, was served her in the outer salon. She wore a pale yellow gown, leaving part of her arms and neck uncovered, and there was a bunch of violets nestling in her bodice, their pure woodland scent contrasting with the heavy Oriental perfume that always hung

round the Pacha's apartments. She was very pale; her eyes gazed mournfully out of dark circles and were red-rimmed, for she had been weeping.

The Ambassador, on Soranzo's arm, rose at her coming as if she were an honoured guest, and putting out his hand he drew her to a seat by his side. At that moment Ruel Bey and the rest of the official staff entered; the old man greeted them all with impressive courtesy.

'Gentlemen,' he said, 'I have sent for you that on this important occasion you may drink with Mademoiselle Isàdas and myself to the health of his Majesty the Emperor, in whose service my life has been spent.'

Some of the secretaries would have liked to ask what was this important occasion, of which till now they had had no intimation, but the Pacha's manner kept them silent. Soranzo poured out the sparkling amber liquid, filling first the glass of Mademoiselle Isàdas and then that of the Ambassador, which was a Venetian goblet of great value, one that he always used at State dinners, but even then only for the toast of his sovereign. It had been a present to him from the Emperor. The goblet trembled now in the old man's bony fingers, but his look was full of dignity. Turning to Rachel, he bowed and touched her glass with his own, a ceremony at which the attachés wondered, but which confirmed Ruel Bey's belief that in his will, the Ambassador had recognised Rachel as his daughter and heiress. Ruel Bey bowed low too, looking towards the girl as though pledging her. The Ambassador raised his glass again, and his voice rang deep and clear.

'Mademoiselle! Gentlemen! To the health of our beloved sovereign, his Majesty the Emperor.' The toast was drunk standing, each one repeating, his Majesty the Emperor!

Then a thing happened which astonished all present. The Ambassador turned and deliberately flung the goblet he had drained, down upon the marble pavement of the fireplace behind him, where it crashed into a hundred splinters. But again there was that in his face which forbade all questioning.

'I bid you good-night, gentlemen,' he said. Each man then approached, and, moved by the same instinct which had impelled Marillier a little while before, kissed his chief's hand, and saying, 'Good—night, Excellence,' left the room.

Chapter X

THE PASSING OF THE PACHA

‘Mademoiselle will remain,’ said the Pacha. ‘Remove these things, Soranza, lower the lights, and leave us undisturbed.’

Soon the two were alone—the old man and the girl. Isàdas did not go back to his couch, but sat in the armchair between the table and the fire, the flames of which leapt and shone upon the broken splinters of glass. The girl took a low stool at his feet. Her breast was heaving. As he looked down at her, she was emboldened to place her hands upon the arm of his chair and to lift her face nearer his. Then, as the softer expression in his eyes deepened, she put one timid hand upon his knee, and pleaded gently,—‘Excellence, I know you believe that you are going to die—Doctor Marillier has told me—and that is why you broke the glass when you called us up here to drink the Emperor’s health with you for the last time, as you fancy. But oh! Excellence, life and death are in God’s hands, and none may tell the day on which his Maker will call him. Let me stay with you tonight, Excellence, and help you to fight this fear which has seized you; then the morning will come and find you living still under the protection of Our Lady and the blessed saints. For has not God said by His Psalmist to those who put their trust in Him, “He shall give His angels charge over thee...there shall no evil befall thee, nor any plague come nigh thy dwelling.”’

Tears were on the girl’s lashes; her face was full of hope and tenderness, for she fancied that the Pacha’s heart was at last melting towards her, but his first words dispelled the hope.

‘So Marillier has left you to guard the door against death!’ he said harshly. ‘How else has he betrayed me?’

‘Betrayed you! I don’t know what you mean. He has told me nothing, except that this superstitious dread might have a bad effect upon you. Let me help you, Excellence. I am strong in spirit though I am only a weak girl. A woman’s love may prevail even against death.’

‘A woman’s love!’ the old man repeated. ‘It is not possible that you can love me.’

‘I have told myself, too, Excellence, that it is not possible, for you have never spoken to me one word of affection. And yet I would be to you as a devoted daughter if you would allow me.’ The old man seemed touched by her simple words.

Then he uttered a fierce imprecation, and flung her hand away from contact with his own. She was frightened, and now the tears flowed, and her breast heaved with sobbing.

‘There, don’t cry,’ said Isàdas, roughly. ‘I hate to hear a woman cry. Women are meant to be men’s playthings, not their persecutors.’

The girl wept on.

‘I told you I had something to give you,’ exclaimed Isàdas. ‘Stop crying, and let me make you my last present. They have not been so many after all, and this is rightfully yours.’

He drew the emerald ring from his finger and held it towards her, but Rachel waved it passionately away.

‘I don’t want your gifts. I have told you so already. I want nothing from you but this; tell me—I demand it—and surely I have a right, to know, why am I here since I am so distasteful to you? I would rather have worked or starved than have taken benefits from you, if I had known the truth sooner; but it is only since I have been in your house that I have realised how you felt towards me. What is the cause of your dislike? I have seen you kind and caressing to women who were only acquaintances, and whom I know that in your soul you despised. Why should not I have received some crumbs of tenderness? You do not even call me by my Christian name. It is always mademoiselle—mademoiselle! Oh! the mockery of it! The loneliness of my position! Do you think I haven’t suffered? Many, many times I have come to you intending to beg that you would send me back again to the convent, and then I have not dared to speak. Something has whispered to me that you were not all iron, that you had a heart, that it is not in your true nature to be cruel to a helpless girl. Besides, strange as it may seem to you—and I have said it seemed strange to myself—I have cared for you. I have longed that you would let me love you. Excellence, I am of your blood—at least, I have always been told so; I have been told that you are my guardian, my nearest of kin: why then do you hate me? It is not natural. It is not just For how

can I have done you wrong? If there is in you—as I sometimes feel—bitterness, and the desire for vengeance, whose sin would you avenge? Was it my father who worked evil against you, or was it my mother?’

The Pacha’s eyes never left the girl’s face as she poured forth her plaint. He gazed at her as one fascinated, bound by some spell of the past.

‘In my mother’s name I appeal to you,’ Rachel cried. ‘It cannot be that you nurse revenge against a dead woman—a poor girl like myself. How young she must have been when she died! Am I like her, Excellence? Is it her eyes which look out of my face and which angered you so tonight that you could not bear me to touch you?’

The Pacha made an impulsive movement with his hand, beating the palm of it upon the arm of his chair, as his way was when he lost self-control.

‘Have done! Have done!’ he cried.

‘Not till you have told me the truth. In my mother’s name I ask it. Did you hate my mother, Excellence?’

The old man’s head sank forward.

‘Your eyes are your father’s eyes,’ he said, ‘but your voice is the voice of your mother, and it stirs old memories within me.’

‘Excellence, you did not hate my mother. You loved her; and if I had been more like her, you would perhaps have loved me too.’

The old man made no answer; his breath came quickly.

‘Excellence,’ the girl went on, ‘see! I hide my face. I will not look at you since it makes you angry.’ She laid her forehead against the chair, her head bent so that only the dark coils of her hair were visible to him. ‘Think that it is my mother speaking to you, pleading for her child, pleading too for the man who wronged you. Ah! I understand now, and I am glad—I am glad. I knew that you were not heartless; I knew that you could love deeply, truly. I am glad, Excellence, that you loved my mother. I do not seem to care about my father. He is nothing to me; and he has long been dead, they told me. Death wipes out all injuries; forget those which he did you. Darkness covers them now. The shadow hides them, the

shadow that is falling—falling—though it may not yet close round you; the darkness in which there is forgiveness of sins, and peace.’

In the silence that followed, the Pacha’s hand crept tremblingly from the arm of his chair and rested on the girl’s bowed head.

‘You have not been told the truth,’ he said presently. ‘Your father is not dead.’

Rachel looked up, startled and wild-eyed. The Pacha’s hand dropped and went back to the arm of the chair, which it clutched feverishly.

‘Not dead!’ she repeated. ‘Where is he? Who is he?’

‘That I cannot tell you now, answered Isàdas. ‘He will know soon of your existence, and you must await his pleasure.’

‘He is powerful, then?’

‘Yes,’ replied the Pacha. ‘He is very powerful.’

‘Oh,’ cried the poor girl, ‘will he hate me too?’

‘I cannot say,’ answered Isàdas. ‘He loved your mother, after his own fashion, and I do not think it likely that he will hate you. This ring which I now give you, is your passport to his presence and to his favour.’ The old man took the emerald she had refused from the table where he had laid it, and put it on Rachel’s finger. The girl looked at it with wonder.

‘There is something written upon it,’ she said.

‘Your father, when you give the ring to him, will translate the inscription. He will recognise it and will know its meaning. You need not hesitate to take the ring. It was your mother’s, given to her by your father as a pledge that he would grant any request of hers which did not involve the breaking of their union. She broke that union, but I do not think he will disregard the oath which he then swore. Your mother’s dying request will reach him in due course. It concerns your welfare. I believe that when you present this ring to your father you will find that your happiness, in whatever form you desire it, is assured.’

‘What you tell me sounds like a fairy tale,’ said the girl. ‘Excellence, will you

not make it clearer?’

‘No. Time will do that. I have already said more than I intended. There is just one thing besides—another gift that I have to make you. You need not scruple about accepting that either. Look upon it if you will, as the only mark of affection I have ever shown you, for it is in affection that I make this provision for your immediate needs.’

‘Then I will accept it, Excellence, with a grateful heart.’

The Ambassador drew a pocketbook from his breast.

‘You may find yourself in need of money—only for the moment. Remember that your future is arranged for. Here are Bank of England notes to the value of two thousand pounds, and also the title—deeds of an old Moorish palace near Milianah in Algiers—the house in which your mother died. You may take possession of it when you please. Put the pocketbook in a safe place. If you need advice, consult Doctor Marillier.’

Rachel took the book, and a look of pleasure brightened her sad face.

‘Oh, Excellence, I thank you! Indeed, indeed, I thank you. In Algeria! I remember Algiers well. I always loved it. And to have for my own the house which belonged to my mother! It will be real happiness. I may live there, may I not?’

‘That will be as fate and your father decide. Now I have said all that need be said between us. Sleep well, and take this comfort to your white soul, if there should ever be any solace to you in the thought. Your mother’s smile on your lips has lightened the darkness, and the echo of your mother’s voice has sounded sweetly in my ears at the last. No! No more crying! Come no closer. The dogs of hate are leashed; do not unloose them.’

Silently Rachel obeyed. She did not dare even to touch his hand. The Pacha closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he was alone, but there came a sound of knocking at the door of the room. The Pacha started, alert and wrathful.

‘I said that I would not be disturbed until the doctor came.’

‘Excellency,’ said his servant, ‘it is Akbar.’

A thin, dark man, wearing a caftan, rushed in and prostrated himself in an Oriental obeisance, pouring forth in the Abarian language a tale of delay, accident, humble entreaty that his late coming, which had been by the will of Allah and no fault of his own, might be forgiven. The Pacha peremptorily bade him cease talking and bring forth his despatches.

Akbar, having delivered himself, stood at arms, as it were, with a certain martial dignity. In silence he produced a sealed document, which the Ambassador opened and read eagerly, a sigh of satisfaction escaping him. It was as Isàdas had hoped. The Emperor promised his loyal subject, whose faithful servitude had duly earned him so great a grace, the dying favour which Isàdas had asked of his Imperial master.

‘It is well,’ said the Pacha.

He sat for a minute or two lost in thought, unmindful of the messenger’s presence, and muttering to himself,—

‘Can I trust Marillier to withstand the temptation?...If I am still a slave to the echo of a dead woman’s voice, to the ghost of a dead woman’s smile, how should he be proof against the living embodiment of his desire?...What more easy than to suppress the secret of which he alone has possession?...Better not burn the duplicate as I had intended....Wiser to send it and make all secure.’

‘It is well,’ he repeated aloud. Then, giving the man some directions in his own dialect, the Pacha got up with difficulty from his chair and tottered to the masked safe which he had opened in Marillier’s presence. He felt extremely weak, and only by force of will was he able to accomplish what he wished to do. Supporting himself by holding on to a cabinet, near which was the shrine of his familiar, he gave Akbar a packet that he took from the safe and which seemed precisely similar to the one Marillier had carried away. It was in fact a duplicate, containing attested copies of the documents in Marillier’s keeping.

This the Pacha delivered into Akbar’s hands, bidding him neither change his garments, nor wash nor sleep, but to snatch a morsel of food and set forth at once by the immediately outgoing night express for the place whence he had come. The packet he was to present himself, to the Emperor of Abaria.

Akbar made his obeisance. The curtains swung to behind him, and the Pacha was again alone.

He did not at once go back to his chair, but fumbled anew at the keys he carried, and with difficulty finding the right one, opened the cabinet and drew forth the box containing the mandrake. Carrying it with his nerveless fingers, he staggered the few steps which lay between the cabinet and the table and sank heavily into the armchair, still clutching the box, which now rested upon his knee. For some time he remained motionless, exhausted with the effort. Then, his mind working feebly, he struggled to rouse himself and stooped over the box. He wanted to open it, but the old superstitious dread made him hesitate. Moreover, his fingers had lost their cunning and wandered aimlessly about the lid. He could not find the topaz which concealed the spring. He fancied his sight was failing, and as he persevered, half eager, half fearful, drowsiness stole over him, and he sank once more against the broad cushions of the chair, his head thrown slightly back, his gaze fixed dreamily upon the familiar objects that came within his vision.

There was comfort in the things he knew, the accustomed air of the room, its genial warmth and tone, its stability, the massiveness of carved frieze and fretted ceiling, even the solid look of the furniture, and the soft thickness of the carpet whereon he feebly stirred his slippered feet to reassure himself that the ground was still there. For a strange feeling of being drawn upward filled him. His failing senses clung pathetically, desperately, to the accompaniments of his former life; yet slowly, surely, they were passing from him. Walls and ceiling were shrouded in dark shadows, deepening, drawing nearer—a fathomless mist that closed around him and bore him gently on its bosom upward, ever upward. In his ears, still attuned to earthly sounds, rang the faint echo of Rachel's voice—a parting benison that followed after him like sweetest music.

Then came a rush as of many wings, and a corresponding sobbing of distress in his throat as he passed onward, upward, hemmed round, it seemed, by dark shapes that would have stayed his progress. Wild, rapacious birds he thought them, and remembered an eagle he had shot once upon the Lebanon. Just so had its wings brushed his face as it dropped at his feet, and these were dropping past him now. Many things came back to his remembrance in that strange upward flight—doings of youth and manhood, hitherto forgotten hours; visions of dead delights flitting like ghosts across his path and stretching pale hands as though still desirous to enslave him.

But he knew his goal. It was opening out before him as the mist melted away, and a gleam of silver, the herald of the morning, shone far beyond. The Immensities were unfolding. All space was before him, and he himself one with

the Universe, one with the Heart of Life. What matter then if Death's hand had touched him, since it released him for this? Why trouble over time while eternity was his? The thing he had longed for was his—life, life immeasurable, eternal, rippling up—up—within him and without. A great peace filled the passing spirit. Gone were the rustling wings that had tormented him—gone the encircling cloud. All boundaries, all limitations had disappeared, and above him in the infinite blue, shone two stars. They were the eyes of his love.

A little after midnight Marillier passed through the ante-room where Mademoiselle Isàdas sat over a dying fire keeping her lonely watch. In the outer salon, the first secretary and some other members of the household watched also, and in an adjacent room the nurse and the Ambassador's body-servant conferred together. None had dared to disobey the old man's order that he should be left undisturbed.

Marillier was the first to enter the chamber, and as he crossed its threshold an indefinable sense of awe told him that Death already held possession. The Ambassador sat almost upright in his carved chair; on his knees was the golden box, from which one limp, waxen hand had fallen; the other rested on the arm of the chair. A wonderful majesty encompassed the throned figure. Upon the fine face, in which already the ironic lines were smoothed and from which had departed all passion and unrest, there had settled a new dignity, and in the wide-open eyes there was an expression of deep satisfaction, as though they had seen the fulfilment of a life's longing.

Chapter XI

‘ADIEU, EXCELLENCE!’

Isàdas Pacha lay in state in the ballroom of the Embassy. They dressed him in full uniform, and placed him on a scarlet bier. His orders glittered in the light of the tall candles which shed their glow upon his dead face, and all round the bier, flowers were heaped. At the foot, was a great wreath in the Abarian colours, beside that one sent by the Queen, and surrounded by tributes from other royalties. The wreaths spread over the floor, and a narrow pathway was made among them at the side of the bier for those who came close to take their leave of the dead Ambassador. The heavy scent of the flowers pervaded the house. Above, in the darkened reception-rooms and in the Pacha’s chamber, all was still. Below, in the Chancellery, there was much business done; telegrams arriving every few minutes, despatches written, messages sent—Ruel Bey superintending all the arrangements, and taking entire command of the affairs of the Embassy.

He had not seen Mademoiselle Isàdas, who remained in her own apartments, but he wrote to her in lover-like terms frequent little notes. It might have seemed that during this self-enforced separation he was less fortunate than Marillier, who, in semi-professional capacity, more than once had some conversation with her. Now the girl appreciated Marillier’s forethought, for it was by his suggestion that Nurse Dalison was asked to remain at the Embassy as long as it continued to be Mademoiselle Isàdas’s home. Rachel had grown to like much this sympathetic woman, who never said or did the wrong thing, and had the knack of adapting herself to tragic conditions with a cheerfulness that made them cease to seem tragic. She took possession of a room next to Rachel’s sitting-room, and the two women, avoiding for the time the great drawing-rooms, lived entirely in this more retired part of the house, scarcely seeing anything of the life of the Embassy which went on busily on the floor below.

Ruel Bey received a shock when he learned the contents of the late Ambassador’s will, which had been opened by the lawyer and executors in view of funeral directions. The surprise accounted some what for his attitude towards Mademoiselle Isàdas, and he had not decided within himself whether it was a relief or an irritating responsibility. In any case the man’s worldly wisdom and

his ambitious hopes of advancement kept him from committing himself to any premature declaration.

For Mademoiselle Isàdas had not been acknowledged either as the Pacha's niece or as his daughter. She was spoken of as 'the daughter of Rachel O'Hara, deceased,' and styled 'Rachel, commonly called Isàdas.' No legacy was left her beyond some jewels of value, and the Moorish palace near Milianah, in Algeria, the title-deeds of which had been given to her. To Ruel Bey was left a small sum and a few personal belongings of his chief; to Marillier the contents of various cabinets and bookshelves, and also a ring set with a very fine diamond. All the rest of his property, so the will set forth, Isàdas Pacha bequeathed to his beloved master the Emperor of Abaria, to be apportioned according to the Emperor's will and discretion in the manner concerning which he—Isàdas—had already made a humble petition of his sovereign.

Rachel felt no resentment, and wondered why Ruel Bey wrote indignantly of the Ambassador's unjust neglect of her claims. What claims had she? None, she assured him in her pitiful little reply. The Pacha, she said, had dealt most generously by her. But she did not tell Ruel Bey in her letter, of the last interview she had had with the old man, and of his parting gift of money. She felt a little hurt that Ruel Bey had not at once assumed the right of an accepted lover. She had fancied that he would disregard etiquette, and insist upon seeing her, even in these early days of mourning. Had he done so, she thought, she might have explained to him something of her feeling for the Pacha, and her apparently excessive grief for his loss. Then she blamed herself for having expected so much of Ruel Bey. He was right, she said, to think of conventions, all the more so because of her unprotected position. And he was not acknowledged as her accepted husband, though he had called himself her lover; there had been no word of their marriage; he had never demanded her of the Pacha. Ah! why had he not done so? Surely in those last weeks, when the operation was over, and there could have been nothing unseemly in approaching her guardian on the subject, he might, had he greatly cared, have asked the Pacha's permission to woo her openly. And now, could it be that he wavered—that he did not think her rich enough, grand enough to be his wife? If he truly loved her, would he not break down mere worldly barriers—would he not mount the stairs and ask for her, and press her to his heart?

It was true, she knew, that he had much diplomatic business on hand. But was that sufficient to engross his thoughts completely? And then she asked herself

what would become of her if he failed her now. How could she bear it if he deserted her? For she loved him. Even when his eager wooing alarmed her maiden reticence, and his kisses seemed almost too bold in their fervour, the caresses were nevertheless sweeter than she dared confess to her own soul. She felt it would kill her if she discovered that Caspar did not really love her. All day, in her quiet room, she thought of him, recalling his words, his looks, his wonderful power of fascination. Did he fascinate other women as he had fascinated her, and did he inspire other women with that nameless fear which, argue against it as she might, seemed to chill her even at moments of his most ardent protestation? She wished that he were more her friend, perhaps, and less her lover. No, how could she wish that—when, if not her lover, he could be nothing. If he were not her lover, she would rather never see him more. That was the strange thing.

She thought of Marillier. How different were the cousins; how different was her own attitude towards the two men. The one she loved, the other she trusted. Yes, she trusted Marillier, and she leaned upon him as she had never leaned upon anyone in her life. She felt that he would always tell her what was true and right; she knew instinctively that he would rather die than commit a dishonourable action; she knew instinctively too, that if he loved, nothing else would count in the scale with his love. This was a man on whose loyalty a woman might stake her existence. No doubt of this man could ever enter her mind. He was not one who would think of some petty convention, if he knew that she was lonely and suffering, and that his presence would comfort her. And Marillier's presence did comfort her in an abstract sort of way. She seemed to be inwardly strengthened by his look, his touch; she was always sorry when he left her, always glad when he came back. Oh! why had she not that sense of security in her love for Caspar—a love which she often fancied was more of a pain than a joy?

She did then consult Marillier as the Pacha had bidden her. She described to him that last scene upon the night of the old man's death, and in the pleasure his sympathy gave her she hardly noticed how embarrassed were his replies to her questions and surmises as to who her father could be—this potentate whose will concerning her must be awaited with respectful patience. She asked him whether he thought it would be well for her to go back to her convent in the South till her future should be more decided. And then her own embarrassment came in the way of counsel, for she knew that whatever Marillier's opinion might be, she could not decide upon anything till she had some insight into the mind of Ruel Bey. The thought struck her with a stab, that perhaps she would be wiser not to

attempt to see Ruel Bey, but to go away and let him, if he chose, come and seek her. Marillier answered evasively that nothing could be settled till after the funeral, and that, in any case, there was no need for her to leave the Embassy while Nurse Dalison kept her company.

He came by-and-by, to ask her if she would go into the ballroom and bid farewell to the dead man lying there in state.

‘I have been afraid to go,’ she whispered. ‘Oh! I cannot bear the scent of the flowers. I think the scent of those flowers will always be with me. And I have never seen anyone dead.’

‘It is not terrible,’ answered Marillier. ‘He looks very calm and stately. Gentler and nobler than he ever looked in life.’

‘I will come,’ she said; ‘but I like best to think of him as he was that last night, when he put his hand on my head and spoke to me as though he cared for me a little.’

She followed him into the silent room with its bowed watchers, its tall wax candles, its gloom and solemnity; the great crimson bier in the centre half hidden by flowers, the still form in glittering uniform, with the flag and the star of Abaria over his head, surrounded by all the paraphernalia of rank and office, lying above the massed blossoms. Rachel paused for a minute at the doorway, and nervously clutched Marillier’s arm.

‘I have come here once or twice, but I could not go closer. That is not Excellence. There is something . . . something...I cannot describe it...a sort of tourbillon...It seems to rise...the flowers...everything...oh, I cannot bear it,’ she said piteously, and making a gesture with her hand that moved Marillier. And, in truth, the odour of the flowers—gardenias, roses, lilies—deep-scented hot-house blooms—made, as she described it, a kind of whirlwind of perfume which might well turn a delicate girl giddy.

There were several persons in the death chamber, gliding one by one at the side of the bier, and making a silent reverence as they passed and departed. Ruel Bey was one of these. He and Rachel approached the bier almost together. Marillier hung back when he saw his cousin, for jealous pride made him shrink from obtruding himself upon the lovers’ jealous resentment—indeed, a feeling akin to hatred of Caspar—made him turn away and stand outside the death—room. He

had seen the glance interchanged between the two who had not met for several days. Passion answered passion in the look. Rachel, he knew well, was blind and deaf to everything except the joy of meeting the man she loved. She did not notice that he, who was only her friend, had left her side. Ruel Bey moved eagerly towards the girl, but not a word was spoken. The two clasped hands, and stood together gazing upon the dead man. Then Ruel Bey made his salute. 'Adieu, Excellence,' he said, not without emotion.

Rachel, still clinging to Caspar's fingers, detached with her other hand a bunch of violets from the bodice of her black gown. She kissed the flowers, and, with a movement infinitely touching, bent over and laid them between the folded palms upon the dead breast. Then she stooped lower, and put her lips to the marble forehead. 'Adieu, Excellence,' she murmured, and, shivering slightly at the cold contact she sank against Ruel Bey's encircling arm.

Marillier could bear no more. He saw Caspar press the girl close to his heart, and support her towards the door; then he hurried down the corridor, and passing through the room which had been the Ambassador's bedchamber, and which opened upon the landing, he entered the sitting—room beyond. Here he flung himself into the armchair in which the Pacha had died, and for the first time, realised to the full his love for Rachel Isàdas and his hatred and distrust of Ruel Bey. He fought with his passion as though it had been an evil thing, trying to convince himself at the same time of its futility.

'I am nothing to her—nothing—nothing. As soon as she saw him I was blotted out of her existence. I am nothing, nothing,' he repeated, 'and Caspar is everything. She loves him, and only through him can I help her.'

Presently the man straightened himself, and a steely look of fixed resolve came into his eyes. His hands were clenched upon the arms of the chair with a grip of iron.

'So be it,' he cried. 'If Caspar be worthy of her he shall make her happiness. But if he be unworthy—by God, I will kill him before he shall be able to do her a wrong.'

He got up from the chair and paced the room towards the folding doors, over which the velvet curtains hung. Suddenly he paused, for his eye had fallen upon the gold box containing the mandrake, which he had not taken away in

obedience to the Pacha's directions. He had forgotten it in the confusion following the Ambassador's death, and this was the first time he had entered the room in which it still lay upon the table where he had himself placed it, when he had removed it from the dead man's knee. He determined to take it away with him as enjoined, and open it upon the morrow, after the remains of the Pacha had been laid in the tomb. For tomorrow was the day of the funeral.

As he took up the box, and was about to pass with it through the curtains, and along the suite of reception-rooms, he heard a voice in the ante-chamber which immediately arrested him. It was the voice of Ruel Bey.

'Dearest, you are alone. You are absolutely friendless, you are penniless—'

'No, not penniless, Caspar. I have told you—Mademoiselle Isàdas's sweet tones were broken with sobs.

'Practically penniless! 'Ruel Bey repeated. 'What are a few jewels—none of value—and a dilapidated Moorish palace in a place where it is impossible for you to live? Are you going to bury your youth and your beauty in an old tower in the Kabyle mountains? Beloved, it cannot be; it shall not be while I am alive to protect and adore you.'

Marillier's impulse, when his cousin began to speak, had been to draw aside the curtains and make his presence known to the pair. But something in Ruel Bey's words—or was it the manner of their utterance?—checked the impulse, and caused him to hesitate and stand uncertain what to do. He had scarcely time to analyse his own motives when Caspar continued, and the involuntary eavesdropper, his former vague suspicions stirred into new activity, remained rooted to the spot, no scruple of honour now deterring him from satisfying himself as to their having foundation in fact.

'My lonely one,' the caressing voice went on, 'this is no place for you, a young and beautiful girl, quite friendless and unchaperoned among a set of secretaries and attachés—and you know what the Eastern ideas of women are! As long as the Pacha was alive you were comparatively safe, but now even I, your lover, could not be sure of protecting you from insult. You must leave this house. You must trust yourself to me, and let me find you another home.'

'But not now, Caspar,' the girl answered in glad but wondering accents. 'It is so soon. There would be a great deal to arrange, and Doctor Marillier said that as

long as Nurse Dalison was with me, I need not go away.’

Caspar uttered an impatient exclamation.

‘Lucien is a fossil. What does such a man know of the ways of the world and of what is fitting for a girl? He never goes out in London; he has no notion of the gossip there is already about you and your ambiguous position in the Embassy.

‘My ambiguous position!’ she repeated. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘There is no need that you should. I was wrong to use the word. Forget it. Yet even in the short time that you have been in London some things must have struck you. You must have noticed how few women of the Pacha’s acquaintance have called on you or asked you to their houses.’

There was a short pause. Marillier’s blood boiled. He wondered if the dart had pierced Rachel’s shield of innocence. It was in him to rush forward and thrust the coward who had shot it for his own evil purposes, out by the neck from the girl’s presence. But he restrained his wrath. He would make himself yet more sure of Ruel Bey’s intention; and so he waited in breathless anxiety for Rachel’s reply.

It came in a low, hurt voice.

‘You mean kindly,’ she said. ‘You want me to know the truth, and I cannot blame you though the truth is painful. It is true that my position has been ambiguous, but perhaps it will not be so for very long.’

‘What do you mean?’ he asked eagerly.

‘I cannot say any more now. I know nothing myself except this—the Pacha himself told me on that last night, that my father was not dead as I had been led to believe.’

Ruel Bey gave a low laugh. Marillier knew that the man fancied he understood. The confession had trembled, perhaps, on the old man’s lips. Isàdas’s heart may have melted for a moment and been steeled again before he gave it fuller utterance. That was what Caspar said to himself.

‘Yes, her father was alive then,’ thought Caspar.

‘Why do you laugh?’ said the girl.

‘Because it is of so little consequence to us whether your father is alive or dead,’ he answered readily. ‘It makes no jot of difference in my love for you.’

‘You do love me, Caspar?’ Her voice was plaintively glad.

‘Have I not told you so a thousand times, oh! sceptical one? Do you want a proof that I love you? Look—look at your own face in the glass before you, and say if any man who had blood and not lymph in his veins could resist it. Do I love you! Is not this an answer? So much, and so much. Your lips, sweet! Why do you hide your head? Why should you be shy with me now?’

‘I will believe you, Caspar. I will never doubt you again. But I have been so lonely. I wondered why you did not come. Only one little flight of stairs that you used to mount many times a day when you brought despatches for Excellence to sign! And then always a word, a look, sometimes many words, for me. I lived on our meetings, Caspar, in those dreary days. I did not know that they were food to my poor starved heart till lately, when they ceased.’

‘And do you not understand why they ceased?’

‘I knew there was a great deal of business in the Chancellery. I could hear the murmur of it even here. And I knew, too, that Excellence was lying dead. Oh! Caspar, never let me see a dead face again. I cannot bear it.’

‘You shall never, if I can prevent it, look on a sight that distresses you. It was like cold—blooded Lucien to bring you there.’

‘Oh, no, don’t say that. I wanted to go. I was glad that I saw him once more. And if I had not gone, oh! Caspar, when should I have seen you?’

‘In a few hours, when the funeral was over, and I could feel that I was free to think of my own joy. But you understood my little notes?’

‘They seemed cold.’

‘My heart was burning. I dared not give vent to my longing. I should have remembered, to my Own detriment and yours, that only a small flight of steps, as you said, separated us. But surely You must have known? How could I have had

your name bandied about amongst the secretaries, the messengers the crowd of newsmongers! You can't conceive what it has been these last days. Official business, instructions from Abaria, that Medianah affair again, and I alone capable of dealing with it. So much the better, however, for my chance of promotion. Then the journalistic ghouls! The mere thought of you in such associations seemed desecration.'

'But you did think of me, Caspar?'

'Every hour; every minute. You are the background of my life. Through all the worldly turmoil your love shines as a ray from heaven.'

To the woman, his words rang true, and were as balm to a heart which had been wounded. To the man who was listening, they seemed false as hell. There was a silence, eloquent of caresses.

'You are so good,' Rachel murmured. 'No, I know you never meant to hurt me. I want to assure you of that, my Caspar. And besides, one should never allow oneself to be hurt by the truth. Do you think I cannot appreciate your wish to spare me, and yet to make me understand what it is well I should know? And, as you said, what does anything matter when you love me? Nothing can make any difference in our love. I suppose it was that feeling which really upheld me during all these dreadful months when my pride revolted terribly against my position here and the manner of the people who came to the Embassy. For I did realise it, Caspar, though I couldn't understand it at first. Then I supposed it was because the Pacha, who seemed all powerful, showed so plainly that I was only here on sufferance, and that he disliked the sight of me.'

'May the old man suffer in Purgatory for his cruelty and injustice,' cried Ruel Bey.

'No, no! You must not speak so; it is wicked. And I—oh! you may think it strange, but I cared for the Pacha even then. I wanted to be a daughter to him, and his cold looks were like knives in my heart. If it had not been for you I could not have borne my life. But now that I know more, I can understand the Pacha better. Think, dearest, and you will sympathise, because you love; think that he loved my mother, and she preferred another man to him—another man who may have wronged him. I cannot tell; he was my father, and I ought not to speak ill of him. But think, think, and then judge Excellence more gently. I am not very like

my mother; he told me that. I am more like my father, whom he hated. But think, Caspar, how good his heart must have been to have brought me up and educated me; then to have had me in his house when he could not look at me without being reminded of the secret sorrow of his life. Do you remember that night when he gave Doctor Marillier the box and called us to witness the gift, and how he drove me from his sight?’

‘Yes. By the way, I wonder what the box held. It’s all a mystery to me,’ went on Caspar, vehemently. ‘Why should the old man have taken the trouble to tell you that story at the last? Why have brought you here at all? He had the craft of the devil, Isàdas. What if State jealousy were at the bottom of his scheme, a scheme to entrap one whom he knew was his rival in the Emperor’s favour, and whom he feared might be his successor.’

‘Caspar, I cannot follow your thoughts,’ the girl said in bewilderment. ‘I know that I am very stupid. Of whom are you speaking? Can it be yourself? I’m quite ignorant of State intrigue.’

‘Remain so, my pretty saint. Would I change one hair of your head? Would I instil one drop of serpent’s guile into your pure heart’s blood, the blood which flows quicker at my voice, which rises and reddens your cheek at my wish? Why hide the blushes, dear? Do I not know that your pulses beat only for me? They are so lovely, those blushes, delight of my eyes. I am not sure how I like you best—pale or rosy.’

Had Caspar’s face been turned towards the door he might have seen the curtains stir, might have discovered that a man stood there driven to almost uncontrollable fury.

Marillier waited on. There was no treason in listening. On that point he was certain; he had Rachel’s honour to guard, and he held in mind the oath he had taken. But it seemed to him that a moment more and he must be maddened by the whispered cajoleries, the sound of endearments, the specious arguments of which it was so clear to him that Rachel did not understand the drift.

‘You make me think of Eastern gardens,’ continued Caspar, ‘of moonlight upon marble, of plashing fountains, and an orange-tree canopy overhead. My citron flower! I love those creamy blossoms with their petals like a woman’s skin, and their luscious perfume. Do you remember the first bouquet I gave you? I had

sent south for it, and chose it of citron flowers because you reminded me of them, and I loved them best. Ah, my dearest! why stay in this cold country? Do you not detest the damp, grey fog, and the grim houses with their melancholy air of respectability? Are you not pining for sunshine, and blue sea, and laughter; the song of birds, and all that makes life worth living? Why remain in this dreary house so full of the savour of death, where the old man's cruel presence must always haunt you? Let me take you back to glad France?'

'I have thought of that, Caspar. I was only waiting. You, too, think that would be best?'

'Best? Yes, certainly. Let me take you. I can manage it. We need not delay very long.'

'Oh, yes, yes!' she cried. 'I do detest England. Who would live in this cold gloom if they could fly to the South? Why should I not go to Algeria, Caspar? Only, it would be a long way for you to come and see me. Well, there is my convent—that is where I meant to go, and the dear nuns would let you visit me, perhaps, or else—Ah, well! I don't know. But it need not be for very long, my Caspar.'

'What? You are forced to admit that the dear nuns might be scandalised if I presented myself and requested that I might spend a few hours alone with my sweet saint! No. I have a better plan. That little corner of France is very pretty and poetic, no doubt; but it is a long way from my duties—a tiresome journey. And the nuns! I have already told you that my tastes do not incline to a parade of sanctity. I'm too human for that. What do you think, dearest, of a much shorter pilgrimage and a more earthly shrine? I have a little entresol in Paris—a box. I lived in it when I was in the Abarian Embassy there. I have kept the place. I go over to it occasionally when I want a whiff of free air to drive the fog out of my throat. It's pretty; you'd like it—close to the Champs Elysées. There's a decent concierge; his wife would take good care of you. I'd get you a maid, companion—whatever you preferred. Better not take your own woman, she seems to smack rather severely of the nunnery. I want you to see life—the life of cities—the opera—theatre—society, if you wished; but I think you would not wish for overmuch of that Listen! Don't say me nay till you have heard all my plan. I would take you over and instal you. Then when things were settled here—when the new Ambassador is appointed—are you speculating, mademoiselle, as to whom that is likely to be? In any case, when I am assured of promotion under

whatever conditions—well, then, I would join you, and then we might make definite plans.’

‘Definite plans?’ she repeated. ‘You mean our marriage. But how could I—Till we were married ought I to live in your house? And our marriage, Caspar. I am not prepared; you are not prepared—’

‘That is true, my wise saint. I am not prepared. Seriously, dearest, I am glad you see it in this light. Seriously, it would be madness if I were to marry you now—or, shall I say, announce our marriage—till the new appointments are made. My prospects would be jeopardised—and yours. But there need be no difficulty as long as you trust me—as long as you believe in the sincerity of my devotion. Paris is not London. And that is one advantage of your ambiguous position—pardon me for the phrase, you yourself have used it—no one in this city is likely to ask what has become of the “so-called” Mademoiselle Isàdas. As for the Parisian world, it has forgotten me; or if not, I can give a new address to my friends in it. No one there, will know anything but that a beautiful lady—if they observe her goings and comings—now lives in an appartement which was once tenanted by a servant of the Abarian Government, but which is, presumably, no longer his property; and, in any case, who would care if he be seen entering and leaving? Might it not be supposed that the business of his country prevents that Abarian gentleman from enjoying more than stolen tastes of his charming wife’s society? Need one advertise one’s marriage in the newspapers? Matrimony is a mere legal formality, sweet nun, though I know you consider it a sacrament. For me, love is the sacrament, and marriage only the outward symbol. But the symbol shall be a sacrament for me, too, if you please, and none the less so if our wedding take place a little sooner or a little later. Sweet, the whole gist of the matter is, do you love me?’

‘You know that I love you, Caspar. How else could I promise to be your wife?’

‘Then if you love me, you must also trust me; the one condition pre-supposes the other. Allow me to play the knight-errant and rescue you from this ogre’s castle, and as soon as may be. Is there so much trust required in the man you love, that you should hesitate to let him arrange your journey and escort you to your destination? The only thing is that we must keep our own counsel. Say nothing even to Lucien. Sweet, I am jealous of Lucien. I have a shrewd suspicion that you have captivated the grave doctor, and that he would oppose, as far as lay in his power, our pleasant projects. Time enough to tell him when the deed is done,

and you are made mine irrevocably. Why should we court gossip? We would travel by the night express. If you are wise you will let it be assumed that you are returning to your convent, or even going to take possession of your Moorish palace—some day we will see it together. But for the present, dearest, we will go no further than Paris. Speak! Give me your promise. No, I take it—thus.’

Marillier knew that she was in his arms. He could hear murmured words. Then he seemed to know that she had released herself.

‘Caspar, I love you, and you have said what is true—since I love you I must trust you absolutely, entirely. It would be a sin against my love if I could doubt yours for me. And I don’t know why, or what, I should doubt. As you say, it would only be delaying our marriage for a little while. And you are right; the air of this house is full of death and sorrow. England is all gloom and oppression, and I am an alien in the land. You shall take me away if you will—you shall go with me to Paris if you please; but for the rest—don’t ask me to decide now. I cannot. I can think of nothing but the joy of having you back again, of knowing that you love me. It is all strange and bewildering, this plan of yours; I don’t quite like it. It is not that I don’t trust you. My heart, I love you, and I will do anything that you ask, believing you would never ask me to do what was unwise or wrong. But I am troubled, Caspar; I—I am afraid...’

The curtains parted. Marillier stood in the opening. He seemed to bristle like a grim grey wolf whose young is threatened. His teeth showed between his drawn lips, and his eyes gave a flash as of a sword leaping from its scabbard. For ten seconds he looked at the pair without speaking. Caspar had his back towards him; he was holding the girl’s hands, and she was gazing into his eyes, beseeching him with hers to reassure her vague doubt, to still the conflict in her between love and something which made her shrink from him, while yet he held her fascinated. Marillier thought of a little bird before a serpent. He made a movement forward, and Rachel started and looked at him, uttering a cry of confusion as she dropped Caspar’s hands.

Caspar was confused too, and his eye fell before the indignant gaze of his cousin. But he recovered himself quickly, and laughed in his light way.

‘Have pity on Mademoiselle Isàdas’s nerves, Lucien. They have had a good many shocks lately. You seem to me a poor sort of doctor to take her first into that horrible death-room, and now to burst in upon her in this manner. What is

the matter with you? You seem disturbed.'

Marillier pointedly ignored him.

'Mademoiselle Isàdas, forgive me,' he said. 'I am sorry that I startled you by my sudden appearance. I ought to have taken better care of a nervous patient. You are my patient just now, remember, and you will let me advise you to go to your own room and put yourself into Nurse Dalison's care.'

Rachel made a meek little movement with her head, and without a word left the room.

Caspar and Lucien faced each other. The former spoke.

'May I ask, my honourable cousin, how long you have been playing the eavesdropper? I see,' he added brutally, with a glance at the box in Marillier's hand, 'you have been carrying away your booty; but that is hardly an excuse for listening behind the curtains.'

'I have listened to some purpose,' retorted Marillier. 'For the first time I know you in your true colours. Caspar, you are the son of my mother's sister, yet I tell you that you are a scoundrel.'

Ruel Bey flushed a brick red, and his arm went out as though he would have struck the other man. But it dropped, and he turned off the situation with another laugh.

'We are both inclined to be melodramatic, I see. Perhaps, however, it is pardonable in the conditions, and I make some allowance for natural jealousy. No doubt you heard Mademoiselle Isàdas avow her preference, and are annoyed at her choice of one so much less worthy, you would say, than yourself. But there's no accounting for the tastes of women. I trust that I may be permitted to justify that of her whom I adore. As for your abominable insinuation—well, Doctor Lucien Marillier, if I were not the son of your mother's sister, I should feel myself compelled to send you my seconds this evening and to ask you to cross the Channel and meet me on the Calais sands as soon as might be convenient after the business of tomorrow. But I am the son of your mother's sister—which seems to me a roundabout way of stating a plain fact; moreover, you will admit that it is not exactly seemly to pick a quarrel within a few paces of where the late Ambassador of his Majesty of Abaria is lying in state.

Moreover, for other reasons, I don't intend that you shall fire a bullet into me; and so, cousin, I will wish you good evening.'

Chapter XII

THE DEAD HAND

The funeral was over, and the mortal remains of Isàdas Pacha were laid in the earth. He had desired to be buried in the place where he died, not in Abaria or the island of his ancestors, so a grave was dug in the Catholic cemetery at Kensal Green. It was a grand procession which left the Embassy. The spirit of Isàdas must have been glad, if it were hovering near, to see the homage paid to its earthly casket. And indeed to Marillier, who was in a strange mood that morning, haunted by the old man's mystic utterances, and racked with the emotion he had endured after overhearing the scene between Ruel Bey and Rachel, it seemed that the Pacha's spirit might well be present at this imposing ceremonial—that ironic spirit scoffing, amused, interested, yet all the time, not unmindful of the daughter of his old love, and at the last, stretching forth the dead hand he had spoken of to save her from sorrow.

The day was gloomy beyond description, as November days are apt to be. A grey fog enveloped that part of London—not a thick brown fog closing one in like a wall, but a ghostly spreading mist, which made the houses loom in gigantic proportions along the street, and the people walking and the carriages and carts look as though great shadows had descended and taken to themselves forms. The scarlet tunics of a detachment of the Guards which the Queen had sent, made the only definite block of colour in the leaden mist which filled the square, until the coffin was borne down with its covering pall of flowers, while the men in uniforms and decorations round it and the crimson fezzes of the secretaries blended at in a variegated mass, and then dispersed, as the mourners followed the dead chief in due order.

A flash of steel pierced the fog, as the Guards presented arms to him who would never again, after this day, receive an earthly salute. The band played the Dead March, and the procession passed through lined streets. For it was a great sight, and the funeral of an ambassador does not take place every day. The Queen was represented and all the greater royalties, while several princes attended in person. There, too, were the members of the various foreign Embassies, the Ministers of the Crown, and, indeed, almost all the notable men in London. Isàdas Pacha had been a popular figure in society, as well as a clever diplomatist.

As the coffin was taken out of the hearse the mourners formed themselves into line. No blood relation of the late Pacha being present, Ruel Bey, in virtue of his official position, took the place of chief mourner. The members of the Abarian household followed him closely, and with them Marillier, as the physician in attendance upon the late Ambassador, and the young medical man who had assisted him in the critical operation of some weeks back, and who had shared with him to the end the responsibility of the case.

Marillier's mind was a chaos of conflicting thoughts. Foremost among these was the impression, of which he could not rid himself, that the old man's spirit hovered above the cortège, controlling every incident and whispering intimately into his own ear words of warning and injunctions to hold himself in readiness for whatever might occur, confirming him in the conviction which had leapt to him during his night's agony, that he, and he alone, was left to fulfil the dead man's will, and that upon him rested the responsibility of saving and protecting Rachel O'Hara's helpless daughter. This feeling was so strong upon him that it gave him a sense of illusion. Ruel Bey's striking form in the rich Abarian uniform, walking ahead of him in the procession, at once heightened the illusion and gave force to reality. The first secretary won the approval and admiration of all who witnessed his tactful and dignified performance of the duty that had devolved upon him. More than one of those present, saw in him the future ambassador, or at least a diplomatist whose career was assured. The representatives of royalty, the English Ministers, the members of the foreign Embassies, approached him with cordiality, even a certain deference. His demeanour was perfect, yet to Marillier, all through, it masked the designs of a fiend. Marillier's excited fancy saw in Ruel Bey the enemy of Isàdas, and of Rachel O'Hara's daughter. It was true that Ruel Bey was the Ambassador's temporal representative, but to Marillier, it seemed that he himself was, by the Pacha's own choice, the true deputy of the old man who was gone, and that Isàdas's spirit was now urging him to realise his responsibility, and was pointing out to him that, as he had been chosen as the sole repository of the secret of Rachel's birth, through him alone, could the dead hand smite for the girl's salvation. Rachel's hitherto sole protector had gone for ever from mortal ken, but Marillier felt that the mantle had fallen upon his own shoulders, and he stood ready to fulfil to the uttermost this sacred trust. As the line of mourners, leaving the grave, reformed, a sudden darkness fell. The fog, which had been grey before, was now black, and through it, glimmered linkmen's lanterns and the hurriedly lighted lamps of waiting carriages.

The long rows of equipages drawn up in the open space by the gate which was guarded by a cordon of policemen, began with difficulty to take up their owners; and the space appeared one moving shadow in which were monstrous shapes with small red eyes twinkling. Hoarse cries resounded, and the names of great personages were bawled forth as in the confusion of the departure from some fashionable gathering. Just in front of the cemetery, and in the street opening upon it, traffic had been stopped during the procession for certain fixed hours, but there had been delay; the hour of closure was past, and vans and cabs approaching the scene, were obliged to turn back, finding progress stopped, so that a block happened, and in the darkness the melee threatened to be serious. A road was being repaired just beyond the police cordon, and now, a traction engine started suddenly into work. Its roar and the puff of red smoke which accompanied it, alarmed the horses in a waiting carriage at the end of the middle row. They darted forward with the carriage swaying behind them, breaking the line, and causing a horrible displacement. Panic spread. Voices of coachmen were heard above the tumult calling to their neighbours and trying to soothe the frightened animals in their charge.

Marillier's brougham stood at the back, and he and the medical assistant with him were with difficulty making their way towards it, when the excitement began and prevented them from going further. Ruel Bey called out peremptory commands as he accompanied a very great personage to the door of his carriage, a personage whose word might make or mar his own diplomatic destiny, and Ruel Bey in any distracting circumstances, remained susceptible to such considerations. Just as the great personage had stepped into his carriage and the footman had taken his place on the box a pair of maddened beasts dashed down the road. There sounded the crash of a collision, and one of the horses belonging to the carriage beside which Ruel Bey still stood, reared, kicked over the traces, and would have bolted, causing greater damage besides endangering the life of a power in European politics, had not Ruel Bey, alive to the situation, sprang to the horse's head, seized the rein, and after considerable effort, brought the beast to bay. But as he struggled in the uncertain light, foam from the terrified horse's mouth spurting on to his face and almost blinding him, he was caught by the pole of another carriage turned crosswise, and obliged to loose his hold. The released animal reared again, but the coachman had it now in grip. It kicked out wildly, and Ruel Bey was struck to the ground and trampled under its hoofs. There was a rush of roughs, and two policemen pulled Caspar, bleeding and unconscious, on to the pavement, while several occupants of carriages put out their heads and called, asking if there were a doctor anywhere near.

By the light of a street lamp just above Marillier had seen every detail of the occurrence. He knew that his cousin had been kicked on the head and that the injury must be serious. Through his dreamy realisation of what had happened, there flashed the fancy that to this end his own steps had been barred by the throng. Had he found his carriage sooner, he would not have known of the accident. Another wild thought flashed. Did the Pacha's spirit dominate events still? Was this the work of the dead hand?

He answered the call at once, however, in his clear, authoritative manner, the trained habit of the doctor triumphing over the emotional man, and all his professional instinct on the alert. He explained quietly that he was the physician of the late Ambassador, that Ruel Bey was his cousin. He, with his medical assistant, he said, would take charge of the case and convey the injured man in his brougham at once to his own house, which was on the way to the Embassy.

The great person, who was visibly concerned, professed himself grateful and satisfied, and presently, extricated from the block, drove off. Order was soon restored. Marillier and the young assistant, who was a silent, fair man, absorbed in his work, shy of great people, and devoted body and soul to Marillier, whom he considered the one and only medical authority of the day, carried the unconscious first secretary as best they could, with the help of policemen, to the doctor's brougham now in readiness. Ruel Bey was placed on the front seat, and the doctor and his assistant supported him as far as possible in order to save him from being jolted. The coachman received orders to go as quickly as was practicable by a quieter route to Marillier's house in Harley Street, but the density of the fog made movement necessarily slow at first. Every now and then from the lips of Caspar a feeble groan escaped, like that of a wounded animal—a mere sound of physical distress, with no consciousness in it. The sound brought to Marillier a thrill of disagreeable association, for, since the scene of the day before, he had sedulously avoided all intercourse with his cousin. He endeavoured to turn his thoughts by remarking to his companion upon some technical aspects of the case. In such cursory inspection of the hurt as had been possible, it seemed clear to both that an injury to the brain was to be apprehended, and that probably an operation involving the lifting of a portion of the skull would be necessary.

The hurried diagnosis was confirmed by a fuller examination in Marillier's consulting-room. This was in a wing built out at the back of the house, which contained besides, laboratories and a small operating-room divided from the rest

of the apartment by a movable partition of ground glass. On the other side of the partition, was a white-tiled space, the high operating-table, with its movable supports for the limbs and head of the patient, and lighted from above with electric globes and reflectors, standing in the centre.

Marillier turned on the lights and ran his eye over the array of sponges, instruments, antiseptics, bandages, and different kinds of surgical appliances kept always in readiness. There was, of course, a supply of hot water, and the place was heated to a pleasant temperature.

In the larger room, which, now that the folding partition was drawn, lay open to the operating chamber, a fire blazed, and here the electric light, scattered and more closely shaded, made a lesser illumination. Caspar lay stretched on the couch, to all appearance lifeless, for the moaning had quite ceased. The consulting-room was very quiet, shut off as it was from the rest of the house, and when the door was closed, absolutely secure from intrusion. It was a comfortable apartment, with some fine old cabinets of English make, oak bookshelves filled with books, and a great writing-table with the doctor's armchair behind it, opposite to the one in which patients seated themselves when they came to face the penetrating eye of the physician.

On an oak table, between the screened space of the operating-room and the sofa on which Caspar lay, stood the gold box containing the mandrake, which Marillier had placed there on his return from the Embassy the previous day. It occurred to him that the Pacha had bidden him open the box as soon as possible after the funeral, and he decided to do so by-and-by. He had other, more imperative, things to think of now, and he resolutely put aside every thought of Isâdas, of Rachel, and even of Ruel Bey, except as a patient who demanded immediate attention.

Now the surgeon and doctor of medicine held paramount sway over the man, and this in an almost sub-conscious manner, the result of long control over nerves when the business of his profession was concerned. For the moment, his rival was a case, one of unusual scientific interest—no more.

He looked again at the wound, passing his deft fingers over it—a touch here, a pressure there, his brows knit, his lips pressed so closely that they made one thin line accentuating his strong jaw. He went on with certain medical preparations in silence, except for a brief direction delivered at intervals to his assistant. Then he

stood deep in thought. Presently he said abruptly to the younger man,—

‘It must be done, Heathcote—the sooner the better.’

Heathcote nodded.

‘You see—’ there followed some technical explanations. ‘It is a question of preserving his sanity. That splintered bone must be raised from pressing on the brain, and that without delay. I have often done the operation of trephining, as you are aware. I have no hesitation in saying that, in this case, it will be successful. I know.’

‘That is enough,’ replied Heathcote. ‘For you to say “I know” means certainty of success.’

‘Let us waste no time,’ Marillier went on. ‘We can get through the operation—you and I—at once, here. There’s nothing else imperative for this afternoon?’

Heathcote looked at a tablet of engagements, reading out names and hours.

At one of the names Marillier stopped him.

‘You can attend to him. By that time I shall not need you. Now we will begin.’

The two proceeded in a cool, business-like way with their arrangements. The body of Caspar was laid upon the operating-table. Presently the air was filled with the sickly fumes of chloroform.

Chapter XIII

THE AVATAR

Much of Marillier's success in the operation of trephining was due to a dressing, at once antiseptic and healing, the secret of which he had learned when practising in the East, and which, notwithstanding experiment and discussion, was not favoured by English surgeons. It had been duly applied, and the bandages arranged. There was every ground for hope that life and reason were saved to Ruel Bey.

Marillier stood alone over the body of his cousin, which, still under the influence of the chloroform, had been removed to a couch at the foot of the operating-table. He had dismissed Heathcote, having decided that it would be better to do himself all that was necessary than to entrust the work to his subordinate.

For the first time since Caspar had been brought into the consulting-room, Marillier remembered that the man whom he had saved was, in very truth, his bitterest enemy, remembered that in restoring to Caspar his intellect and powers of fascination, he was in reality sharpening a weapon that should pierce the heart and destroy the honour of the woman he loved.

He looked down at Caspar's handsome face and finely-moulded form. Inwardly, he contrasted this perfection of physical beauty with the mental picture of himself which he carried in recollection—the grey, rough-hewn face, the thick-set figure with its ungainly gait. There was nothing in such a personality to attract a young girl's fancy, to turn the heart of a loving woman from the man she adored. It came upon him with a shock, that this was the thought consuming him, burning into his soul—the desire to take Rachel from Caspar in order to possess her himself, and not for her well-being primarily, but for the satisfaction of his own desire. He had partly realised the strength of his passion on the previous day, but it had not then gripped and held him in its naked might as it gripped and held him now.

Completely overcome by it for the moment, he felt, as he gazed upon the motionless form of his rival, that he would willingly barter every advantage, everything in the world that he held most dear—his scientific reputation, his power of healing, his knowledge, all the acquirements that he had struggled for

and mastered during years of self-denying application—everything would he give that he might win the heart of this girl. He felt that he hated Caspar, and yet he yearned madly to possess Caspar's charm and power of winning love; he yearned to inform with his own will and his own spirit this fine fleshly mould inhabited by Caspar's soul. He knew himself intuitively, to be a truer man than Caspar. He felt that, given the opportunity, he could make Rachel love him, and with a more abiding love than that which she had given to Caspar. He longed to bring forth Rachel's grander qualities, and to transform her from a half-developed girl into a noble-hearted woman. As he dwelt on this thought, the less worthy impulse subsided. No, it was not for mere selfish gratification that he wished to win Rachel. He loved her with his higher, and not with his lower, self. The longing to grasp and hold her at any cost was an outside prompting, having no root in the real man. Rachel's pure image expelled the baser instinct. Were Caspar dead, he told himself, he would be content to wait, to worship, and to patiently serve till, of her own free will, she gave herself to him.

If Caspar were dead! To all intents Caspar was dead. During the course of his studies and experiments in the working of anæsthetics, Marillier had satisfied himself that in an ordinary operation under chloroform, mental consciousness is not entirely separated from the body, but remains in close connection with it, as in the less profound dream condition; whereas, in the case of an operation touching the brain, the seat of reason, when an anæsthetic is administered, the soul is, in very truth, driven forth for the time from its earthly tenement, by the fact that a process of vital reconstruction is taking place, so that the body during that period is performing automatically its natural functions. Marillier remembered having discussed this question with the Pacha, who had quoted some of the theories of the Medicine Moor.

And now, a cold perspiration rose on Marillier's forehead, as he was suddenly assailed by a temptation which seemed, indeed, the suggestion of the old man's godless spirit to which evil and good had been—in his own phraseology—merely opposite poles of a force unknowable as its lower counterpart, electricity. Why should he recall the soul of Caspar? Why not leave it to join the Wandering Ones? Then Rachel would be saved, and he himself, with no obstacle between them, might gain her for his own.

He battled with the temptation. He beat it down—throttling it before the suggestion could put itself into definite shape. He walked away from the couch, and returned again. Surging thoughts swept his being. The murderous impulse

conquered, making place for a thousand other imaginings, utterly wild and fantastic, one thought dominant—that he could change places with Caspar—that he might woo Rachel in Caspar's body, animated by his own soul.

Certain words of the Pacha floated back to him—he scarcely knew by what connection of ideas. The old man's voice echoed in his ear. He seemed to hear it once more, as he had heard it during the interviews when the Pacha had talked to him of the mandrake; at first, cold, sarcastic, gibing, then vibrating with the intensity of conviction, of supernatural dread. One by one, bits of sentences framed themselves in his memory:—‘There are two forces in Nature by which man may to an almost incredible extent control his own destiny...By means of Love and Will, the Vital Energy which creates and maintains life may be drawn upon and used by those initiated into a certain form of magic.’...And then the echoing voice quivering with that strange emotion which had revealed itself to Marillier, and perhaps among all men, to Marillier only, went on, ‘It is the Mystery of mysteries, doctor, that transfusion of life into death, by the magic of love... Ponder it... Yearn for its key—the key that you hold almost within your hand... There are men capable of concentrating in themselves and employing the subtle forces of the Universe... By the strength of your own will wrest this secret from God, or Nature, or the Devil... The desire will be born in you; its germ already lies in your heart. The hour of struggle will arrive, and the force shall rise within you—you choose to put it forth—that shall give you the mastery.’ The force? What force? The might of will—the power of desire? Had not Marillier's aim for years been to cultivate his will? But never yet had the supreme opportunity for test presented itself. He had never hitherto desired anything with sufficient intensity. But now! The Pacha had bidden him remember his prophecy... Will!... Yes, the Pacha had prophesied truly. He felt the power growing within him... It uplifted him... It filled him... He had a sense of potency indescribable... Now he understood the meaning of mystic utterances... Man had in himself the germ of godhead... Man might create—man might accomplish miracles—restore the dead to life—change the outward form of the spirit—subdue all to himself—make himself verily a god...

His brain seemed to be bursting; it reeled under this new and extraordinary consciousness. Was he going mad? Had the fumes of the chloroform affected him in a manner of which he had no previous experience? Marillier flung wide apart the glass folds of the partition, and walking rapidly to the end of the consulting-room, threw open the window, and drew in long breaths of fog-laden air. They seemed to calm his excitement, but he still paced the room with quick,

eager steps. Again his eye was caught by the gold box on the table. Involuntarily he went to it, and his fingers played about the lid.

As he touched it, words of the Pacha again recurred to him—their talk about the mandrake, and of other Eastern superstitions. He knew that the Pacha had believed firmly in the magical properties of the root, in its power to confer physical attraction upon its possessor and the gift of women's love. Isàdas had implied that from the date upon which he had wrenched the mandrake from the ground, he had possessed the faculty of inspiring love in the breast of any woman upon whom he pleased to exercise it. He had died in the absolute conviction that he owed his worldly renown and prosperity to the influence of the mandrake; and not only this, but that the mandrake had actually transferred to himself the vitality of which he had robbed it. He had implied also that, when he died, the mandrake would take back its life to itself and all its magical qualities, and that these might be made to serve the will of its new possessor.

Mad superstition! Well had the mandrake been named 'the insane root.' Thinking thus, Marillier, scarce consciously, pressed the topaz beneath which lay the spring, and the lid of the box flew open. The silken wrapper was slightly displaced; he could see a portion of the mandrake's form—an arm laid bare, which to Marillier's fervid imagination seemed to twitch and slightly move. He tore away the coverlet... And then he staggered and shrank back, for here was confirmation of all that he had deemed impossible and but the raving of a disordered brain. Here was living proof—yes, living proof that there was truth in the old superstitions, and that the Pacha had told him no fairy tale. Or could it be, as Isàdas had said, that he had in himself the capability to absorb and concentrate those hidden energies of Nature by which, if legend and history were not to be rejected, men have in all time worked seeming miracles; and hence then this sensation which he felt of wondrous capacity, of superhuman endowment. Had he instilled life into the mandrake?

For the root was certainly alive. When he touched it the soft, fleshy substance of its body stirred and pulsated; the grotesque features were agitated by a sort of infantile and most gruesome spasm. He lifted it from its box, and as he did so, the brown tentacle with its rudimentary hand closed round his finger.

Marillier was seized with horror, and another wild fancy came into his mind—the notion that in this creature he beheld his own guilty thought which had thus personified itself. He stood for several moments holding the mandrake away

from him, cold with supernatural awe. Presently the horror passed, and he said to himself that the thing was a natural monstrosity, one of Nature's failures, or perhaps another of the strange but authenticated links between the vegetable and the animal orders of creation. He held it nearer till it rested on his breast. Then, like the Pacha, he seemed to feel the thrill in it. So holding it, he walked to the couch on which Ruel Bey was stretched.

Was the man dead? He appeared so, but Marillier knew that in a short time, if nothing should prevent it, consciousness would return. Now his former passionate hatred and revolt at the physical beauty of the man, in comparison with his own ungainliness, burned anew, seeming to derive fresh intensity from the life of the mandrake, while he fancied that the mandrake's vitality waxed warmer and stronger from the raging fire in his own breast. Jealous longing mastered him. Why should Caspar return to work that evil which he, who loved Rachel with a love that Caspar was incapable of, would sacrifice eternity to avert? And how was he discharging the trust which Isàdas had laid upon him? Were he to restore Caspar, to what end would the dead hand have interposed?

No, he was prepared to risk all. Only let the mandrake's magic be tested, and a miracle be wrought. Let him be Caspar—Caspar's spirit remaining exiled, and he in possession of the body which had won Rachel's love—that he might clasp Rachel in his arms and know the full sweetness of her kiss upon Caspar's lips.

Simultaneously, other words of Isàdas Pacha flashed back upon his memory:—'Remember that to accomplish such a result you must project your very soul, as it were, out of your own body upon the object of your desire.'

He would do this. As he summoned all his strength, he became aware of a stronger, more pulsating thrill in the thing which clung to his breast. Then a strange giddiness overpowered him. He felt himself falling, and for a time he knew no more.

He was conscious again, but at first, in an odd faint way, with a stirring about his heart, and a queer pain in his head. He moved feebly. There was the impression of something unexpected having happened to him. He seemed to be coming back slowly and with difficulty. A distant roaring sounded in his ears, like the dashing of far-off breakers against a cliff. He tried to move his lips. His feet pressed on something soft; he thought he must be in his bed, but presently knew that he was partly dressed. He put out one hand; it touched the wooden support of the

operating—table. The electric lamps above it, glared down upon him from their burnished shades. He saw the tiled walls and the other small table with an array of his own surgical instruments and appliances—the basin, the blood-stained towels. Then he remembered that there had been an operation, and that he had performed it upon his cousin. The incidents of the day crowded back in a confused medley upon his overwrought brain; the funeral, the accident; the sense of Isàdas's hovering spirit, and of the dead hand beckoning him; his temptation; his mad desire to exchange places with Caspar—to woo Rachel with Caspar's body, but with his own mind.

The mandrake! He remembered that too, remembered the last strange thrill of it, which seemed to have blended with the life in himself And then the dizziness and the darkness. He must have fainted. He put his hand to his breast feeling for the horrible thing, but it was not there.

He raised his head. What was he doing here on the couch at the end of the operating-table? It was Caspar's body which he and Heathcote had placed there. He knew that the operation had been quite successful. The Medicine Moor's famous antiseptic—a decoction from the stalk of the banana, the secret of which that strange person had learned in his travels from South-Sea Island natives—had been applied. Marillier was satisfied; he had never known dangerous complications occur after its application. He remembered everything distinctly. He lifted himself into a sitting posture and stared around him, and now down on the floor beside the table. What was that he saw huddled on the tiles? A man's form—the body bent, the face lying sideways, one arm outstretched, the hand spread. He recognised the hand. He recognised the shape of the limbs—the short neck, the thick high shoulders, the massive head, the rugged profile. It was his own face, his own form, upon which he gazed!

And beside the man's form, as though it had fallen from his breast, lay the little brown thing—the root in half-human likeness—the mandrake.

A glimmering of the truth rushed upon Marillier, for if his body was lying there why was he conscious of lying here? Why should he be on the couch beside the operating-table. What was that? And if that were his own body, who was this?

He looked along the space beyond the drawn, glass partitions and straight into a mirror fixed between the windows at the further end of the consulting-room. Reflected duskily, but with sufficient distinctness, he saw himself—no, not

himself, but Caspar.

That which had contained his soul lay lifeless on the ground, but the body of Caspar lived, and he lived in it. He had longed to be Caspar, and ho!—he was Caspar! The magical properties of the mandrake had been proved; the Pacha's prophecy was verified; the hour and the opportunity had come.

His desire had been granted. He had wrested from Nature the great secret. By the force of Love and Will, he had made himself master of his fate; and he might now control, not his own destiny alone, but that of the woman he loved.

Chapter XIV

FRIEND AND LOVER

One thought rose uppermost in Marillier's mind when he realised the extraordinary transformation which had taken place. It was that Rachel must be spared if possible the shock of learning simultaneously the accident to her lover and the death of her friend.

He had already taken some precautions, having at the cemetery gates instructed the secretaries and some members of the Embassy household to keep from Mademoiselle Isàdas news of the mishap to Ruel Bey, and of the injured man's conveyance to his own house until he should be able to satisfy himself as to the extent of the mischief. He told them that, later on, he would personally report at the Embassy. Little did he think at the moment what would be the nature of the report. Yet, on the surface, the explanation would be comparatively easy. He would go to the Embassy, not as Doctor Marillier, but as Ruel Bey, and there he would tell Rachel and the members of the staff that an operation had been performed—to this Heathcote, the assistant, would bear testimony—and that when restoring the patient to consciousness after the administration of the anæsthetic, Doctor Marillier had been by some unaccountable accident overcome by fumes of chloroform, and had fallen in a syncope which proved fatal. The natural inference would be that Marillier was a victim to half-suspected heart disease. He himself remembered that incident at the Embassy a short time back, when both Rachel and Ruel Bey showed alarm at his apparent indisposition, and Caspar had taxed him with overworking a weak heart, and had made him drink the liqueur as a restorative. Rachel would no doubt recall that episode, and would accept the theory of heart disease without a question.

But now he must act. There was no time to be lost. Heathcote would be returning presently, and on medical grounds, would oppose his purpose. Weakened though his body was by the operation and consequent nervous shock, the transferred vitality from a frame comparatively healthy enabled Marillier to collect his energies and to rise from the couch. He looked at the hunched-up form which had been himself, with a mixture of emotions. But here his training in self-control stood him in good stead; and among these familiar surroundings of his late personality he was Lucien Marillier the physician, rather than Caspar Ruel,

of whose physique and temperament he was becoming vaguely conscious.

He knew that, later on, this consciousness might prove bewildering. At present the grim necessity of the situation caused him to rise above it. He at once felt the desirability of concealing the mandrake which lay a few inches from the prostrate form. Taking it up reluctantly, and with an involuntary shudder lest the little brown tentacle might again close round his finger, he replaced it in its box. But the root was once more flabby and pulseless. Seeing that it showed no sign of movement, and remembering the Pacha's belief that only with the extinction of his own life would that of the mandrake return to itself, Marillier wondered if the mandrake's force had indeed been again poured forth for the benefit of its new owner, or whether it had been wholly expended upon the magical deed just accomplished. He gave himself, however, no further time for speculation. An impulse of loathing made him spread the coverlet hastily over the grotesquely-human shape, and snap the lid of the box with a feeling that he could never again desire to open it. He locked the box up carefully in one of the oak bureaus. Then he made some steps forward into the consulting-room, and glancing up, beheld his bandaged head and disordered figure in the mirror which had first reflected him as Ruel Bey. The sight brought to him still more the reality of the situation. He rang the bell, and in a minute his servant, who, cautioned by Heathcote, was on the watch, answered the summons. The man stared as though a ghost were risen before him, for he beheld, as he thought, standing there confronting him, Ruel Bey, whom he had last seen carried in a state of unconsciousness into the surgery, and upon whom he knew an operation of more or less serious nature had been performed. Marillier pointed to the operating-room, and to the dead body huddled upon the floor. He could scarcely speak. When he did so, his voice was husky with agitation and he clutched at the mantel for support. While he was trying to explain what had happened, Heathcote, who had hurried back from his professional visit, turned the handle of the door, and at sight of the man whom he had left, as he believed, motionless upon the couch, drew back also as though he beheld a ghost.

'You see,' Marillier stammered, 'I awoke...That is what I found.'

Heathcote gave an exclamation of horror as he looked in the direction which was indicated by the outstretched hand of, as it appeared, Ruel Bey.

'What is it?' he cried. 'What has happened?'

‘See for yourself. He is dead.’

‘But how—how? It is impossible.’

‘I cannot tell you how. I must go to the Embassy. I must break this horrible news. Have the kindness to order the carriage at once.’

‘You cannot go to the Embassy,’ said Heathcote.

‘It would be endangering your life.’

Marillier laughed strangely, and pointed impatiently to the form on the tiled floor.

‘Attend to him. That is your business. Let me attend to mine. I tell you that I must go.’

Heathcote, too horrified to expostulate further rushed to the body of his friend and began to make unavailing efforts for its revival.

‘Order the carriage at once,’ repeated Marillier to the butler.

‘The carriage is waiting, sir,’ replied the man. ‘It brought back Mr Heathcote.’

Marillier hurriedly adjusted his dress, the man assisting him. He was as pale as a corpse; a bandage still swathed his head, and the uniform he wore was tumbled and awry. He was then helped out of the consulting-room, got into the brougham, and calling to the coachman, ‘The Abarian Embassy—quick!’ was driven rapidly the short distance which lay between it and Harley Street.

Rachel Isàdas sat alone in the inner reception-room before a blazing fire. Nurse Dalison had gone out, and she had come to this room in the half hope, half fear that Caspar might find her there on his return from the funeral. The afternoon was cold, and the desolation in her heart made her feel still colder. She leaned forward in her big chair, hugging the warmth. The blazing logs brought her a dull sense of comfort and cheer, as the flames danced in the mirror behind her and on the polished furniture, shedding an illusory glow on her pale face. But they only seemed to make her eyes sadder and her slim, black-clad form more pathetic and childish.

Her mind was full of strange forebodings. She was thinking now of her last interview with Caspar; indeed, there had been scarcely a moment when she had not thought of it. She had then intuitively felt something in Caspar which she did not understand, and which faintly revolted her; this she was forced to acknowledge to herself, and yet, in spite of the feeling, Caspar formed the sum of her future. Without Caspar, she could make no plan of existence—nay, she would hardly care to exist. In a few days at latest, she must decide whether to accept or to refuse his proposition—one from which she instinctively shrank, but which she dared not decline. Her own forlornness oppressed her. She had no one to whom she could turn for advice; and though she longed to consult Marillier, Caspar had expressly forbidden her to mention the matter to his cousin. Even without that prohibition, she felt that it would be difficult in this instance to confide in Marillier. For her age, she was extraordinarily simple-minded and unworldly, this convent—bred girl, but her woman's instinct stirred and cautioned her. Marillier was her friend; he had vowed to befriend her if need be; but there were some things one could not speak of to the closest friend, and this was one of them. It was her secret and Caspar's. Her face burned as she remembered that Marillier had seen her almost in Caspar's embrace, and that seemed to make confidence still more impossible. Besides, Caspar had bidden her be silent, and Caspar's word was law. Nevertheless, she was puzzled by Caspar's reasoning, and, though not knowing the cause, her maiden soul rebelled against Caspar's manner of wooing. She wavered, torn with doubts which her tenderness would scarcely allow her to put into form.

There had been many carriages drawing up at the entrance to the Embassy; she heard the sound of footsteps and of opening and closing doors below, and knew that the funeral cortège must have returned, that the body of Isàdas was laid away, and that the business of the Chancellery was going on—the business of reporting the events of the day and registering the possible diplomatic significance of all that had taken place. A lull followed, broken by the drawing up of Marillier's brougham, but this Rachel did not hear, nor did the hurried explanations in the hall reach her ears, or the brief talk which took place between Marillier and Ahmed Bey, secretary next to Ruel Bey, who, in the absence of his superior, had taken command of affairs. She heard nothing, knew nothing, till footsteps sounded in the larger room beyond her—footsteps that she seemed to recognise. Then the double doors were burst open, the curtains pushed aside, and Marillier, or as he appeared to her, Caspar, her lover, stood arrested for a moment on the threshold. He was stopped by a suffocating sense of dread, and by his own eager longing, of which he was now overpoweringly conscious. Rachel turned,

half rising from her chair, the love in her face blending with some uneasiness, evoked by her recent reverie. She did not seem at first to realise that he had been hurt; he had forbidden that she should be told, and it was not now apparent, for he had made an arrangement of his fur-lined coat which the butler in Harley Street had insisted upon his putting on,—drawing up the collar about his throat so that the bandage was almost hidden, and only his white face emerged from between the fur and the fez which covered his head. As he advanced, she sprang to her feet.

‘Caspar!’ she cried, holding out her hands uncertainly, the red mounting to her brow. She felt in a vague way that something momentous had happened or was about to happen.

He came close, seized her hands and kissed them, and put his arms round her, bending his face to hers, but suddenly drew back, and bowing reverentially before her, again kissed her hand in the manner of a subject doing homage to his queen. He held her a little way from him and gazed at her with an intense devotion in which there was all the time this, to her, unwonted reverence. She did not understand it, but it seemed to her the very answer to her thoughts. Now that she was alone, unprotected, the Pacha laid in his tomb, Caspar, she thought, showed himself indeed in true knightly fashion. Womanlike, with a little laugh which had in it a glad ring, she lifted her hands and with unmistakable affection placed them upon either side of his face and laid a little kiss, light as a butterfly, upon his cheek. Then he dared to gather her close to him.

‘Dearest! Dearest! Dearest!’ The words broke from his bursting heart, in which pent-up passion mingled with humility and deep tenderness. She was his. He had won her; she was his own; he had but to prove himself worthy and he might hold her for evermore.

Heaven helping him, he vowed in his inmost soul that he would so prove himself, hallowing this shell of Caspar by the holy fire of his love, till she in her turn should learn to love him as she had never loved Caspar. At the thought his senses reeled. Long and silently their lips met. It seemed to him that the purest and sweetest yearnings of his life were fulfilled in that kiss.

Presently he put her back in the chair and knelt by her side, a strangely different wooer from the self-assured Caspar she had hitherto known.

‘Rachel,’ he said, and hesitated. It was the first time he had called her by her name, and not yet could he utter it glibly.

‘Rachel,’ he repeated, dwelling with caressing cadence on the syllables, and lowering his voice as though he were pronouncing a sacred word. ‘Rachel! Oh, what a beautiful name it is!’

The girl laughed again, moved and glad, for this new mood of his, pleased while it surprised her. She felt drawn out of her usual shrinking timidity.

‘Have you just discovered that?’ she asked, with the faintest touch of coquetry. ‘I fancied you did not care very much for my name. You have called me by so many others that were more—more—’ she paused and reddened again.

‘More—? Tell me,’ he questioned.

‘More fantastic,’ she answered shyly, and drew back, her fingers playing lightly upon his coat sleeve, half expecting, half dreading one of those accesses of fervid demonstration to which Caspar was liable. But it did not come, and she wondered whether she had done anything to displease him. She could not think that, however, seeing the great love in his eyes, the almost solemn worship expressed in his face. His extreme paleness struck her, and now she perceived the bandage he had been at pains to conceal.

‘Dear!’ she exclaimed in alarm. ‘What has happened to you?’

Marillier’s face grew graver. The critical moment had come. He hesitated.

‘I—it is nothing—only an accident.’

‘An accident!’ she cried. ‘You have been hurt?’

‘A mere tap from a horse’s hoof I am plastered up, you see. There was a crush in the fog and I fell among the carriages. They put me down in Harley Street on the way back, and Lucien—my cousin—’ he stammered confusedly. ‘Lucien Marillier doctored me.’

She noticed his confusion.

‘There is something more, Caspar—something you are hiding from me.’

‘Yes, there is something more. I don’t want to hide it from you. I came to you at once, in order that you might not hear the news suddenly. Don’t be alarmed. It is something that you will be sorry for, but it will not affect you very deeply.’

‘What do you mean? Don’t palter with me. Is it that you are more seriously hurt than you now seem to be? That would be as bad news as any you could break. But I don’t believe it’s that.’

She rose abruptly to her feet, and, putting one hand firmly on his shoulder, attempted to examine his head as well as she could, without removing the bandages, but he caught her hands and put her back in the chair.

‘My love, I assure you that my hurt is no great thing. I shall soon be all right. What I have to tell you does not concern me—personally.’

Again he hesitated. The explanation was more difficult than he had anticipated.

‘Is it someone else who has been hurt? You need not mind telling me. Nothing matters much now that I know you are safe.’

He had always underestimated her feeling for himself as Marillier, nevertheless her words gave him a stab, confirming as they did what he had been telling himself on the way to the house—that her friendship for the doctor had been of the most ordinary kind, and that the loss of Lucien Marillier would be of no great moment to her so long as Caspar remained. His mind, however, was becoming clouded. The clear gaze of her brown eyes, so soft and solicitous, seemed like a magnet drawing away his reasoning faculties. He feared that if he did not at once plunge into his story he might lose control over himself and give Rachel some inkling of the strange truth. This must be prevented, though he knew that, whatever he said, she would only think he was talking wildly, and that his brain had become disordered by his accident. He half wondered if it were the case; if the whole episode of the mandrake had not been hallucination, and involuntarily, he glanced upward, rose to his feet, and looked deliberately into the mirror above the fireplace.

No, there was no delusion. It was Caspar he beheld, not Marillier. With the certainty thus forced upon him, and the effort of rising, he became faint and staggered slightly. In spite of the physical weakness, one feeling was strong in his mind. He must frame his tale plausibly enough to secure his own position, and thus place speculation beyond question.

Rachel was frightened.

‘Oh, what is it? Tell me,’ she pleaded. ‘But you mustn’t stand there. You look so ill. My Caspar! If only Doctor Marillier were here he would know what to do; he would tell me the truth. It is no use shaking your head. I know that you must be suffering.’

‘It is nothing, nothing,’ he protested. ‘Only the shock, believe me.’

The girl gently led him to the chair in which she had been sitting.

‘Lean back here,’ she said. ‘Let me come beside you, then talk to me, talk to me, Caspar.’ She bent over him and softly caressed his hands. ‘You look better now. I don’t feel so afraid about you. And you need not mind what you say to me. I can bear anything, so long as I have you safe. Now tell me, but first let me ring for some wine; that will do you good, for you look faint.’

He checked her as she was rising.

‘No; I want nothing. And what I have to tell you isn’t much after all.’ He spoke in broken sentences, making strong but jerky gasps after self-mastery. ‘You won’t mind...I was foolish to think for a moment that you would mind...As you say...you have Caspar...What does anyone else’s fate matter to you? Caspar is with you. .

Caspar can never forsake you now. .

‘Oh, my dear! my dear!’ she exclaimed. ‘You are not yourself. You speak so strangely. I know that you must have been more hurt than you will allow.’

‘No...I was kicked. I told you—’ He tried to recover himself and to speak coherently. ‘They took me to Lucien’s house—Lucien took me; he did something to my head...I was unconscious...He had given me chloroform... When I awoke it was he who was unconscious...He was lying on the floor...He had fallen, do you see?...The chloroform was spilled, I suppose, and he had a weak heart, you remember?’

Rachel stood up. She looked petrified.

‘I don’t understand. Do you mean that he—that he—? Oh! no, it can’t be that’

‘He is dead. Lucien Marillier died. He fell...he was lying huddled on the floor. There was no life in him...it was gone...and I came...I came to tell you...I was afraid...’

The girl’s eyes lost their soft look. They grew terrified and full of pain. She stood silent for a few moments, motionless, till the whole sense of what he had said, broke upon her. Then she kneeled suddenly on the ground before his chair, and with a pathetic gesture laid her head upon his knee, uttering a low moan of distress.

‘Oh, my friend! my friend! He was the best friend I ever had; so true to me. And I trusted him—I cared for him so much.’

Even in his bewildered condition Marillier’s heart thrilled with joy. She had cared for him! She might have loved him, perhaps, if there had been no Caspar. The treasure he had gained was greater far than he had hoped for. Her trust, her friendship, ay, her love, it might be, were all his. As Caspar he had won her, but it should be by the strength of Marillier that he would hold her.

He put out his hand and stroked her bent head twice or thrice. Stooping, he laid his lips upon it; the contact of her hair seemed to intoxicate him. He could feel her slender body shaken with sobs as she leaned against him. Gathering up all his strength, he put his arms round her and drew her close, holding her head back with one hand so that her face was uplifted and her eyes met his. Closer still he held her, and all the yearning in his heart found voice as in his double nature he pleaded with her.

‘Trust me, beloved. Let me be friend and lover in one. Think of me not only as Caspar who loved you for your beauty and your sweetness and for all the joy you gave him, but as Lucien too, your friend, your adorer, to whom you were as something holy, to be revered, guarded at the sacrifice of his life, at the risk of his soul. My beloved, think of me so, not as some mere light wooer, not as the gay, careless Caspar of yesterday, but as one whom you have changed into a nobler man; as one whom your love has lifted nearer to the level of yourself I swear to you, Rachel, that though as Caspar I love you, as Lucien I honour you, and as Lucien I will protect you, asking nothing in return but that which of your own sweet impulse you give freely. Dearest, forget all the wild talk of yesterday which distressed you. Forget that foolish, that ill-judged plan. You shall go with me to Paris whenever it pleases you that I shall become your husband; or you

shall stay in England and I will minister unto you at a distance if you choose. I will prove myself worthy of you; I will obey your slightest wish, your smallest scruple. No queen shall receive homage such as I will pay you, my soul's beloved, beside whose happiness, the whole world counts as nothing.' Rachel's sobs subsided. She lay in his arms against his breast with a sense of peace and happiness stealing over her such as she had never known before in all the ardour of Caspar's caresses. These, she felt, were not Caspar's kisses, and yet it was the lips of Caspar which touched her cheek. These were not the words of Caspar, yet it was Caspar's voice that uttered them. She no longer felt that instinctive shrinking which had made her dread the renewal of Caspar's entreaties; she forgot even her grief for Marillier in this new blessedness. 'You don't want me to go to Paris? You are not minding about your prospects—the appointment? You will not ask me what you asked yesterday?'

'I will ask you nothing; I have sworn it. Of your own free will you shall give me my heart's desire.'

'But you wish it, Caspar; you wish that I should be your wife? You love me... and I...I...'

'You love me? Say it, dearest.'

'I have told you that I love you, but you did not seem to wish yesterday that I should—be married to you...for a long time yet.'

She blushed deeply as she spoke, and her voice was so hesitating and so low that he could hardly hear the words. She had withdrawn from his clasp and was again kneeling on the ground before him.

He bent forward; he tried to raise her, but his strength would not permit. He would have kneeled at her feet instead of her being at his. Something of this thought burst from his lips. He could only kiss her hand, entreating her forgiveness. The plan of yesterday, had he not told her, was foolish and wicked, a wrong to her sweet maidenhood. Her instinct had rightly shrunk from it. Never more would he insult her by any such propositions. Not through him, should her life be made more difficult. He would marry her tomorrow if only she would consent. This was his heart's desire, for which, all unworthy, he waited, but yet dared not ask. For her sake, even more than for the sake of his own joy, he longed for the right to protect her; he longed to lift her beyond even the

suggestion of an equivocal position. But not at the cost of her own inclination; not—his voice failed him. He could only again mutely kiss her hands.

The girl was sobbing softly. Her whole heart went out to him more fully than ever before. She realised that a great change had come over her lover—Caspar—a change for which she could not account, of which she fancied it might be wrong of her to take advantage; some passing phase of emotion, perhaps, prompting him to an attitude that later he might regret. But she could not doubt his sincerity. Her impulse was to throw herself into his arms, to bid him take her, do with her ‘as he would, marry her now or not as he pleased. But the very change in him made her uncertain. What had caused it? And then the thought flashed across her that, perhaps, Lucien had influenced him. She had left them alone together the day before. Lucien must have overheard her talk with Caspar, and no doubt he had remonstrated with him afterwards. Now, like a sharp blow, came the realisation that Lucien was dead; that her friend, her counsellor, was gone from her. And how could she have forgotten him, even for a moment? For in listening to Caspar’s passionate pleading she had allowed herself to forget. A great compunction seized her.

‘Oh! if Doctor Marillier were here!’ she cried again. ‘My friend! My dear friend in whom I could always trust. I like to hear you say, Caspar, that in you I have him also, for indeed, as you speak to me like this, I seem to feel him in you—his noble nature, his strength and goodness—all that I cared for in him. But still you are my lover, not my friend, and you cannot judge as he could judge for yourself and for me.’

Anew, her words thrilled sweetly in Marillier’s dazed ears. He tried to reassure her, but speech died on his lips. He longed to tell her that it was only her enemy, not her friend, who had passed away, that the friend still lived in the lover, that he was himself both lover and friend. Perhaps, had not his utterance failed him, he might have spoken thus, and have earned for himself only a doubt of his sanity, for he was in no mood to weigh the wisdom of his words. Fortunately for his chances of winning Rachel, his strength was almost spent; he had no longer the power of expression, and could only murmur terms of endearment, and feebly stroke her hair.

‘I had forgotten him for the moment,’ she went on in her remorse. ‘It was heartless of me. I thought only of you, and of the joy of those dear words. If he were alive, you would now let me tell him our secret? You would not forbid me

as you did yesterday? And he would advise me for your welfare, dearest; he, who was so wise and so just, would not let me sacrifice you to myself.'

Marillier was aroused at her words, and gripped as it were his fading senses.

'Sacrifice! Oh! my love! My love! If you could know! Have I not said that you are my life? Worldly advancement is nothing to me. To hold you in my arms as my own would be worth heaven. To have the right to protect you—to give you my name—to know that you are mine, and that no power can take you from me! oh! that seems to me the height of human happiness; and if that could be now—at once—before you leave England; if I might guard you, and care for you now in your loneliness—is it impossible, Rachel? I ask only the certainty that you are legally mine, no more; for the rest I will wait. Rachel, will you marry me—as soon as it can be arranged?'

His tone, and the deep sincerity of his words uttered so haltingly, carried the girl out of herself. Her own love welled up in a tide that was irresistible. She put her arms round him and raised her lips to his. The kiss was her answer, but he would have more.

'Speak to me,' he murmured. 'My beloved, tell me that it shall be as I ask.'

'It shall be as you ask,' she replied with solemnity. 'I am yours to take when you will. I will marry you, Caspar, now—or next year—as you think best, for you are my beloved, and my heart is in your keeping.'

Their lips pressed again, and then she felt a sudden relaxation of his muscles, and his form, inert in her arms, fell back helplessly against the chair. She knew that he must have fainted, and terrified, darted to the electric bell, and sent a shrill ring echoing through the house. Then she knelt at Marillier's feet, chafing his hands and wildly kissing them, while she called upon him as Caspar in vehement entreaties that he would awake and answer her. She feared that he too was dead, and that instead of gaining in him lover and friend as he had said, she had now lost both. The entrance of the servants who came in answer to the bell scarcely checked her outburst of emotion. She had been completely unnerved by the strain of the last few weeks, and was no longer mistress of herself. In face of this new calamity, she did not care if all the world knew what were her feelings towards the unconscious man. As his betrothed wife, she thought, she surely had a right to tend him.

The room was soon a scene of prompt and anxious action. Nurse Dalison had come back, and now drew Rachel aside, and did her best to comfort her. The poor girl continued to sob out her regrets that Doctor Marillier was not there; he would have known what to do, he would have restored his cousin. But Doctor Marillier was dead, and what other doctor could she trust?

‘Mr Heathcote is here,’ said Nurse Dalison; ‘and we have sent for Doctor Carus Spencer.’

Heathcote had followed his patient to the Embassy, horrified at the risk he was running. It was Heathcote who had told Nurse Dalison, and confirmed to the secretaries the news of Marillier’s death; he was broken-hearted at the loss of his friend and master, but he felt that he had done all he could, and the dead must be left, since the living needed him more imperatively. Now, while Nurse Dalison soothed the weeping Rachel, Mr Heathcote issued rapid orders, and in a few minutes Marillier was borne to the chamber which had been Ruel Bey’s.

Chapter XV

DOCTORS DIFFER

The Abarian Embassy was thrown into a state of consternation by the accident to Ruel Bey; indeed, one might have found it somewhat demoralised for the moment, by the three disasters coming so quickly one after the other. Marillier's sudden and tragic end did not, it is true, affect the business of the Chancellery, but his relationship to the first secretary, and his frequent attendance at the Embassy during recent months, had made him seem almost a part of its staff. Besides which, from that quality of forcefulness which he possessed, the members of the household had come in a certain sense to rely upon him, and his loss, hardly yet realised, fell upon all with the shock of calamity.

The Ambassador's death had been a great event—in fact, a national event; but he had been long ill. It had been expected, and as regards practical workings, his loss was just now of less importance than the disablement of Ruel Bey. The first secretary and Chargé d'Affaires, as he now became, handled the helm deftly, and there was no one who could take his place. Ahmed Bey, the secretary next to Ruel in order of seniority, though clever, ambitious, and most eager to seize this opportunity of advancement, was young, had only lately been appointed, and was by no means capable of dealing with European and Eastern complications, or of directing here in London the difficult course of Abarian diplomacy. He was in fact more on a level with the two beneath him, and a wide gap had always been recognised between his official status and that of Caspar. He had a fearsome awe of the responsibility which now devolved upon him, and which he discussed with the secretaries below him as they talked together, wondering what would happen, how long Caspar would be ill, whether he would indeed recover. For with an injury to the brain, who could say how far permanent might be his disqualification. Ahmed Bey looked more like a Parisian dandy than a serious diplomatist; he was a dapper little man, faddish in his dress, and had an attractive face, with bright eyes and nicely-curved moustache. He thought himself very clever, and was convinced that he could impress the authorities by his ability; so, though nervous, he was pleased and excited, determined to come up first in the scramble, but in reality in great danger of ruining his prospects by some mistake arising from the ignorance of self-conceit.

They were all speculating as to who would be the new ambassador. There were rumours that the post would be conferred upon Ruel Bey, and this was not altogether pleasing to the undersecretaries, who, as was natural, were a little jealous of their brilliant colleague, and would have preferred an outsider. It was thought that this accident might possibly shake Caspar's chance of the appointment; there was a tendency among the secretaries to make much of the accident in the reports, and all were eagerly waiting the verdict of the two doctors Nurse Dalison had sent for, before committing themselves to a preliminary telegraphic announcement.

Evening was creeping on. Heathcote had done what he could for the sick man who was lying in a state of unconsciousness, from which it was considered improbable that he would revive before some hours had passed. At length, Heathcote, full of his own keener grief and deeper anxiety, went back to the house in which his dead friend lay, and where much business was awaiting him. He had concluded that the doctors, Carus Spencer and Ffolliot, the Pacha's former attendants, and as Heathcote knew, bitterly opposed to Marillier's methods—a fact which made him unwilling to meet them—would be immediately in attendance. By a coincidence, however, both were at the time engaged in a consultation in the suburbs, and could not at once be got at. They arrived late, and received only such version of the affair as Nurse Dalison had heard from the lips of Heathcote. They were astonished to hear of the death of Marillier; but, as both frankly stated, this event did not concern them so much as the condition of his patient, which was now their business. Both questioned the wisdom and the manner of the operation, and Nurse Dalison, who was devoted to Marillier, felt incensed at their comments, but could not resent them. The injury was examined, fresh dressings substituted, and it was arranged that a male attendant should be sent to watch the injured man, who remained unconscious. Till he recovered from this state of insensibility little could be done.

Before the doctors left the house Nurse Dalison requested their professional offices for Mademoiselle Isàdas, who from a fainting fit had fallen into a condition distressingly hysterical. The nurse intimated that there were emotional complications; that Ruel Bey and the Ambassador's niece were lovers, and that the poor girl had been entirely broken down by this double shock of the death of her friend Doctor Marillier and the accident to her fiancé. Mr Ffolliot was severely scientific—a surgeon—an authority on brain injuries, a man of note and also of iron, whose reputation rested mainly on his insusceptibility to sentimental considerations. Doctor Carus Spencer, on the contrary, was a type of the

sympathetic doctor, the trusted recipient of aristocratic confidences, and well acquainted with West-end medical scandals. In him the hearts of troubled wives, husbands, and fathers had their trust, and his latitudinarianism made him all the more welcome in fashionable boudoirs and bedrooms. He had heard some of the gossip about the Ambassador's niece—whom he, with the rest of the world, believed not to be his niece. The Pacha's will had been a topic of talk; the legacy to the Emperor of Abaria giving food for conjecture. Doctor Carus Spencer was not loath to attend Mademoiselle Isàdas, who had on previous occasions interested him greatly, and the love affair at which Nurse Dalison hinted, stimulated his interest. In Ruel Bey, provided that Marillier had not bungled the head injury fatally, by, as he termed it, an operation of doubtful wisdom and some quack lotion not known in European surgery, Doctor Carus Spencer scented a future ambassador, and an instrument that might be effectively wielded in his own intrigues for a baronetcy. He saw Rachel, murmured discreet words of consolation, prescribed a composing draught, and departed, leaving Nurse Dalison in command.

His visit made Rachel understand that she had betrayed, perhaps compromised herself, and, to a certain extent, it restored her self-control. Her efforts to command her nerves were pathetic. She allowed herself to be put to bed, swallowed the draught, and begged only that Nurse Dalison would from time to time let her know how Caspar progressed, and whether there was any return of consciousness. The nurse kissed her, told her all that she could of the doctor's opinion, not hiding the blame they cast on Marillier, but echoing sincerely the girl's plaint, 'Oh! if only he were here.'

It was a comfort to Rachel to know that in Nurse Dalison she had at least one whom Marillier had trusted; only she wished that the nurse had in her partisanship spoken out more boldly of the doctor who had trained her. But that was not Nurse Dalison's way. She was steady, reliable, an automaton in obedience to orders—therein had lain her claim to Marillier's confidence—a refined and entirely well-meaning woman, but she was famous for her tact, and was sufficiently diplomatic not to offend the powers of the day. Marillier was dead, she mourned him truly, won Rachel's heart by her tears—the two had wept together—but Mr Ffolliott and Doctor Carus Spencer were alive, and might in many future cases be her masters. 'My dear,' she said, 'it made my blood boil to hear our poor friend, who was a better doctor and a more skilful surgeon than all the Carus Spencers and Ffolliotts of London put together, spoken of in that way. And to call that special antiseptic of his, which is really wonderful in its effect, a

quack lotion! But what could one do?' (Nurse Dalison italicized freely.) 'Mr Heathcote will explain all about the operation, and I know that Doctor Marillier would never have done it unless he had been absolutely sure. I have no doubt whatever that it saved Ruel Bey's life. Only, of course, he would never have allowed the patient to get up and come here immediately after it. That was sheer madness, and it's just marvellous that it hasn't killed the dear man. I'm not surprised that the doctors are afraid of meningitis or cerebral hemorrhage. But now, don't you be nervous, for that isn't going to happen. I'm certain that he'll pull through all right. This isn't the only case of trephining that I've nursed for Doctor Marillier, and I know that it's his first dressing which takes away the risk of complication. I shall say nothing, but I shall go on as though I were under the orders of our dear dead friend. And, besides, my dear, we will both say our prayers. I am convinced that Providence watches over unselfish lovers. He was thinking of you, not of his own danger. Poor fellow! How I sympathise with him in his feeling that he must rush at once to you. But there's no denying that it was a terribly imprudent thing to do.' 'Oh, I ought to have seen! I ought to have known!' cried Rachel in deep self-reproach. 'I was not like him, I was thinking only of myself But he said he wasn't seriously hurt.'

'Naturally he would say so; he wouldn't want to frighten you. I think it was just beautiful of him. But one must accept the consequences of such devotion, though his indifference is his best chance of overcoming them. They are not going to end seriously, my dear; and as long as they don't you should be thankful for his self-sacrifice; it's the best guarantee he can give you of married happiness.'

She prattled on, knowing that her talk was medicine to Rachel.

'I daresay he didn't in the least realise the conditions. He must have been quite overcome by the shock of seeing his cousin lying dead at his feet—and he just risen from the operating-table. The whole story sounded too gruesome when young Heathcote told it to me. I'm so sorry for that young man. He adored Doctor Marillier, and he is full of talent himself, but just a little emotional and blind to his own interests. He shouldn't quarrel with Spencer and Ffolliott, but he will, I know he will. I wish I could warn him before he sees them tomorrow. Naturally they didn't like being turned off the Ambassador's case to give place to—Of course, I can't call dear Doctor Marillier an outsider, but we know he went through a totally different training from that of the ordinary English doctor. And then that Medicine Moor whom he thought so much of! Well, you couldn't expect a Fellow of the College of Physicians, who had never heard probably of

the Medicine Moor, to bow to his authority. He'd class him, no doubt, with Avicenna and people of that kind in the Middle Ages. In fact, you couldn't expect a conventional London physician to jump at out-of-the-way ideas—could you, now? No, dear, I think we must make allowance for the opinion of Carus Spencer and Ffolliott There is a good deal to be said on their side. And one must remember, too, that notwithstanding Doctor Marillier's treatment, the Ambassador died. That was quite in the order of Nature at his age—but still he did die.'

So Nurse Dalison contrived a special plea on both counts. She was deeply sympathetic with Heathcote, and loyal in her way to the dead Marillier, but she always prided herself upon seeing 'the other side' in matters concerning her profession. No doubt there was both justice and common sense in her attitude, but it jarred on Rachel, and did something towards strengthening her efforts at self-control. During the night, Nurse Dalison glided at intervals to Rachel's bedside. The girl awakened soon after midnight from her drug-bought doze, and lay all through the small hours waiting for the nurse's report, which was always the same—' Still unconscious.' The attendant engaged by Ffolliott was there, nourishment was given in spoonfuls and just swallowed—that was all. There was no more to be said. The same report continued during the earlier part of the next day. The doctors came in the morning, and Heathcote met them by appointment. He himself was not yet qualified as a physician, and moreover, would have objected to working with men antagonistic to his late master, and who were going against the treatment Marillier had started, and would have continued had he been alive to carry on the case. Then, too, Heathcote had never liked Ruel Bey, and beyond professional interest in the operation at which he had assisted, was not deeply concerned in the matter of his recovery. In truth, Heathcote was too bowed down by his own grief to care greatly what happened to anyone else. He told the story of the accident and of the operation at Marillier's house, dwelling upon the necessity for prompt action, which the doctors questioned. They remarked that it was strange Marillier should have undertaken so great a responsibility unfortified by another's opinion, at which Heathcote replied hotly that it had never been Doctor Marillier's habit, when sure of his ground, to fortify himself by other Opinions.

Doctor Carus Spencer observed blandly, 'It would have been safer—much safer, my dear friend, as the results have proved. But continue, pray continue.'

Heathcote asserted warmly that were any bad consequences to follow, they

would be due, not to ill judgment or inefficiency on Marillier's part, but to Ruel Bey's rash action immediately after the operation. He then related how, after it had been successfully concluded, he himself had left the surgery, and had returned to find the patient risen from the operating-table and violently insisting upon going to the Embassy, while Marillier, to his horror, lay dead upon the floor.

'And the cause of death?' put in Doctor Carus Spencer, sweetly. 'Heart failure, I understand; no doubt following upon the inhalation of chloroform during the administration of the anæsthetic. Strange—strange! No doubt there will be an inquest. My dear sir, I presume that Doctor Marillier's relatives will investigate this occurrence.'

Doctor Marillier had no relative,' replied Heathcote, 'but his cousin, Ruel Bey.'

Doctor Carus Spencer rubbed his whiskers reflectively, and Mr Ffolliott, who had been watching Heathcote with his keen eyes, listening attentively, but asking no questions, interposed,—'Our business is not so much with Doctor Marillier's unfortunate collapse and the circumstance attending it, as with its consequences and those of the operation he performed upon our patient, Ruel Bey.'

He then put some technical questions, which Heathcote answered shortly, irritated by the surgeon's impassive manner. But Doctor Carus Spencer was not so easily quenched; the social side of his profession weighed with him almost as much as the scientific, whereas Mr Ffolliott was a scientist on the hard and fast materialistic lines, and disdained social aspects. Doctor Carus Spencer expressed suave regret at the sudden extinction of a medical career which had promised to be both brilliant and useful—he weighed his words—in spite of a tendency to unprofessional methods and dangerous innovations, with which, he added, in the case of the late Ambassador, he had reluctantly and from a sense of duty, been compelled to dissociate himself. He had not believed that such methods would be successful and had not been surprised, though sincerely sorry, that the Pacha had not long survived Doctor Marillier's operation. Heathcote flared up in—hot defence of Marillier, exclaiming that what Doctor Carus Spencer called dangerous innovations and unprofessional methods had, as surely the whole faculty must acknowledge, the sanction of foreign authorities in medicine and surgery. 'Such as the recently deceased Medicine Moor, a quack on mystic lines, whose methods I have lately had the privilege of hearing something about from a gentleman whom he treated in Algeria. Astrology, I understand, played a large

part in them.' Mr Ffolliott spoke with impatient sarcasm.

Doctor Carus Spencer bristled fussily, but he was always benevolent. 'My dear friend, you are yet young in the profession, and your admiration for the late Doctor Marillier has all my sympathy. Believe me, I like and admire you for championing his unorthodox theories, but take the advice of one who, in the course of a long and varied professional career, has learned with reason to distrust modes of treatment not ratified by scientific experiment: Our late friend Doctor Marillier had genius; I am the first to acknowledge it. His genius carried him through difficulties which to others might have been insurmountable. His personal force; his enthusiastic belief in himself, enabled him to perform cures that without those aids could not have been accomplished. That leaning towards the occult, the unprovable, is the modern snare. Even Charcot and Liébault—'

But Mr Ffolliott mercilessly interrupted, and again brought his colleague back to the business in hand. The two doctors were an odd contrast to each other, each one a type in his way of the successful London healer. Carus Spencer was short, fussy, inclined to stoutness, with a thick black moustache and short black whiskers; a man of words, persuasive and conciliatory, eminently calculated to deal with nervous women, yet robust enough in speech to inspire the average man with immense confidence. He was a sportsman also, which was in his favour with men, and his August holiday was mainly devoted to grouse, which he shot on the moors of sundry aristocratic patients. A man of the world was Carus Spencer, but with a special aptitude for the domesticities. Ffolliott, on the other hand, was scientific, and nothing but scientific. Report called him a vivisectionist of a somewhat milder order than Paul Bert, and women shuddered at him. He was lean and long bodied, with a hawk nose and singularly piercing eyes. He did not talk much, but what he said was to the point, and he observed minutely, admitting nothing beyond the physical.

Heathcote left the doctors, feeling guiltily that he had failed in loyalty to the dead, and had gained no credit from the living. The patient was still insensible; it was only towards the close of the day that he lapsed into a lethargic sleep, which the doctors considered a hopeful sign, but from which he could not be roused. His attendant watched him continuously, administering nourishment at intervals, and Nurse Dalison kept an intermittent watch. There was for Rachel another night of anxious waiting, but by this time, the girl had become stronger, and was better able to hide her heart rending anxiety. Nurse Dalison, deeply pitiful and slightly curious, tried to make her talk about her engagement, adroitly alluding to

her relations with the late Pacha, commiserating her loneliness, and hinting vaguely at future plans, and the possibility of Rachel herself occupying the position of Abarian Ambassadress.

Nurse Dalison was quite in touch with the gossip of the Chancellery, and congratulated her charge on the brilliant prospects of her fiancé. The nurse's talk, sympathetic and even well-bred as it was, put Rachel on her guard, while yet she was grateful and soothed by the sense of having gained a woman friend. Nurse Dalison seemed to her a worldly replica of that Irish nun who had taught her to sing Moore's melodies with the national accent. She was quite ready to talk of the convent, of her dead counsellor Marillier, of everything but Ruel Bey—save as a patient. In that character she discussed him eagerly. She made Nurse Dalison repeat every word the doctors said when they came, and listened greedily to each scrap of news from the sickroom. After a little while, Nurse Dalison humoured her, and held her peace on other subjects; she was really fond of Rachel, and partly understood her mood. Late in the evening, she came to tell her that the sick man had recovered consciousness, but the doctors were in the room; and she hastened back, leaving the girl in an ecstasy of happiness at the bare intelligence, which as yet was all she had. When Nurse Dalison returned to Ruel Bey's chamber, the patient had just spoken, had asked where he was, and what had happened. Doctor Carus Spencer stood at the side of the bed holding Marillier's pulse, and peering through his spectacles into the sick man's face, while he reassured him as one might a frightened child. Ffolliott said nothing, but leaned over the foot of the bed, watching every movement and noting every expression that passed over Marillier's face. The surgeon's eyes were alert, interested; at the same time he was puzzled. There were one or two things in the patient's demeanour which he had not expected. Marillier's brain was dazed; he could remember nothing. He thought of himself only as Marillier, if he thought of himself at all, and could but feebly wonder why he was in this strange room, and what had caused his bodily sensations. He tried to raise himself, but became aware of his helplessness. His right hand and arm moved at first aimlessly, and then sought the seat of sensation, his head, and found that it was bandaged. A glimmering consciousness came to him of the operation he had performed upon Caspar—he did not yet realise that he was Caspar and not Marillier—and he was annoyed at discovering that the bandages were not as he himself would have arranged them. He uttered an angry exclamation and found words. Who had been meddling? Why was not the dressing as he had placed it? Here he made use of a technical expression which struck Mr Ffolliott as surprising in the mouth of Ruel Bey; it was this expression which had roused the surgeon's interest and

curiosity. But he was still silent.

Marillier asked again why had not the dressing been left as he had put it? Surely it must be evident that he had intended to guard against hemorrhage? He made some medical remarks. The surgeon and the doctor looked at each other, but did not answer him.

Doctor Cams Spencer pressed the pulse, relaxed his fingers, looked at his watch, and let the sick man's hand down gently on the bedclothes, nodding across at Ffolliott.

'Better than I expected. Rapid, of course, and slightly feverish. My dear friend, you mustn't scold the doctors. We are doing our best. You have had a nasty accident, and have been sometime unconscious, but now I am glad to say there is no danger to be apprehended. Only keep quiet; don't excite yourself. Of course the dressing is as it should be. You must have confidence in your medical attendant. I think I may say that the best skill in London is at your service. It is Mr Ffolliott himself who dressed and bandaged the wounds.'

'Ffolliott!' The sick man gave a feeble groan; it seemed almost of disgust. Mr Ffolliott bent forward.

'You prefer Doctor Marillier's style of dressing?'

The sick man stared strangely.

'Why—naturally.'

'Naturally, of course,' sweetly interposed Doctor Carus Spencer. 'He was your cousin, and no doubt you had a high opinion of his skill, as we all had. But he—unfortunately, Doctor Marillier's services are not now available. Submit yourself, dear friend, and pray allow some merit to English methods of surgery and some honour to Mr Ffolliott, who has certainly proved himself worthy of it.'

'That is nonsense,' said Marillier. 'Take off the bandage, please, and put on the old dressing. If it had been left I should not feel as I do now. I—I—' His speech became confused. He stared wildly. 'What has come over me? God! I don't know myself. Who is this? What is this?'

His brain seemed to him bursting. It was as if two floods of consciousness, of

memory, met each other, dashed against each other, mingled in confusion that was maddening. It seemed to him that he was in truth being driven mad, and a sudden frenzy of terror seized him. He tore at the bandages, and would have removed them but that Mr Ffolliott's strong arms held him down. He struggled, argued the point of treatment in scientific terms which amazed the two doctors, and finally fainted.

The doctors thought it wiser to humour the patient by re-dressing the injured part in the manner Doctor Marillier had employed. Happily they were able to do this by the aid of Nurse Dalison and of the information Heathcote had given them.

Mr Ffolliott in especial was puzzled. The sick man had objected in the coherent incisive manner of one who knew what he was talking about, not as a man in delirium, and certainly with a knowledge of medicine and surgery not to be expected in that brilliant diplomatist and man of fashion, the first secretary. They accounted for this afterwards by supposing that Caspar might, perhaps, at the beginning of his career have studied medicine with his cousin, and so have imbibed Lucien Marillier's peculiar theories. This, at least, was Carus Spencer's idea. Mr Ffolliott said little, and that little had to do with latent impressions and unused brain cells.

Chapter XVI

A SOULLESS MASK

An account of her lover's delirium was taken to Rachel, and distressed her beyond measure. Nevertheless she loved Caspar the more for what she thought his loyalty to his cousin Lucien, and blamed herself for having formerly done him injustice in some respects, for though she recognised to the full his talents in diplomacy and his many social and artistic gifts, she had not credited him with capacity for those graver interests in which Lucien Marillier delighted. She begged Nurse Dalison to go back to the sickroom and watch by Caspar's side the progress of this new development which frightened her. It seemed to Rachel, in her ignorance, almost better that he should lie unconscious than that his mind should go even temporarily astray. When, some time later, Nurse Dalison announced that the patient was quite quiet, perfectly reasonable, more satisfied, and in less discomfort since the doctors had conceded their opinion to his in the matter of dressing the wound, Rachel felt indescribable relief. She asked Nurse Dalison to tell her everything that her lover had said.

'He gave me a message for you,' replied the nurse, which should comfort you and show you that he is in complete possession of his senses. It is an extraordinary thing, my dear, how he should have known as he did about that dressing. For he was perfectly right, and dear Doctor Marillier himself couldn't have put the case more plainly. I daresay Mr Ffolliott's way is as good, but then it isn't Doctor Marillier's way, and as he trained me, it's natural I should think his way the best. I did a little more for Ruel Bey on my own responsibility, and this seemed a comfort to him. I suppose they were very intimate, the cousins? Do you know it gave me a weird feeling to hear Ruel Bey speak just as Doctor Marillier might have done. He must have known more of the doctor's work than anybody could have imagined. They were very intimate, weren't they?' she repeated.

'I don't know,' Rachel answered dully. She was not interested in the question of the dressings which appeared to have made so great an impression on the doctors and on the nurse.

'Perhaps he had some kind of accident like this in the past,' Nurse Dalison went

on, 'and Doctor Marillier may have attended him in it. And yet—but that I knew it was the voice of Ruel Bey, I could almost have declared that I heard Doctor Marillier giving me his directions. There was something quite ghostlike about it. I was glad to turn Ruel Bey's attention from himself and to speak about you.'

'You spoke of me?' Rachel exclaimed, not altogether pleased, yet longing to hear the response.

'Only a word. You must think me a very bad nurse to fancy that I could let him excite himself. Of course, I knew that he would be anxious for news of you, and that it would soothe him, so I just said that I was certain you would be glad to hear he was better, and that I was going to you in a few moments.'

'And he said—?' Rachel asked eagerly.

'He said, "That's right, nurse. Take care of her; she needs it. Don't let her be anxious. Tell her from me that I spoke truly when I told her that there was nothing seriously wrong, and that I hope in a few days to be able to see her." Those were his very words. And now I've told you everything, and you must try to sleep in peace.'

But Rachel could not sleep. In the reaction after strain and suspense, as she lay awake that night, her thoughts went back to Marillier, again with deep self-reproach that she had been so entirely occupied with her lover as to have almost forgotten her first grief at his loss. Her mind dwelt much upon her dead friend during those night hours and the succeeding days. She knew that though her anxiety upon Caspar's account had for the moment absorbed her, nevertheless the death of Marillier affected her strangely, touching her in the deepest recesses of her nature. The lack she felt was immense, and she could hardly understand why it should seem so great to her. She tried to reason with herself, to assure her aching heart that Caspar—her lover, her husband to be—still remained; and that, therefore, no other loss could make a material difference in her life, especially now that the vague doubt of Caspar had been quelled, and he had shown her in that last interview the real nobility of his character. And yet she could not help feeling that at this juncture she needed a firmer stay than Caspar could supply; she needed the counsel that Marillier would have given her. And as she pondered upon things which at various times Marillier had said to her, and which had been fortifying and elevating, there came to her a sense of inward strength and calm that seemed almost an emanation from the dead man himself, as though he were

there in the room with her, influencing her very thoughts. She fancied that it was that very influence which had enabled her to exercise some control over her emotion, and which was now helping her to quiet reflection, and to a certain acceptance of the situation, without further qualms of fear for herself or for Caspar. A little while before, she had been incapable of thinking for the best or of deciding what she should do, and she had yet been afraid of allowing Caspar's judgment to sway her against her own better counsel or what would have been Marillier's advice. She was now able to weigh different courses of action, and these resolved themselves into three. The Paris scheme, at which she still shuddered, was mercifully eliminated from the programme; but, putting that aside, she knew that she must now either marry Caspar at once as he appeared to desire, which might be detrimental to his own prospects, or she must go back to the convent, which would mean separation from him for, at any rate, some months; or—the other course which remained—she must find a home in London, it might be with Nurse Dalison, till things were more settled and her lover's future assured. This last seemed, on the whole, the most feasible plan, and she half resolved to talk to Nurse Dalison about it. It was clear that she could not long remain at the Embassy, but, for the next few days at least—till Caspar should be pronounced out of danger—there was no need for any decisive step. She dreaded only that Caspar's pleading should, as it had done at their last meeting, unnerve her and make her as straw in his hands, ready to marry him against his own interests at a moment's notice if he so wished. She determined not to be led away by the weakness of passion, but, when the time came, to do that which was wisest and best for him. Nothing could be decided till she saw Caspar again, and she would wait that meeting, relying upon the thought of her dead friend's advice, and upon the strength which, with the need, would, she knew, flow into her.

It was the day before Lucien Marillier's funeral, and Rachel sat alone in her usual place in the inner drawing-room, upon her lap a little chaplet of violets and white roses, which was to be laid in the dead man's coffin. She had made the tiny wreath with her own hands, and had woven into it her affection, her trust, her regret. It seemed so hard that this man should be taken away in the very prime of his life and in the midst of a career of usefulness; it seemed doubly hard that she should lose the only man, with the exception, perhaps, of one or two priests, upon whose goodness and honour she could absolutely rely. She remembered the talk they had had upon the first occasion of their speaking to each other, in which he had told her that to him creeds and dogmas were but as so much mummery, and that he believed only in a Force unknowable, but which

was to him the source of knowledge and strength. Could there, after all, be any better religion than that, she thought, and was that Force, which he had called unknowable, at last brought within his ken? Her musings were interrupted by the entrance of Mr Heathcote. She had heard from Nurse Dalison that he had been at the Embassy, and had sent a message begging him to come to her. At first she had felt an impulsive desire to see the face of her dead friend once again, and had wished to ask Heathcote if he would take her to Harley Street, but before he came, she had decided that the sight would be too painful. She remembered what she felt when standing beside the coffin of the late Ambassador, how the marble mask she then looked upon had not seemed to be 'Excellence,' but something wholly strange and terrifying; something which she had not since been able to forget. She resolved that she would have no such impression of Marillier, but that she would hold him in remembrance always as she had known him in life. Something of this kind she said now to Heathcote, and he told her that it was well she felt so, that he could not have advised her to follow her first impulse. When she asked if there were anything painful in the sight, any trace of suffering on the features, he hesitated, and then answered hurriedly,—'No, in cases of heart failure the end is quick and there should be no pain. He could not have suffered.'

'He looks peaceful?' she asked, the tears dropping from her eyes upon the wreath, and lying like dewdrops on the violets.

Heathcote was touched. He himself felt sad and broken. Her sympathy and her affection for Marillier were grateful to him.

'He is at peace,' the young man answered.

He then told her the arrangements for the funeral. By Doctor Marillier's wish, expressed in a letter to his lawyer, everything was to be done as quietly as possible. Lie had desired there should be no guests, with the exception of his cousin Ruel Bey, who was now, of course, unable to attend. Heathcote would therefore be the only mourner. He told her also that Doctor Marillier had left him a legacy, which was deeply gratifying to him as testifying to the regard his friend had had for him.

'It's not the money, Mademoiselle Isàdas, but to have been singled out by the noblest man that ever lived—that's something to be glad of,' said poor Heathcote, and the tears came into his eyes too as he spoke. The rest of

Marillier's property, he told Rachel, went to Ruel Bey, who would now be a comparatively rich man, and the girl remembered Lucien's words to her on the subject of her marriage with Caspar, and how he had said that it lay in his power to facilitate it, and she knew that he had considered her welfare as well as that of his cousin.

She gave the small chaplet to Heathcote, and begged him to lay it on the dead man's breast. He took it from her with emotion, and, hardly able to speak, pressed her hand, and departed. He had divined something of Marillier's feelings for Rachel Isàdas, and would have been glad had his friend's love been requited. As it was, his heart went out to the girl. He understood that she would have loved Lucien Marillier had there been no Caspar; he felt for her; he pitied her.

It was somewhat of a relief to him, when she gave him the wreath, to leave her presence, for he feared that she might ask some further questions as to the appearance of the dead man. He did not want to tell her, knowing how distressed she would be, that there was that in Marillier's face which had shocked and horrified him so much that he had not himself dared to look again upon the countenance which in life had been so dear to him. Never had he seen upon any dead face the look which was upon Marillier's, and in spite of his youth, Heathcote was familiar with death. In most cases, even after great suffering, he had noticed that there comes over the features of the dead an expression of peace and nobility, in all, a look of rest and satisfaction, as though the soul had not yet quitted its earthly tenement, but was only sleeping. This face, however, gave the impression that the soul had fled away in haste, it seemed almost in disgust. Indeed, one might fancy that this inanimate shell had been built for the habitation of a soul and that the soul had refused to possess it. It looked as though it had never been human, or, if so, as though the spiritual element had been so entirely withdrawn from it as to leave a mere wrinkled and discarded envelope. The visage had contracted; everywhere it was pinched and lessened. About the mouth were furrows which gave it an unpleasant expression, while the brows were bent and the features twisted, suggesting a struggle at the moment of dissolution not in accordance with the usual medical theory. Marillier's young colleague had shuddered at the sight of this dead face. He had so admired the man, had so revered his great qualities, and it seemed to him only fitting that now, when life was gone, the countenance should show an unusual grandeur and serenity. It was therefore with a shrinking reluctance that he entered the death-chamber in order that he might fulfil Rachel's commission. He laid the wreath upon the dead man's breast as she wished, and folded the stiff hands across it, so

that he seemed to be clasping it to his heart, where Heathcote knew that Marillier would have desired Rachel's gift to lie.

Heathcote did not lift the face-cloth. He could not bear to look again, but as he was leaving the room, some impulse made him turn back, step fearfully to the side of the coffin, and lift a corner of the covering. Then it seemed to him that the face had softened and smoothed itself, and when he drew aside the cambric he found that this was indeed the case. The features had settled into shape, the furrows were not now deeply indented; the whole face had filled out, and though still a soulless mask, it was peaceful, and no longer repulsive.

He was thankful for the impulse which had brought him back, so that his last impression of his friend might not be one of horror, and kneeling by the side of the coffin—for Heathcote was young and had not yet forgotten to pray as his mother had taught him—he commended the spirit of Lucien Marillier to the Giver of Eternal Peace.

Chapter XVII

ON FORBIDDEN GROUND

Marillier was rousing from his lethargy. After his altercation with the doctors, when the fit of prostration had passed, the confusion of his dual personality was overwhelming as he lay here in Ruel Bey's bedchamber, surrounded by the objects which had made part of Ruel Bey's life—the life of a man about town—of many towns, but which were wholly foreign to his own tastes and pursuits. Then gradually, the surging waves of double memory seemed to subside and the confusion in his brain lessened. He could now think in more definite sequence—could think as Marillier. It was true that the possession of Caspar's temperament and constitution in some degree irked him. At moments, he was galled by the pressure of unaccustomed physical limitations. At others, the spring of animal enjoyment that had been so buoyant in Caspar, brought him a feeling of strange pleasure in the mere fact of living, and in the joy of earth and its bounties, to which, as the student Marillier, he had been almost a stranger. Yet again at times, so strongly did he realise himself as Marillier, in so shadowy a fashion as Caspar, that he was obliged to look into the hand mirror which to Nurse Dalison's amusement he insisted on keeping at his bedside, in order to convince himself that he did not still occupy the body that had been known as Lucien Marillier, and which was now laid in the ground not far from that of the late Ambassador in Kensal Green Cemetery. Then, when he looked in the glass, and there gazed back at him the dark eyes of Ruel Bey, and he beheld the chiselled Greek features of Caspar, refined by sickness to almost poetic beauty, he would feel a thrill of satisfaction, even of triumph, in comparing them with that grey wolf face with its steely eyes and hard features, and with that ungainly form that had hitherto been the abode of his spirit, and which of late he had so longed to exchange for the splendour and charm of manhood which had won Rachel's love.

His desire had been granted him. He possessed now that glory of manhood which had seemed to him so great a thing in the eyes of women. And in gaining it, he seemed to have lost nothing of those intellectual gifts on which he had formerly laid far the greater store. He was still himself, Lucien Marillier, student, scientist, retaining the peculiar qualities of his own individuality, although weighted by certain material tendencies not agreeable to him, but which by his

knowledge of the physical nature of man, he was aware that he might successfully combat. On the other hand he found himself endowed with a perfection of form, a keen vitality which from his boyhood he had vainly coveted; while more than this, and the very acme of these gifts, he had, in this exchange of personalities, gained for his own the woman he adored. And this in no sense of doubtfully transferred affections, in no rivalry of persons; but given to him heart—whole, pure, in deeper trust, in more assured love, with a fuller measure indeed of all his own love could desire, than had ever been bestowed upon the expelled Caspar.

It did not then occur to him that in driving forth the spirit of Caspar he had committed a crime against Nature, a deadly wrong to a fellow human being. What did that count in comparison with the saving of Rachel from what must have been a marriage of bitter disillusion, a life of long misery?

He was able in these two or three days of quietude and of slow recovery of his faculties, to reason out the situation, to weigh its practical bearings, and to decide more or less definitely how to meet it. He, of course, realised that to Ruel Bey's reputation and brilliant prospects as a diplomatist he now added Doctor Marillier's fortune, and liberty to choose such a manner of life as might please him. He also realised that it was impossible he could carry out Caspar's diplomatic career, and that in self-preservation he must before long resign his post. But this consideration did not for the moment trouble him greatly: it was a mere detail in the whole. And meanwhile, his illness gave him breathing space. At the back of his mind, however, there was always an uneasy dread as to what might be the attitude of the Emperor of Abaria when that potentate became aware of his relationship to Mademoiselle Isàdas. Would the Emperor sanction his marriage with Rachel? And if not, what then? Abaria was a far country, in another continent, where the life of even an English subject would count for little. And Marillier reminded himself that he was now not an English subject. He was no longer Lucien Marillier, but Ruel Bey. At this very moment he lay in his bed under the Abarian flag and in Abarian territory. He might expect at any hour an Imperial mandate which he would be compelled to obey. Certainly the mission confided to him by Isàdas Pacha had been confided to him as Lucien Marillier, but as Ruel Bey he must perform it. He must take the Pacha's letter to the Emperor of Abaria, unless indeed he sent it by a trustworthy messenger, and that would not have seemed to him the due fulfilling of his contract. Who could say how far, in Abaria, the person of an Abarian subject obnoxious to the Emperor would be safe from harm? The Emperor was an absolute monarch.

Death or imprisonment might await the unfortunate envoy in the Abarian capital. In any case there would be a strong probability of his separation from Rachel. Then to what end this avatar? To what purpose the magic of the mandrake?

He pondered these things as carefully as his weakened brain permitted, comforting himself with the reflection that for the present, the matter was in his own hands, and the Pacha's letter, secure in Marillier's iron safe in Harley Street, was awaiting his recovery to be dealt with by him as sole executor of the will he had made as Lucien Marillier only a few weeks previously, and in which he appointed Ruel Bey his heir and the administrator of his last behests. Till the time came for action, he thought, he need only concern himself with the restoration of his bodily strength, which would enable him to arrange all things for the best. He did not know of the duplicate letter entrusted by the Pacha on the night of his death to Akbar. He did not know that already Akbar had started from Abaria with the mandate of the Emperor. Marillier's heart was full of anticipation of seeing Rachel again as soon as the doctors would allow him to rise from his bed. Till then, all excitement was forbidden, and he could only appease his longing by delicious foretastes, in fancy, of the joy in store, by the remembrance of her sweet conformity to his wish at their last interview, and by the imaginary pressure of her lips upon his, a fancy which at times seemed almost a present actuality. He lived over and over again in the memory of those blissful moments, in the rapture of that embrace—the one vivid reality standing out from the wild confusion of his fading senses which had been merged in the long stupor of insensibility.

To the doctors he was now quietly submissive, and though Mr Ffolliott had made notes of that strange awakening to consciousness and the starting into action, as he believed, of latent brain impressions unconsciously imbibed, the surgeon had no further ground for comment upon this physiological and psychological phenomenon. Marillier was quite aware that in order to hasten his recovery, he had better make no more objections to the doctors' treatment, but keep still and trust to Nature, the great healer, though he was in the mood in which he would allow nothing to the credit of accepted methods. The doctors were pleased. He was improving sooner than they had supposed likely, and his response to their treatment was an argument in favour of their previous position towards the Ambassador's case. The Lancet was enriched by an article from Mr Ffolliott's pen, and by a letter from Doctor Carus Spencer, both of which compositions added to the reputation of those eminent specialists.

The day had come on which Marillier was allowed to see Rachel for the first time since his collapse. He was dressed, and sitting up in a big armchair by the fire, awaiting her arrival. The room, gaily decked with flowers, had more the appearance of a sitting room than a bedroom, a curtained alcove at one end containing the bed, while the more spacious portion had a writing—table and sundry bits of rather valuable furniture, the private property of Ruel Bey. A pair of prize fencing foils, an arrangement of Eastern weapons, a collection of Japanese ivories and Chinese snuff-bottles, and some photographs of Parisian theatrical beauties adorned the walls. There was also a bookcase filled with French novels. The photographs struck Marillier disagreeably. He felt it a sort of insult to Rachel that her eyes should be greeted by the pictures of women whom a man would not be willing to introduce to his wife; he regretted that he had not noticed them sooner, and resolved that as soon as possible, the photographs should be taken down. He had a half idea of calling Nurse Dalison and bidding her remove them, but he was too weak and uncertain in body and brain even for this slight effort of will. Thoughts of various kinds surged in his mind and afflicted him with nervous doubt, making him fearful of happenings that he could hardly put into shape. The thought of Rachel's connection with the Emperor of Abaria was uppermost, and a vague wonder how far as an honourable man, bound by his knowledge of that connection, he was justified in renewing his entreaty that she would give him the legal right to protect her.

But the image of himself as her protector, and the blissful visions it evoked of a future in which they could not be separated, turned the course of his imaginings, soothed his tremors, and gave him a feeling of warmth, of confidence in himself, and of returning will-force and vitality. That sense of possession of her, of fate defied and conquered had all through his illness been as a talisman towards his recovery. Whenever he pictured her as his own, the joy of a wondrous hope stirred in him, nay, more than a hope, a certainty. And this stirring of his being, was not the mere natural pleasure in living which comes to the convalescent, investing the common place acts of eating, drinking, moving, with new satisfaction, and imparting a fresh interest to ordinary sights, sounds and occupations; it was something much keener and more thrilling, a new birth into a hitherto unknown world of love and happiness which Rachel's kiss had been the key.

Intoxicated by this mental image of her, he lay back in an ecstasy of anticipation, and all disturbing considerations were swept away in a flood of rapture, to which, in his state of bodily weakness, reason offered no resistance.

A gleam of wintry sunshine coming in through the curtained window, seemed to unite with the redder glow of the fire and to bathe him in warmth and joy. The scent of violets, and the faint odour from a vase of pale tangled chrysanthemums arranged by Rachel herself, and sent by her to him, pervaded the warm glow, and were as the breath of that glorious new life she was bringing to him. He seemed to see in the sun rays her soft, dark eyes, no longer with their indefinable expression of melancholy, but beaming with happiness and heavenly tenderness. Was she coming? Surely it was time; and was not that the distant fall of her footstep in the corridor? A few moments now and the vision which haunted his dreams, waking and sleeping, would stand before him in flesh and blood reality.

Suddenly, through the glow and the sweetness, he became conscious of a strange chill. It seemed to creep upwards from his feet to his heart, and clutch him there as though something cold, clammy, and of evil intent, had crawled up and put damp claws upon him. He shuddered and shrank back in his chair, glancing uneasily about him, knowing that he would see nothing, but with the dim feeling of a presence supernatural and loathsome. He did his best to shake off the chill and the uncanny foreboding, and bent closer to the fire, the heat from which he could feel upon his hands and face, though it made no difference in the clammy sensation within him. His medical understanding told him that it was a passing faintness, the effect of unusual excitement and exertion, and he put out his hand for a cordial Nurse Dalison had left upon a table beside him. He swallowed the draught, and was comforted by the fire of it, as it coursed through his veins. He leaned back against the cushions with a gasp of relief, and his eyes turned to the door by which he knew Rachel would enter.

And now again there came that horrible sensation of a presence near him which it was impossible to analyse. He tried to combat it with his reason. He looked deliberately across the intervening space between his chair and the door, assuring himself that nothing was there but the carpet, nothing but the portière stretched across the entrance, tight against the door. He could see where the handle protruded at the side beyond its folds, the catch of the lock, and the rim of felt protecting the crack so that no air should enter. But though he knew that the door was tightly closed he could have fancied that no solid barrier existed, for the edge of the curtain stirred; the folds seemed to ripple, and—strangest fancy of all—he had a conviction that someone—something—stood there, barring the opening against Rachel's passing.

He struggled with all his might against the supernatural dread—for he felt that it

was supernatural. Another draught of the cordial and his nervous shivering was stilled; this, he told himself, was only the weakness of an invalid, only the reaction from intense longing. What force, dead or living, could now keep Rachel from him if he chose to take her for his own, and to defy the only authority by which she could be snatched away—that of her father, the Emperor of Abaria? As for supernatural powers—those invisible agencies of which the Pacha had talked to him—why should he fear them now? Had he not, by the might of his love, proved himself their master? And even admitting that gruesome possibility of the dead hand stretched forth to injure—he laughed aloud quaveringly at the notion—he, Marillier, secure in his occupation of the living body of Caspar, could have nothing to fear from any wandering spirit banished justly to the world of shades. It was absurd to suppose that a ghost could deprive him of Rachel's love. That was his in very fact, inalienably, for he could never do anything that would cause him to forfeit it; and in a few moments she would be with him; her kiss would again have ratified his right. Of her own free will she had given herself to him; she was coming straight to his arms—to his heart. Nothing could hinder her—no one, nothing. Besides, he told himself that there was nothing there; he knew there was nothing; he repeated the words. Yet, all the same, the curtain seemed to stir, the ghostly chill crept closer. He leaned forward, his hands on the arms of his chair, his eyes nailed to the door, waiting—he knew not for what. A footfall sounded. The handle was turned very gently; the curtain swung slowly backward.

Marillier's heart leaped to his throat. The aperture of the door widened, and there, on the threshold, stood Rachel, hesitating, yet eager, timid, anxious, most graciously sweet.

She moved shyly forward. He tried to rise, but sank back, overcome by weakness; and she, alarmed, put up her hand, forbidding him by an imperative gesture. Marillier made no further attempt to get up, but held out his arms as he sat, welcoming, beseeching. And, as he did so, he was conscious of a distinct rush of cold between himself and the girl; not a rush in the sense of a blast of air forcing its way in from without, but a gliding something—a current moving within limits, definite, and deathly chill.

Rachel also felt the icy breath; she shivered slightly and glanced round, all anxiety for him, exclaiming that she ought not to have let in the draught.

'I don't know where it can come from,' she said, not ill-pleased to hide her

agitation under a certain commonplace fussiness. ‘We have been so careful to keep the pipes in the corridor at an even temperature.’

She went back and closed the door carefully. Then, seeing his arms still extended, and fearful lest the least exertion should fatigue him, she broke through conventional restraints, and pressed forward, a wonderful lovelight shining in her eyes, her face tremulous with glad emotion. She kneeled on the footstool at his feet, threw her own arms up around his neck and was enfolded in his embrace, the two clasping each other breast to breast. Now, all shyness gone, she lifted her face to his and kissed him. For several minutes they remained thus locked together; and, as he held her, warm, living, loving, to his heart, the icy clutch seemed to drop away, and the grave—like coldness to melt beneath this glow of life and happiness.

Presently she withdrew her arms and sat on the footstool, her hands in his, her head against the arm of his chair, looking up at him with something of the solicitude of a mother for her sick child. She would not let him talk, but softly babbled, scarcely knowing what she said.

‘Dearest, I mustn’t tire you. I may only stay a short quarter of an hour, and I must not let you excite yourself one little bit. So do not speak. Just be still and listen to me. Oh, if you knew how many promises I had to make before I could get leave to come to-day! I could have managed Doctor Carus Spencer, who is a kind old thing in his way, but it was that ogre Mr Ffolliott who was so difficult to deal with. Is he married, do you know? Has he ever been in love? Can he understand how it feels to have nearly lost the being you loved best on earth, and then to know that he is only a few paces from you, and to be forbidden to see him? No, I’m certain Mr Ffolliott could never have been in love, unless it was with a skeleton. He talked of “an abnormal condition of the brain.” What does that mean? And of an interesting physiological problem and of the danger of cerebral excitement—all to prevent me from coming to you. Oh, my dear, can it be dangerous to feel happy? Isn’t it satisfying, soothing—altogether beautiful to know that we are together again—we two; to know that Fate hasn’t dared to separate us, and that though death has been near, and has tried to divide us, it was powerless to keep us apart?’

He snatched at her words.

‘Yes, you are right. Death has been powerless—death shall be powerless to

separate us. Nothing, no one, on earth or in Purgatory shall be able to hold us asunder.'

'Why do you say "in Purgatory" in that strange way? I did not think you believed in Purgatory; you always said you did not. Ah! if Excellence were here, he would not wish to part us; and your cousin Lucien—oh, Caspar, I mourn him more and more everyday. He was too good to remain in Purgatory; he has gone straight to heaven.'

'You think so, Rachel? You believe that Lucien Marillier was good? Yes,' he added, not waiting for her to answer, 'there was one thing in Lucien which was all good, and that was his love for you. And I too, my dear, whatever evil may lie in my nature, and there has been, there is much evil—be sure of this, that the one thing which uplifts and redeems me, is my love for you. Trust in it, beloved. Never doubt its unselfishness, its purity—no matter what appearance be against me. Know—and this is very truth—that my love would always put your honour, your happiness, far, far above its own joy. Tell me—tell me—for I have not in the past justified your complete trust in me—tell me that you believe this.'

'I do believe it, Caspar. I believe it now absolutely. I trust you implicitly. I did not, I confess, quite trust you in time past. I was afraid, a little afraid, dear. I was miserable that day after you left me—that day before the Pacha's funeral—before Lucien died.' She spoke haltingly, half in deprecation, her upraised eyes wet, but shining with a beautiful confidence.

'Poor Lucien!' she went on sadly, and her face became graver. 'I can't realise that he is dead. His presence and his influence seem to have been with me all through these dreadful days, keeping me from breaking down altogether.'

'He was with you,' said Marillier, solemnly.

'You believe that?' she answered wonderingly. 'I did not expect that you would have the same feeling; and I am glad, for it has been so strong in me. It's very strange. And there's something else, too, that is strange,' she added. 'Dear, don't think I am fanciful, but it has seemed to me that Lucien's spirit has affected you as well, that it has made you more serious, more loving—in the best way of loving. You say things sometimes so like what he would have said. It is as though in dying, he had left you a part of his own nature—that steadfast part which made me trust him as I did. It was that part—oh, Caspar, I must say it—'

and don't mind, for the thought has passed now entirely—it was that part of him I always wanted so to find in you.'

She paused, at once startled and reassured by the look in his face.

'Don't mind, dearest,' she repeated hastily, fearing that she had wounded him. 'You mustn't mind, for now there could never come a shadow of doubt over my love for you. And you mustn't think, either, that I did not love you wholly then. I did, oh, I did love you. But everything was different, in a curious way. I can't understand why. Perhaps it is that death so near us and all this sorrow and illness passing over us, have brought more of self-reliance and truer knowledge to us both. Do you understand how I feel?'

He raised her hand passionately to his lips.

'Do I understand?' he exclaimed. 'Oh! pure, sweet soul, Heaven pardon me that I ever failed in understanding. Do I not understand? Yes, to the very core of me. Go on feeling like that, Rachel. It's what I most fervently desire in you. Think of me, if you can, as having for you all that you valued in Lucien, and all the man's passion fervent as ever, which met and answered your tender love, in Caspar. I ask no better blending, no surer guarantee of happiness in the years before us.' Moved by his heartfelt sincerity, and even a little awed by it, she could only silently caress his fingers, and lay them against her cheek in a manner infinitely sweet and pathetic. She was a little alarmed too by the quaver in his voice, for Nurse Dalison had so impressed upon her that she must be careful not to agitate him. She watched his face anxiously, every now and then pressing her hand upon his forehead and drawing down her fingers over his temples in a gentle, soothing movement. It felt to him like the touch of an angel, counteracting that malignant unseen influence of which he was all—the time vaguely conscious, and which seemed to be sapping away the strength and chilling the warmth he had gained in their first long embrace. He was too weak to talk much, but lay back with one arm upon her shoulder, joying in the sight of her, and saying just a word here and there, that made the harmony of their communion more perfect, if that were possible. They spoke of the unity between them, spiritual and physical, and in truth, never till now had she realised the bliss of it. The cup of her happiness was filled by his presence; there were no barriers; the two seemed absolutely one. He had no thought of playing a part to her now; there was no need for him to simulate the manner of Caspar, for in this wholly satisfying lover, she forgot the Caspar she had known. As she yearned over him for his bodily weakness, Rachel

felt herself entranced more and more by those qualities she had admired most in Marillier. She forgot too that time was passing; the quarter of an hour had gone by, and they were still close together, she at his feet, her arm around him, their left hands clasped, and he drinking in her sweetness and drawing into his being the living warmth of her affection. But now, through that warmth he experienced the former sensation—at first slight, then increasing to troublous uneasiness. He felt once more the same cold wind, this time blowing upon their joined hands, and was aware again of that baleful influence. She shivered, falling suddenly silent, and he felt the shiver and her silence to be the confirmation of his own unexplained dread.

‘What is the matter?’ he asked, longing for the sound of her voice, yet half afraid of her answer.

She laughed nervously.

‘I don’t know. It’s nothing—the kind of creepy feeling one gets when, as they say, something is passing over one’s grave. There really is a draught; and yet I don’t know where it can come from; the door is tightly shut. I’ll speak about having a thicker curtain.’

He glanced over her head at the door. He could see nothing, nothing but the carpet and the folds of the curtain, and yet he knew that a presence was there; he knew that again the portière was stirred as by an invisible hand. This time the sensation became more definite. Icy fingers seemed to clutch at his heart, sending the lifeblood from it, and horror transfixed him, for the dreaded presence came nearer, seeming to interpose between himself and the girl, who had instinctively removed her arm, and was now less close to his side. He felt as though she were being snatched away by that malignant thing; her face seemed to recede, the lovelight in her eyes to grow dim. He tried to put out his arms to draw her nearer, to thrust away the supernatural enemy, but he could not move a limb; even his lips were bound. With a great effort, he called her name twice in accents of agony. ‘Rachel! Rachel!’

She started, and rose, clasping him in her arms again, imploring him, while she bent over him, to tell her if he were ill. With the recovered sense of her nearness, the deadly clamminess became less overpowering. He feebly gripped her arm, crying to her like a child not to leave him, and then sank back, his form seeming to crumble among the cushions. Thoroughly frightened, Rachel relinquished her

hold, though he half consciously strove to retain her. She ran to the bell, and in a moment, Nurse Dalison, who had been on the watch outside, appeared, calm, brisk, cheerful, her face and voice and matter-of-fact ministrations changing the morbid atmosphere of the room into one more healthy, and at once acting as a restorative to the sick man.

‘Don’t be frightened, dear Rachel,’ she said to the trembling girl. ‘It is nothing but a little faintness—just what I expected. I was on the point of coming in to tell you that you had overstayed your time. He’ll be all right presently.’

She stood before Marillier, fanning him, and giving him small doses of brandy at intervals, till he came quite to himself, at first with a slow shuddering, and then, a look of intense relief at sight of the nurse’s face and sound of her purring platitudes.

‘Now I think you must go,’ she said to Rachel. ‘You had better not excite him with another word. Tomorrow, if he goes on all right, you shall come again. I’ve got to reckon with Mr Ffolliott, remember, and he has no sympathy with sentiment.’

Rachel, feeling guiltily that she had injured her lover, was moving away miserably, but Marillier put out his hand and feebly called her back, holding her for a moment or two by his side. The presence of the nurse gave him strength and a feeling of protection. The third person living seemed to have driven away the third person who was dead.

‘I am so grieved,’ Rachel cried. ‘Forgive me, forgive me. It is my fault. I ought to have left you sooner. I’ve done you harm.’

‘No, not your fault,’ he said faintly. ‘You couldn’t do me harm. Think no more of this attack. I frightened you unnecessarily. I ought to have learned by this time, what a first day of sitting up means, and have fortified myself sooner against the faintness.’

‘Really, Ruel Bey,’ exclaimed Nurse Dalison, ‘you talk as if you were the doctor and not the patient. How should you have known that you were almost certain to get faint the first day of sitting up? You haven’t been ill so many times. Now, Mademoiselle Isàdas,’ she added, with mock severity, ‘there mustn’t be any more dallying. Leave him to me and I’ll get him back to bed. You shall come tomorrow.’

‘Yes, tomorrow,’ repeated Marillier, and drawing her down, he kissed her. She lifted her face, all blushes, and went away glad. There could be no secrecy now as to their mutual relation.

The nurse settled him back in bed, and would have left him to sleep, but he made a pretext to detain her. He seemed to cling to her companionship, to dislike being left alone, and she was a little surprised at this weakness in one who had shown himself during his illness so quietly superior to the whims of sickness. Yet it was very evident that he was upset and nervous. His eyes moved uneasily hither and thither. He was ashamed of the excuses he made to prevent her going away, encouraging her to talk, pleading a fear lest the faintness should return. She, wondering, humoured his fancy, though she assured him that his pulse belied the fear. She was interested, a little inquisitive, rallied him prettily on his agitation, and would have insinuated herself into his confidence in regard to Rachel had this been possible. But when she approached that subject he became silent.

Chapter XVIII

DIPLOMATIC DIFFICULTIES

The effect on Marillier of this first meeting with Rachel, was so bad that both Mr Ffolliott and Doctor Carus Spencer forbade him to see her again for several days. Sympathetic Nurse Dalison pleaded sweetly for the engaged pair, but the surgeon only snarled in reply.

‘Ruel Bey will have plenty of opportunity to make love when his head is cured,’ said that inhuman person with a grim smile. ‘In the meanwhile he can give his heart a rest, and from all accounts I should say that the organ needs repose.’

Doctor Carus Spencer stroked his short whiskers blandly.

‘An emotional temperament, nurse; always the most difficult to deal with in cases of this sort. I wouldn’t starve it—quite—if I were you, but act with discretion. I may trust you.’

Nurse Dalison responded gratefully.

‘Yes, I am sure that I may trust you,’ the doctor proceeded. ‘I’m interested myself in this little drama which I have watched from its inception—though I never thought it would reach a practical climax. Ruel Bey cannot be judged quite by our standards; he has all the Southern fire and impressionability—outside diplomatic questions; there, I should say, would come in the Southern astuteness. He’s impressionable where pretty women are concerned. God bless me! I’ve watched him flirting dozens of times at evening parties and dinner-tables and country houses—a different lady on each occasion, and each attachment apparently more serious than the last. Yet here is Ruel Bey a bachelor still.’

‘I don’t think that he will remain a bachelor very long, doctor, if he gets well,’ said Nurse Dalison.

‘If he gets well? Why, of course he will get well. We have a chance this time; we hadn’t with the poor old Pacha, who must have been hypnotised by the Medicine Moor and our talented but somewhat eccentric friend, Doctor Marillier.’

Nurse Dalison coloured slightly and looked down, checking the impulse, which prudence forbade, to flare out in defence of Marillier. She played with the scissors hanging on her apron, and remarked only,—‘Ruel Bey is very seriously in earnest this time, doctor.’

‘Well, I am glad to hear it. She is a charming girl. Something of a mystery though. It’s odd the Ambassador didn’t leave her his money. I never should have expected that Ruel Bey would marry a penniless girl; I thought he had too keen an eye to social advantages.

‘Love works wonders, doctor,’ said Nurse Dalison. ‘Besides, I understand that Ruel Bey has inherited everything Doctor Marillier had to leave; and that must have been a good deal.’

‘Ah!’ Doctor Carus Spencer pricked up his ears. ‘I should hardly have thought so: he had only lately come into fashion. However, that has nothing to do with our patient, nurse. You understand the position?’

‘Perfectly. I may allow him to see Mademoiselle Isàdas after a day or two. He will only worry if he doesn’t.’

‘True. Yes, he may see her—only see her, mind. No rhapsodies or raptures. Remember, I trust to your discretion.’

Nurse Dalison conveyed the substance of the doctor’s remarks to Rachel, who took them to heart, and unselfishly refused the proffered indulgence. She would not come near the door of the sickroom lest her lover should be agitated by the sound of her voice or her footstep. Even when he got better and was allowed to be visited by Ahmed Bey and the other secretaries, she would not break her self-enforced rule of abstinence.

‘No, no,’ she said, ‘I can’t run the risk of hurting him again. We are not’—she blushed and faltered—‘we haven’t been engaged long enough for it to seem quite matter-of-fact and natural; there’s so much to think of—so many plans he would want to talk over, and he is not fit for it. Ahmed Bey doesn’t appeal to his emotional side,’ she added, with a little laugh, ‘and I daresay it won’t harm him to hear what is going on in the Chancellery. But I am different. And, besides, I don’t mind waiting now that I have seen him—now that I know—’ she stopped embarrassed.

‘Now that you know?’ questioned Nurse Dalison, archly. ‘Surely there could never have been any room for doubt.’

‘Of what?’ asked Rachel, a note of proud rebuke in her voice.

But Nurse Dalison, in spite of her tact, was sometimes a little unperceptive.

‘Ah! my dear,’ she returned, ‘nurses often see deeper below the surface than the doctors or even the patient’s relatives imagine. Perhaps it’s because I am so intensely human, but I can’t help feeling with my patients as well as for them. I have been here a long time, you know, and I haven’t been able to help reading something of the situation. It has unfolded itself to me like the acts of a play, and I have cared—really cared—immensely. I have so wanted my fairy prince and princess to be happy. So you must remember that, and forgive me if I seem sometimes perhaps, a little intrusive.’

The girl’s heart melted. She could only show her gratitude.

‘Now, if I may say so,’ continued Nurse Dalison, ‘it has always been my opinion that there are three Ruel Beys—the clever Ruel Bey of the Chancellery, the rather worldly Ruel Bey of drawing-rooms, and yet another Ruel Bey, whom I have only learned to know in the sickroom, and who has no ambition in the world but to be happy with the girl he loves. The three Ruel Beys may have clashed occasionally, but there is only one which is strong and real, and that is my patient.’

In spite of her sensitive pride, Rachel was pleased at the nurse’s words. So others had observed what was evident to her. Sickness, which had brought him face to face with the true realities of life, making him recognise the value of her love in his scheme of existence, had certainly wrought a great change in the once worldly and ambitious first secretary. Nor were Nurse Dalison and Mademoiselle Isàdas the only persons in the Embassy who had become aware of this fact. Various points in the demeanour of Ruel Bey puzzled his colleagues in the Chancellery and the members of the household.

Though he was still considered an invalid, it shortly became understood that all danger was past, and that before very long, the first secretary would be able to resume, at least in part, the duties of his position. The doctors, who had now ceased from daily visits, gave a qualified consent to his being consulted on any diplomatic matter with which he had been familiar, provided that his brain were

not too severely taxed. Many small questions arose, which a few words of elucidation from him would have sufficed to settle, a mere picking up of threads that he had been handling before the accident, and of which he alone knew the exact significance. The old Ruel Bey would have been eager to gather up the threads, for however selfish and indolent he might in some ways have been, the first secretary would never have allowed a question of mere personal inconvenience to interfere with opportunities of showing himself proficient in his work. It had been his habit to perform more, rather than less, of the duties required, and he had taken as much as he could of the burden of affairs off the late Ambassador's shoulders, in order, it was supposed, that he might prove his own competency for the post when it should have become vacant. In this manner he had created a great difference between himself and the other secretaries; and Ahmed Bey, notwithstanding his self-confidence, often felt himself at a loss in filling the place of so able a predecessor. Now, all were astonished at the obvious shrinking of the first secretary from the idea of work and responsibility, and at his apparent lack of interest in all the political complications he had formerly delighted in unravelling. For the hour, however, this was of no great consequence. The Ambassador's death had made a lull pending the appointment of his successor. There were as yet no instructions from Abaria, and this delay gave support to the rumour of Ruel Bey's probable promotion. Nothing could be done, of course, while he was still incapable, or considered himself so, and Ahmed Bey was, on the whole, well pleased to enjoy for a longer term his temporary importance.

Another new trait in the sick man was remarked upon by the household; this was his persistent refusal to see people who called, especially certain men friends who pressed for permission—granted by the doctors—to go up and while away with their talk the tedium of convalescence. It was so unlike the former Ruel Bey, who had enjoyed the society of men like himself and their gossip of clubs and theatres, as well as the attentions of charming young matrons in whose houses he had been a sort of tame cat, and who had been accustomed to fuss over him, bringing him flowers and fruit and gay sentimentality on the one or two occasions in the past, when influenza or a sprained ankle kept him in the house. Now he declined to see any visitors, seemed totally indifferent to his old companions, and even in some cases to have forgotten their names. The only persons he saw were Heathcote and Mr Camperdowne, his lawyer—the lawyer, be it understood, of Doctor Marillier—from whom he received much information of which he was already well aware, concerning stock, shares, and landed property making up the fortune he had bequeathed to Ruel Bey. These

details he cut short, laying more stress upon what he wished to have done in the future than upon what had been done in the past. He satisfied himself that his wishes were being carried out for the present, making particular inquiries as to the Pacha's legacy of curiosities, and desiring that the mandrake in its golden box as well as his other personal belongings should remain, so far as the valuers for probate would permit, as he had left them at the time of his physical death. To be spiritually alive and to be physically dead, so far as his former personality was concerned, was now Marillier's strange case.

Mr Camperdowne expressed surprise at the accuracy of his knowledge in these respects, but accounted for it, as the doctors had done in regard to his familiarity with medical details, on the ground of extreme intimacy between the cousins. The lawyer, not previously acquainted with Ruel Bey, had expected to find someone quite different from the quiet, reticent man who gravely conversed with him. He departed, wondering vaguely about his new client, and haunted in a curious fashion by echoes of something already known to him but which he could neither define nor explain; while Marillier, as the door closed behind the man of law, heaved a sigh of satisfaction in the thought that here he had no need to consider his part carefully, and feeling certain that he had duly maintained it.

Not so in the interview with Heathcote. In his desire to see his friend, Marillier had not calculated how trying would be the situation. Here it was so fatally easy to lapse into the old manner of talk, especially when discussing the nature of the operation he had undergone, his treatment at the hands of Ffolliott and Carus Spencer, and certain familiar topics of their former everyday life. He found it difficult to avoid asking questions as to the patients he had left, and the scientific experiments in which they had been engaged together, and was obliged to pull himself up every now and then, remembering that Caspar would have cared nothing for these things. At such times he would notice an expression of deep perplexity and pain pass over Heathcote's features. Nor was it easy for him to hide his feelings when Heathcote spoke of his gratitude to Marillier and of his appreciation of the man's noble qualities. He did not scruple in showing to Marillier's cousin, the sharer, as he thought, in his loss and devotion, that which his reticence and a sense of fitness would have forbidden him to show Marillier himself. This was more than the sick man could bear; he was obliged to plead weakness and say good-bye to his old friend, resolving within himself that he must in future avoid any serious talk with the young doctor.

He was now so much better after the relapse that there seemed no reason why

Rachel should not yield to Nurse Dalison's persuasion, fortified by permission of Doctor Carus Spencer, and see her lover for a few minutes each day; she would not allow herself more than this, and even begged Nurse Dalison to remain present, in order that neither he nor herself should be tempted to a renewal of their first emotional interview. Their intercourse, therefore, was for a little time purely conventional, though very sweet and tender, and the gladdening influence of that brief visit in which she would scarcely sit down, but would bring him the flowers she had arranged herself, disposing them about his room and chatting cheerily over the little incidents of her daily life, remained with him like an afterglow, till it was renewed on the morrow. Nevertheless, he did not attempt to combat this attitude of hers, nor did he show any desire that Nurse Dalison should relieve them of her company. There was always in his mind a vague terror of that supernatural presence whenever Rachel approached him more intimately, for it was at such moments that it affected him. Sometimes, when Nurse Dalison busied herself in the alcove, and Rachel drew near to caress his hand or drop a light kiss upon his brow, he became sensible of that strange chill in the air—that icy breath intervening between them. It was not strong enough again, however, for him to be definitely alarmed by it, and when the sun shone, the fire glowed, and the sweet scent of Rachel's flowers pervaded the room, when Nurse Dalison's pleasant platitudes and cheerful ministrations made an atmosphere of ordinary life around him, then he laughed at the gruesome fancy and assured himself that, as soon as his nerves had regained their balance, it would depart from him for ever. In spite of that, he never-cared for Nurse Dalison to be too long away from him, fore did he encourage her amiable efforts at self-effacement during Rachel's visits—at which she inwardly wondered.

An incident happened in these later days of his convalescence which disturbed Marillier considerably, and made him realise that he had set himself a more difficult part than he was able to play. He had contrived so far, to shake off any attempts of the secretaries to draw him into diplomatic business, declining to discuss such matters on the plea that his head was still confused, that he doubted his power of clear judgment, that he was sure Ahmed Bey could manage perfectly with no interference from him, and that in fact, he would much rather not be worried about the Chancellery affairs. This supineness did not altogether please the doctors, who had remarked the curious broodiness that had come over him, so greatly in contrast to the active temperament of the first secretary in so far as his diplomatic career was concerned, and they rather urged the other secretaries to do what they could to rouse his attention and dispel the tendency to listless musing; for in these days Marillier neither read or wrote, but would lie

back in his chair all day as though in a sort of opium dream.

The incident which did at last rouse him after a fashion, related to that unquiet possession of the Emperor of Abaria, formerly a subject of diplomatic difficulty, and where a massacre of Christians had now again embroiled this Eastern potentate with the European Powers. An unexpected development had caused trouble, and the previous negotiations having been conducted principally by Ruel Bey, whose former residence in that territory made him peculiarly competent to deal with the matter, it was natural that an important despatch concerning it should now be brought to him.

Ahmed Bey was not willing to consult his chief, being convinced that his own inspiration was correct; but he was overpowered by the advice of the undersecretaries, who, afraid of making a mistake, thought it wiser to lay the responsibility on the first secretary. So somewhat to his chagrin, yet with a certain inward relief, Ahmed Bey took the document to the invalid's room and asked his counsel. In the ordinary course of things Ruel Bey would have clearly seen how to deal with the emergency, would have cited precedents, disentangled complications with a lawyer-like acumen, and would finally have prepared a draft and signed the despatch. But to Ahmed's surprise, though Mr Ffolliott had pronounced his patient physically equal to any such exertion, provided that prudence were exercised, Marillier only shook his head, would hardly glance at the papers—with the bearings of which he was, of course, entirely unacquainted—and professed himself quite unequal to the strain. Ahmed Bey propounded his own view of the case in some trepidation, for he had an unpleasant inward conviction that Ruel Bey, in his former clear grasp of things, would have controverted it. His wordy explanation appeared, however, to make no impression on the first secretary, who waved it wearily away, remarking that Ahmed's solution of the difficulty seemed as good as any he could suggest. The little man went off wondering, but still more inflated with conceit; while Marillier, left alone, reflected that he must lose no time in sending in his resignation. The position was already becoming untenable; difficulties presented themselves on every side, not the least part of these, being his own hesitation as to the course he should pursue in respect to the mission confided to him by the late Ambassador, and his dislike to commit himself to an irrevocable step till he had made Rachel his own, or had at least obtained the Emperor's consent to marry her.

For three days he thought the matter over, and then-made up his mind. He knew

that the step was really compulsory upon him, both as a man of honour and for practical reasons. He determined to make known to the Emperor as soon as possible the Pacha's trust. As Marillier he could not, of course, do this, but as Ruel Bey, it would naturally have devolved upon him with his possession of the documents found in Marillier's safe. But were he to go to Abaria as the Emperor's subject—this in any case he must be—and as holding a high diplomatic post in the Emperor's service, the danger to himself must necessarily be increased. In calculating the danger, he was thinking not only of himself but of Rachel, whose happiness and security were involved in his own; for himself deprived of her, he cared nothing, but in order to ensure her safety as far as might be, it was best that he should shield himself from the Emperor's antagonism by withdrawing from his service, and so avoiding a possible official pretext for his disgrace.

When his mind was made up, the dreaminess passed, and Nurse Dalison took heart from his request that he might be allowed to move into the sitting-room of the Embassy. She had become a little concerned at his inertness, which did not seem healthy or natural now that he was able to walk about unassisted. She was glad, too, for Rachel's sake, for she had divined that the girl was uneasy also, and anxious for something to be decided about her own future. Though in her own mind she had planned out a course of action, and had, to a certain extent, taken Nurse Dalison into her confidence, Rachel did not feel able to start upon it till she knew fully her lover's wishes, which could only be when their intercourse was once more unrestrained by the irksome limitations of the sickroom. These had thrown her back somewhat upon her attitude towards the old Caspar, and she was more than ever resolved that she would give his nature free play, and allow him every opportunity for reverting to the prudential considerations that had once ruled him so firmly. Which Caspar, she wondered within herself, was the real, the permanent one? She remembered Nurse Dalison's words about the three Ruel Beys. Would the Ruel Bey of the sickroom, the man she had come to love and admire with equal intensity, have, disappeared to give place to the Ruel Bey of the Chancellery? So it was in a mood of mingled joy and fear and hope that she received Nurse Dalison's communication that her lover was up and installed in the reception-room, where, during the Pacha's time, they had so often sat together, and where she had been used to give him and Doctor Marillier their afternoon tea.

Chapter XIX

A MESSENGER FROM ABARIA

The room looked a little dreary, thought Rachel, though she had that morning decorated it herself with some flowers which had arrived from the Riviera. The sheaves of purple and pink anemones made her think of Lucien Marillier and the talk they had once had over the flower dolls she was dressing, and it seemed to her as though this man with whom she had come to talk, held them also in affectionate association, for he had drawn a bowl full of the flowers close beside him where he sat, and one hand was straying-tenderly over the blossoms. The expression of his face stirred sympathetic chords within her.

The windows looking upon the square were closed; the fire blazed brightly. It was a foggy day; the velvet curtains were drawn, and the shaded electric light made a gentle glow over the room. One, just above the portrait of the Emperor of Abaria, illuminated that monarch's face and gave life to its almond-shaped eyes and its weary smile.

Marillier was in his armchair by the fire, but he sat in it no longer in the attitude of an invalid. When Rachel entered, he came forward to meet her, and taking both her hands in his, drew her close to him and kissed her. He did not, however, hold her long in his embrace, and he shivered slightly as he released her. She fancied that his manner seemed a shade more formal, but she would not allow her own to be influenced by the impression.

'Come,' she said, leading him back to his chair, 'I don't mean to let you stand up and do rash things, though Nurse Dalison says that you are determined not to play the invalid any longer. Let me sit here beside you in the way I like, and we will talk—talk. Oh! I am hungry for talk, Caspar, after this long starvation, and I have so much to say to you.'

'I, too, have much to say to you. The time has come, Rachel, in which we must face our future and decide how to act.'

'Yes,' she answered simply. His words sounded to her sensitive ear a little cold, a little measured. But she did not know in what firm grip he was obliged to hold himself, for he dreaded an involuntary betrayal of weakness, a quiver of his

voice, the faltering of an accent. He dreaded lest his eager longing should burst bonds and he should be tempted to take from her, moved as she would be by the force of his emotion, that which honour forbade him to ask, and which he was resolved she should give only of her own unbiassed will. He dared not let her see how much he cared; he dared not appeal to her feelings—dared not hold her to her impulsive promise that she would be his when he desired her. That, he now felt, would not be worthy of an honourable man; it would be taking advantage of her ignorance, of her dependence upon him. He had no right to bind her under conditions of which she was wholly unaware. He had no right to marry her as Rachel Isàdas when he knew—and he only in the world—that she was the daughter of the Emperor of Abaria.

‘Tell me,’ he said; ‘you must have thought over the question of our marriage in this time since our last meeting—I don’t call those glimpses and snatches of talk that we have had lately, meetings. Perhaps I should say since the day of my accident when we spoke seriously of this matter—the day of the Pacha’s funeral. Tell me, Rachel—you must have come to some conclusion—what is your decision?’

‘I thought,’ she said a little stiffly, ‘that the decision rested mainly with you—at least you used to make me feel so.’

‘That is in the past,’ he answered; ‘the past which you have blotted away and forgiven, the past when I was not worthy of your love and your trust.’

She was touched, but only half convinced; she again remembered Nurse Dalison’s words.

‘People often change when they are ill,’ she said, ‘and then go back to their old ways of thought. And even if those are changed the conditions of life remain the same. You have...I have your prospects still to consider, and you always told me they would be endangered if you married me at once.’

‘I beseech you, leave my prospects out of the question. Believe me that it is of you I am thinking, not of them. I cannot explain myself now; some day you will understand.’

‘I do understand, Caspar,’ she answered gently.

‘No, you do not. You cannot; and it is impossible for me to explain.’

‘I understand you,’ she said. ‘I love you, and nothing else matters.’

‘Nothing else matters!’ he repeated. ‘And yet everything matters. Rachel,’ he went on, with a certain desperate calm, ‘do you not see that I cannot urge you—that I ought not to urge you?’

He was a little wounded by her tone in spite of her assurance of love, and he felt intuitively that she was wounded too by a restraint in him for which his passionate protestations, a short while back, had not prepared her. But he could not do anything to heal the slight hurt, for then restraint would be broken down and he would be no longer master of himself, no longer able to guard her against his own desire. ‘Do you not see,’ he said, ‘that it would be wrong of me to persuade you into a hurried marriage which you might afterwards regret. I cannot take advantage of a few wild words uttered in a moment of stress and pain. I must not press you. I dare not...’

The girl’s doubts surged back, and yet were belied by the shake in his voice, the look on his face and the longing in his eyes. She was torn and puzzled, and she too felt that the only safety for him and for herself lay in reticence. All the time, though she had harked back upon her old attitude towards her lover, as she believed he had to her, she knew in the depths of her consciousness that this was not really the old Caspar, the light wooer who had not hesitated to place her love and his worldly interests in the scale together, allowing prudence to outweigh his love. No, this man was not that Caspar. She knew it in her heart, and that heart leaped to him, as his to her. Nevertheless, a chasm lay between them which neither could cross; it was a gulf of misunderstanding, of mutually mistaken self-sacrifice. Had he taken her in his arms and made her certain of the strength and unselfishness of his love, the gulf must have been bridged and the love would have risen paramount to every other consideration. Deep down, he and she knew this, and maybe, each knew that the other knew it, and that fact prevented either from making an advance.

There was a pause, to him an agony, in which with head downcast she slowly moved her fingers along the arm of his chair, not venturing to touch his hand, and he did not dare to take hers. At last she said gently, but with a firmness he had scarcely expected from Rachel,—‘You are right, Caspar. It is for me to make the decision, and I have done so. I have thought a good deal over things these last days, and have made up my mind to what I feel is the wisest course. It would be a mistake, I am sure, to rush into marriage. I am going to stay in England with

Nurse Dalison—to leave this house as soon as possible, for you know I ought to have gone away from it before now. I have talked to her about my plans and she is quite willing to live with me for a time.’

He gave an exclamation of dismay or disapproval, she could not tell which, but she spoke on hurriedly.

‘Don’t say it won’t do. The thing is quite simple, and I am sure it is what Doctor Marillier would have approved of. He knew Nurse Dalison well, remember, and trusted her. She is very glad to come to me, and I like her better than anyone else I could have. We will go into lodgings or take a small house. Yes, I know what you are thinking,’ as he again made a gesture to stop her. ‘You think I have no money. But I never told you that the Pacha gave me a great deal of money the night he died—two thousand pounds in English notes. And he gave me, too—but never mind, I will tell you about that another time.’

He knew what was in her mind. She had glanced unconsciously at the curious emerald ring upon her finger that the Pacha had shown him—the talisman which was to win her father’s regard, and of which she had hardly thought seriously since it had been in her possession, so many more weighty matters had occupied her. And, indeed, the idea of her father in the background of her mind seemed shadowy, almost mythical; and she sometimes asked herself ‘whether, in those last hours of his life, the Pacha had been in full exercise of his faculties, or whether, as is often the case with old people near the end, he had not deluded himself with the fancy that a dead man was still living.’

Marillier had already recognised the ring on her finger, and wondered how much the Pacha had told her concerning it. Clearly, not the truth, he gleaned from her manner. He did not question her now, but only said, keeping himself heavily in check and speaking in almost colourless tones, ‘I don’t want to make objections. I think with you that Nurse Dalison is the best companion you can have at present, and that the plan is in many respects a good one, since at any hour now, you may have to leave the Embassy. It is strange that there is no news yet of the appointment of an ambassador. But, my dear, you can’t be surprised that I am looking beyond the present, and that I am asking inwardly how long you intend this state of things to last. You are my promised wife, and I cannot let you go far, or wait indefinitely to claim you.’

‘I will be your wife, Caspar, and come to you with all my heart, when there’s no

danger of my—injuring your prospects. I'll marry you as soon as ever you have received another appointment from the Emperor, which you have told me is what you 'wish and are waiting for. You have said it could not be long in coming.'

He was silent, seized by a gloomy presentiment.

'It cannot be long in coming, Caspar?' she asked again.

'I am afraid it will be very long in coming,' he answered. 'Indeed, I think it more than likely that I shall never receive another appointment from the Emperor.'

'Oh, Caspar, what do you mean? Is it because of our engagement? Has that made him angry? Oh! if it is so, I shall never forgive myself for letting it be known.'

'Foolish child!' he said, trying to soothe her quick-starting fear, yet knowing that he was only playing with words in order to gain time; 'how should the Emperor have heard of our engagement? You don't suppose that Ahmed Bey has mentioned it in the despatches?'

'I can't tell. I feel bewildered. Everything seems possible. Excellence could not have written—he did not know; you had never spoken to him. And if the Emperor did know, why should he mind? I have never been able to understand your difficulty, Caspar, especially now that I have a little money'—to poor Rachel's simple mind two thousand pounds seemed inexhaustible. 'They tell me that you will be rich now that you have inherited Doctor Marillier's fortune,' she went on. 'Caspar, you are hiding something from me. Have you offended the Emperor?'

'I have not yet offended the Emperor,' he replied, 'and I hope that I may not do so; yet I ought to tell you that it is extremely possible.'

'But why—why?' she exclaimed. 'My poor Caspar, what have you done?'

'I have done nothing, so far.'

'Then why do you say it is extremely possible that you may offend the Emperor? In what way?'

'My dearest, I can't tell you that now. It concerns a mission that I have undertaken to the Emperor, and which is a private matter.'

She concluded that the mission was of a diplomatic nature—a secret of the Chancellery—and asked no further concerning it. But suddenly it flashed across her that the mission might oblige him to leave her, and she said anxiously, but in a quiet voice,—

‘Does this mean that you must go to Abaria?’

‘Yes,’ he replied; ‘it probably means that I must go to Abaria.’

‘Will it be for long?’ she asked, and her quietude irritated his overstrained nerves.

‘I don’t know. I trust not. But all is uncertain. I have told you that this is a private matter which I cannot discuss as yet.’

He spoke almost harshly, so severely was he wrung, and his tone hurt her. The girl’s heart was sore and sad; her fortitude gave way, though outwardly she remained calm. Why was he so unlike himself, so different from either the old Caspar or the new man whom she had come to love so much more intensely? Why was he so self-contained, so cold; his voice so unemotional, as if he were repeating a lesson he had learned by rote? Could he not see that she was curbing herself only for his sake? Could he not hear her soul crying out to him to take her, to hold her, not to believe in the sincerity of her high-minded resolves? Was he so stupid as not to know that they would melt like snow under such a torrent of fiery entreaty as he had poured upon her when she had flung herself upon his breast, and had vowed to be his whenever and wherever he should claim her? She drew her hand away from his, and turned her face to the fire, slow tears gathering in her eyes and making a sparkling mist before them.

Had she looked at him then, she would have seen the anguish in his face, and would have realised that he too was tortured and torn by his passion and his sense of honour battling with each other. His duty to her; his duty to the Emperor; his duty to Isàdas Pacha, who was dead and who had trusted him—all these considerations held him back, but they mixed with other motives of different kinds, pulling him sideways, other feelings, other conclusions, that he had worked out of the tangle of thought which had led him tortuously to his determination. It had at first been almost a relief to him to hear Rachel’s decision delivered with such self-possession, for he had dreaded the temptation he was obliged to fight. Of her love he was certain, and if all went well the delay would

not deprive him of his prize, but rather assure it. Here in England, still free, she would be safer than if he were to marry her at once and take her or not take her to Abaria. For in resolving upon his resignation he had mastered the impulse to suppress the Pacha's letter and so altogether evade the trust. That, he told himself, would be an act unworthy of an honourable man. Yet he knew—so great was his weakness, so strong his desire—that had Rachel by word or manner contested the point, he would have flung honour to the winds, and would have married her gladly, salving his conscience by the plea that he was thus protecting her from a life that had driven her mother to desperation.

Rachel in the Abarian seraglio! He shuddered at the suggestion. Then his eyes fell again upon the emerald with its engraved legend, and he remembered how the Pacha had told him that this ring was a pledge from the Emperor to his wife, that he would grant any request of hers not involving their separation. But had Rachel O'Hara's flight from the Imperial harem made the promise null and void? Would the Emperor still hold himself in honour bound? Isàdas Pacha had believed so. Till the last, Isàdas held firm faith in his master's loyalty to the dead woman they had both loved. Isàdas had said that the Emperor would be true to his oath. Marillier glanced over his shoulder at the portrait which, in his fancy, dominated the scene and the situation. Yes, there was something in the refined yet firm lines of that high-bred Eastern face which confirmed the Pacha's trust and his own hope.

But there again floated through his mind all that he had heard and read of harem intrigues, of Abarian treachery, of the slow but certain demoralisation of a nature which, twenty-five years ago, might have cherished nobler ideals and finer affections, but which' was now, in European estimation, typical of everything that could be opposed to clean European morals, so that the name of the Emperor of Abaria was but another word for Oriental sensualism, Oriental tyranny, Oriental revenge. A groan burst from Marillier; he was hardly conscious of having uttered the sound, but it fell on Rachel like a lash, punishing her, as she thought, for not having considered his weak physical state. She started, turning to him in self-reproach and fear, in which she was confirmed by the deadly pallor of his face, the pain on his drawn features, and the beads of moisture upon his forehead. All her womanly tenderness was roused. She kneeled by him, wiping the damp from his brow with her little gossamer handkerchief and kissing the place where it had lain. She gave him brandy and smelling-salts, and, after a few moments, restored him from what she believed an attack of the same kind of faintness which had overcome him before, when he

had allowed his emotion to get the better of him. Even when he assured her that he was better, that he was quite well, that he had no pain—how could he describe his mental torture?—she hung over him breathing sweet solicitude, love in every look and gesture, till he could no longer restrain the passion which was tearing him, but caught her to his breast and held her locked as before within his arms, heart against heart, her lips upon his.

She could no longer doubt his love. It filled her being, it comforted her. Presently the arms unlocked; he held her a little away from him, his eyes gazed fatefully into hers where renewed faith shone as the sun at noonday. But in his eyes was a sadness—which frightened her.

‘I love you! I love you!’ she cried. ‘Tell me why you look so unhappy?’

‘Because I must leave you,’ he answered. ‘Because my very soul shrinks from the parting. Because I have a terrible dread that in going away from you, I may be cutting off from myself the power of return.’

‘Caspar, must you go?’

‘Beloved, I must do, my duty.’

‘Your duty! To the Emperor?’

‘In part,’ he answered; ‘not wholly.’

‘To whom then?’

‘To Isàdas Pacha, and to you.’

‘To me? How can I be concerned with a State mission—with the Emperor of Abaria?’

‘Do not ask me, Rachel. I cannot tell you now.’

‘Caspar,’ she cried, ‘you frighten me; you bewilder me. I have nothing to do with the Emperor, nor he with me. I am an English subject—a French—an Avaranese subject—what does it matter? but not one of the Emperor of Abaria. Excellence was an Abarian subject only because he served the Emperor; and I—I am of his blood, of his nationality, therefore of his race; and that was not the Abarian race

—merciful Heaven be thanked for it. If there be any question of money—of inheritance—Nurse Dalison told me of the talk about Excellence’s will—if in that way I am at the Emperor’s mercy, then I willingly renounce anything he could give me. Money is nothing to me—besides, I have plenty. It should be nothing to you; you have enough without it. Caspar, tell me that you would not let the question of money weigh against our love?’ ‘I could not. It would be nothing in comparison. There is no question of money.’

‘Then where lies your duty to me, since I bid you sacrifice it and stay? As for Isàdas Pacha, I don’t know what he required of you, but he could never have asked of you what would do me harm, and, if so, you had a right to refuse it. Excellence is dead, Caspar, and V am living, and even if Excellence were alive I should have the right to choose for myself—I am no child; I am of age. I will not believe that Excellence would have done me an injury, however hardly he felt towards me in life. I know that at the last he wished me to be happy.’

‘That is true,’ Marillier replied mechanically; ‘he wished you to be happy.’

‘So there remains nothing but your duty to the Emperor—your duty as an Abarian official. That’s what it comes to. You would owe none if you were not the Emperor’s paid servant. Why continue to be his servant, Caspar, if it involves danger of losing me? Am I not worth more to you than the Emperor’s favour? Resign your post and be free.’

‘I had thought of that, Rachel, but it is impossible.’

‘You are afraid of the Emperor?’

‘Yes, I am afraid of the Emperor—not for my own sake, but for the sake of someone dearer to me than myself.’

‘You mean me?’

‘Yes.’

‘But I am not afraid. The Emperor cannot touch me when I am outside the walls of the Embassy. You yourself, Caspar, have explained to me that that is international law. Why then are you afraid?’

‘It is not only because of what may happen to you, though that reason is the

strongest. There is another reason which should be stronger, but I put it second. If I did not go to Abaria and fulfil the mission I have said I would discharge, I should be a coward, not only in the ordinary sense, but to my own conscience. It would be as though a soldier, under orders, struck at going into battle. I should be false, besides, to my word given to a dead man, and I should be false in an even more personal sense—to my own code of honour. There are reasons which I cannot explain, and which weigh with me almost as strongly as my love for you. If you understood them, Rachel, you would not tempt me against myself.’

‘Then make me understand them.’

But he only shook his head in dumb pain at denying her.

‘Caspar! Trust me.’ The girl clung to him, her wet face uplifted, imploring his confidence, pleading her loneliness, her need of him. Womanlike, now that he had broken barriers and given her the full assurance of his devotion, she turned face and abandoned her attitude of self-sacrifice for his sake. A few minutes back, believing that he held the possession of herself more cheaply than the Emperor’s favour, she had placed his worldly prospects before every other consideration. Then she had been meeting the old Caspar, as she thought, on his own ground. Now that the new Caspar revealed himself she too became another woman. Fear for his safety nerved her also, more even than the thought of her love. Now she was urging him to fling his prospects to the winds; to throw up his diplomatic career. He read her mood. At another moment he would have smiled at the abrupt transition. It was illogical, but how lovably feminine! How much more difficult to resist!

‘Don’t tempt me, beloved,’ he said hoarsely, trying to put her gently from him.

‘Tell me the truth!’ she cried. ‘I know that there is something terrible behind, which you are hiding from me. I am not weak and foolish, Caspar, as I used to be. Something seems to have changed me since I have learned to know you better. I feel stronger in myself, stronger in my love for you, in yours for me, of which I am certain now. I never really knew you before. I never valued the strength and nobility of your character rightly in the old days, and perhaps it was not strange that you treated me lightly and showed me more of the worldly side of you than of your deeper self. I know you better now, my Caspar, and it is the understanding of you which makes me more worthy of you, more able to bear any misfortune that may come to us. So do not hesitate because you are afraid of

hurting me.'

She waited for him to answer, but he only stroked her hair silently, turning his face away so that she should not see the struggle upon it.

'I have a right to know,' she went on more earnestly. 'If this mission to the Emperor is not a State affair, but has to do with me as well, surely I have a right to know what it is that may threaten to separate us. Caspar, will you not tell me?'

'I cannot at present,' he said doggedly. 'Later on, you may know everything, and then you will not blame me. I beseech you, Rachel, don't press me now. Give me time—wait.'

'Till it is too late! Till that cruel tyrant has snatched my love from me, and I am left mourning and desolate. I know that the Emperor is a tyrant, and that there is neither faithfulness nor honesty in his court. It is a nest of plots for self-advancement. Oh, do you think I have not realised that it was there you learned to be worldly, Caspar, and that it was there the Pacha was taught his cynicism. It is a hotbed of cruelty. Oh, I have heard of Abarian injustice and bloodshed and oppression. It is a nursery of crime for which the Emperor is responsible—that wicked man who has allowed Christian men and women to be butchered, and has had—children torn from their mother's breasts and wives from their husband's arms. They call him the father of his people, but he is the curse of Christendom.'

'Hush! Oh, hush, my dearest! You don't know what you are saying,' he exclaimed, horrified and amazed at the intensity of feeling she showed, of which, in such a matter, he had not believed her capable.

'I speak. You yourself have told me of the atrocities and have made little of them. Do you remember how you shocked me by laughing, and saying that it was only reversing the order of the Crusades? You didn't really mean it, Caspar; I know that now. No, don't tell me not to speak. I will say anything, do anything that will save you from the Emperor's power, and make you free yourself from that bad man's 'service. But I have done now. I am waiting for you to speak. Won't you tell me what this thing is which you are afraid may separate us?'

As if in answer to her question, before Marillier could reply, the door of the room opened and the butler came in with the announcement:—

‘A messenger from Abaria, Ruel Bey, who says that he must see you immediately by order of the Emperor.’

Close behind the servant appeared Akbar.

Chapter XX

AHMED TO THE RESCUE

Akbar seemed, speaking paradoxically, an embodiment of imperturbable haste. In virtue of his office as Imperial messenger he knew not delay. Automatic diligence in the performance of duty was a requisite qualification for the post; equally so, an impassive demeanour and an inscrutable countenance. He stood behind the butler during his announcement in an attitude of arrested activity. His dark brown haik, folded cornerwise over his shoulder leaving the right arm free, gave an impression of rapid travel; his lean lithe limbs had not an ounce of superfluous flesh; his Arab face, clean-featured, of scriptural dignity, cold, save for the glowing black eyes, was a face that could be read by no man.

Akbar would not trust even the high official to whom he might be accredited, until he had proved for himself how far that official was trusted by the head of all. Whereas he had been voluble in explanation to the late Ambassador, he said no word of explanation to the first secretary. He made an obeisance deep and respectful, raised himself, and drawing from his breast a packet wrapped in silken stuff unfolded a parchment-like envelope, curiously sealed and inscribed, and touching it reverentially with his forehead, presented it to Marillier.

Ruel Bey would at once have recognised the character of the document, and would have known that it emanated from a higher source than the usual despatches. Marillier took it, not wholly at first realising its importance, and omitting the prescribed Abarian formula with which a communication of such nature was always received. This, or something in his manner, must have struck Akbar. His keen eyes searched the first secretary's face, and then travelled from Marillier to Rachel, who was discomfited by their piercing gaze.

The man spoke a word or two in the Abarian tongue which Marillier did not readily understand, and which made him alive to the position and to the fact that he had a part to play and should play it becomingly. He looked again at the document in his hand, and it was borne in upon him that the strange embossed seal securing the silken thread which bound the envelope, was the seal of that august personage the Emperor of Abaria. The sense of impending calamity, of a decree which might not be gainsaid, and that affected Rachel and himself, came

over him with overwhelming force, and yet was not quite to be accounted for, as, to the best of his knowledge, the Emperor was unaware of the existence of Rachel, except possibly as Isâdas Pacha's niece. Nevertheless, in that grim Oriental figure before him, Marillier seemed to see a messenger of Fate.

Recovering himself for a moment or two, he waved the man aside, pointing with a commanding gesture to the door, and signifying by a motion of the fingers that the messenger should wait without. Akbar made another low salaam, and withdrew, closing the door, and letting the heavy portière fall behind him.

Rachel, who had drawn back, supposing a State matter to be in question, yet unwilling to go away, the thought haunting her of that mysterious mission with which she fancied this message might be connected, watched her lover anxiously as he examined the Emperor's mandate. He himself, in the excitement caused by his dread, had forgotten for the moment her bodily presence, though the image of her in his mind goaded his fear almost to frenzy. He broke the seal, cut the silken thread, and opened out the stiff paper. For a minute or two, he gazed at the sheet with eyes that saw nothing but a confused blurr of foreign characters; he could not tell whether they were cipher or words of a language he was unacquainted with; he only knew that the letter was not, as he had vaguely hoped, written in Arabic, for those signs he understood. Again the sense of ondrawing crisis came over him, and again he braced himself with the thought that the message could have nothing to do with Rachel—nothing, at anyrate, that need seriously affect her. Why then should he tremble? Yet he did tremble, and so apparently, that Rachel noticed his nervousness, and advancing timidly, put her hand upon his arm.

'Is anything the matter, Caspar?'

He looked at her, recalled to himself by the tender alarm in her eyes; awakened also, as he remembered the point at which she had broken off in her vehement entreaty that he would tell her the truth, to the necessity for controlling his own agitation. After all, there was no real reason why he should become unnerved by his curious presentiment that here was the beginning of the end.

'Dearest,' he said softly, stroking back the hair from her forehead with his right hand, while in his left the Imperial letter seemed to sting him like a live thing, 'do not be disturbed. I am very sorry we were interrupted, but, as you see, it was unavoidable. This is diplomatic business.'

‘I dread everything now that comes from Abaria, and I could tell by the expression of your face, Caspar, that you were afraid it might affect you and me. Confess—wasn’t that thought in your mind?’

‘Darling, if I must confess the truth, it would be that nothing in the world is of consequence to me, except in so far as it may or may not affect you. Possibly—I can’t help feeling, probably—this communication from Abaria may have some bearing upon the subject of our talk. And yet I don’t see in what way. Very likely we may find that you will have to leave the Embassy sooner than we expected.’

‘You haven’t read it, Caspar. Why do you not read it?’

He put his hand to his head confusedly, taking I-a few hurried steps away from her.

‘You will pardon me. This is perhaps an urgent matter that must be attended to. It may be that the question you asked me is answered here. I can say no more at present. We will talk again as soon as I have disposed of this business: There is something I must do.’

He spoke a little wildly, and again pressed his hand to his brow, as though in an effort to collect his faculties. She was deeply concerned, hesitating to leave him. His brain, she thought, could not yet be strong, and indeed this was a fact of which he was himself conscious. But uppermost in his mind, was the resolve not to betray himself. He could play at words with her no longer, the unread letter in his hand staring at them both. He must carry on his part as best he could. There was no time to learn it; he could not make out the letter unaided, and it never occurred to him that the key to the cipher would be in the Ambassador’s safe, to which he had access. Someone therefore must read it for him. He walked bewilderedly across the room and pressed the bell, bidding the servant who appeared, to ask Ahmed Bey if he would do him the favour of coming up. It was galling to Marillier to send the message. He shrank from showing his ignorance to his subordinate. He did not know how he could explain it to this conceited little man, for whom he had but a half-contemptuous tolerance, though they were on terms of distant friendliness, and Marillier was not without sympathy in Ahmed’s schemes for bringing himself into official prominence. He quite realised the practical usefulness of Ahmed’s self-importance, yet it irked him now to take advantage of it, and beyond all things he hated the false position.

As he turned round, he saw Rachel standing uncertainly, her eyes now fixed upon him in anxious longing to read his soul, and to give him all the support her love could bestow. She went close to him, her tall, slim form reaching nearly to his height, as he stood with head bowed and frame shrunken. Placing her two hands upon his shoulders, she said in tones vibrating with sympathy,—‘Dear, I know that you are troubled, and I won’t worry you with questions now. I’ll be patient, and wait till you tell me what all this means. Only this I do want to say—remember that I am yours, and yours only, for ever.’

He put his arms round her and looked into her face with such a strange expression of mingled doubt and fear, that she was impelled to repeat,—

‘Remember, Caspar, my love, nothing can part us but our own will, and if we are strong to hold together we can defy Fate, we can defy the Emperor. Death could not separate us; shall we be afraid then of a bad man’s power?’

He kissed her forehead reverentially, regretfully, with a tenderness that went to her heart, for it seemed to her that he kissed her as though he were bidding her farewell.

‘Beloved,’ he said, ‘I know that I have your heart, and come what may, I shall never cease to be thankful for that most precious gift. If I were to die tonight, I should feel that I had had my share of life’s joy—a joy that I should carry with me into eternity. Living or dying, my Rachel, apart or together, I know that your love is mine—a priceless possession. But how long I shall be permitted to clasp this dear form, to kiss these sweet lips, to hold you so to my heart—ah! That I do not know, and the doubt is like an icy breath. It is—it is—that chill shadow which, when we are nearest, comes between us. Do you not feel it? It unmans me.’

He let his arm fall away from her with a shudder. She, too, had the sense of sudden cold, as though a blast from outside had swept in, and drew back J shivering and oppressed by a nameless fear. At that moment the voice of Ahmed Bey was heard addressing Akbar in Abarian with ostentatious loudness. The lovers drew further apart, and it seemed to Marillier as they did so, that the invisible presence froze them no longer.

The door opened and Ahmed Bey entered, bowing elaborately to Mademoiselle Isàdas, who moved towards the inner doorway, gazing mournfully back at her

lover as she parted the curtains, and regretting in her heart that she had not boldly revoked her decision to abide for the present with Nurse Dalison, and so have forced him to marry her and give up this baneful mission, which, she knew, must interfere with their happiness.

‘I am here, my friend,’ said Ahmed. ‘What can I do? Are you wanting me to deal with an affair of the Chancellery? I see Akbar in the corridor. It must be something more important than an ordinary despatch. Ah! the Emperor’s own seal!’ As his eye fell upon the document Marillier held open, ‘I think I recognise the hand of the Grand Chancellor and the private cipher. You look upset. What is it about, and how can I assist you?’

Marillier, his mind full of Rachel, broken in nerve and spirit by the scene he had gone through, paid small attention to the secretary’s bland little speech. He held the paper out to Ahmed Bey. ‘Read it,’ he said.

‘Read it! Certainly.’ The secretary took the paper, pleased and expectant. ‘You are preparing a surprise for me. Can it by any heavensent chance commend my services in this regrettable emergency?’

‘Read it,’ replied Marillier, ‘and see for yourself. Read it aloud. You know the character.’

‘The Grand Chancellor’s cipher, which is used for the Emperor’s private communications to his faithful servants! Not quite so well as you yourself, Caspar. Poor old Isàdas gave you some practice in deciphering these hieroglyphics. But still—I can read it passably; glibly if it concerns myself.’

Marillier gave an impatient movement. ‘Proceed then,’ he exclaimed.

Ahmed Bey pored for some minutes over the document. His face fell slightly as he perused it, then interest and curiosity animated his countenance—a jealous interest, a somewhat malign curiosity.

‘I don’t see why you have given me this. It has nothing to do with me. Who has pulled the strings for you in Abaria, Caspar—or is this the Pacha’s last legacy? I see that it is a private and personal mandate from his Majesty to yourself.’

‘So I supposed,’ replied Marillier, dully. Something in his manner roused Ahmed’s attention. He looked in an irritable way at the first secretary’s

emotionless face.

‘You supposed! What then? Have you not read it for yourself?’

‘If I had read it, should I have asked you to do so?’ said Marillier, shortly, nettled by the young man’s manner.

‘I imagined that you wanted my opinion,’ said Ahmed.

‘For mercy’s sake don’t imagine, but translate,’ cried Marillier, in a voice so rasping, and with lips so white and tremulous, that Ahmed Bey perceived there must be something seriously wrong with his colleague, and exclaimed in genuine concern,—‘But you are ill! Where is the amiable nurse? Ah! my friend, you have an adorable excuse, but the stern doctors were right to forbid excitations of the heart. Pray let me summon our good Madame Dalison as an antidote.’

‘What are you talking of? I do not allow such remarks. I am perfectly well.’ Marillier spoke angrily, then seeing that Ahmed flushed and reared up his head with an offended air, he recollected himself.

‘Pardon me. It is true that I am not quite well, but that is of no consequence. It will pass. Read, Ahmed. Don’t waste time. My head is bursting; my memory is confused. I have forgotten the cipher.’

Ahmed looked at him, not altogether mollified.

‘Strange!’ he said. ‘This illness has affected you curiously. It appears to me, Ruel Bey, that there will be something for you to re-learn when you go into harness again. You are wise, however, not to tax your brain at present. Here, then, for what I make out of the Emperor’s letter.’

He read the document rather slowly in French, and through the laboured sentences and flowery circumlocution of court phraseology, Marillier grasped the substance of the communication.

It was to the effect that the Father of his people of Abaria was grieved in spirit for the loss of his late Ambassador to the Court of St James, Isàdas Pacha, servant and counsellor, unsurpassed of his predecessors and not to be equalled by his successors, in diligent service and loyal devotion to the sacred person of his Majesty the Emperor. Might the mansion of Isàdas be henceforth built in the

gardens of Paradise! Therefore it pleased the Emperor to stretch forth his hand in clemency and gracious regard for the memory of his servant blessed in Paradise, to Mademoiselle Rachel Isàdas left mourning, and to desire her presence without delay at the court of Abaria, in order that his Majesty, of benignant intention, might with his own hand confer upon her the noble order of the Leopard and the Lotus, an honour specially reserved for those ladies of high birth and distinguished virtue upon whom his Majesty might deign to shed the glorious light of his favour and approbation.

And in pursuance of his Majesty's benignant purpose, and with intent to specially signalise the first secretary of the Abarian Embassy in London, commended by Isàdas Pacha (removed to Paradise), as worthy of his Majesty's grace and protection, Ruel Bey was commanded to escort Mademoiselle Rachel Isàdas, with such following and appanage as befitted her rank and the important occasion, to the presence of the Emperor. And furthermore, in virtue of the grace of his Majesty, bestowed upon one commended by his faithful servant Isàdas, Ruel Bey was desired to hold in custody and to carry with him to the Court of Abaria, there to be laid at the feet of his Majesty the Emperor, all jewels, decorations, and other insignia of the several orders of merit and renown by which his Majesty had condescended to distinguish Isàdas Pacha, now reposing in Paradise.

As Ahmed concluded the mandate, which he had read with mingled feelings of jealous irritation that he himself was not even distantly alluded to in its paragraphs, yet alive to the policy of ingratiating himself with powers likely later on, to advance his interests, he was startled by a heavy groan bursting from the lips of the first secretary. Ahmed Bey looked at his colleague in astonishment. He had expected that the first secretary would be overwhelmed by the magnitude of this honour, and with joy at the prospect of escorting the woman of his choice straight to the feet of the Emperor, there probably to receive the Imperial benediction upon their forthcoming nuptials. Ahmed Bey could not understand why this greatly favoured man should have the appearance of one who had heard his death sentence, rather than that of his promotion to untellable dignities, as well as the right, no doubt, to marry such a girl as Rachel Isàdas, her value enhanced a thousand-fold by the Emperor's favour, and, in all certainty, a rich dowry. To Ahmed the attitude of his colleague was inexplicable, and he could only attribute it to weakness of brain. Really, it seemed as though that injury to his head had totally 'upset the mental balance of the once brilliant first secretary, and that it was more than likely that Ruel Bey's promising career would come to

an untimely end. Ahmed began to speculate on his own chances of stepping into the shoes he coveted, should they become vacant.

‘My dear fellow, you must be ill. What on earth is there to groan about? If I were in your place I should be shouting with delight. I am very much afraid that you won’t be fit to undertake the journey. Now, how would it be if I were to take your place in escorting Mademoiselle Isàdas? I need not say how delighted I should be if I could make myself of service, and I venture to hope that I might be less disagreeable to mademoiselle than a greater stranger.’

Ahmed Bey was deeply in earnest. He had already begun to curse his want of foresight in not having entered the lists as Rachel’s suitor before Caspar had won her heart. He had always admired her, and whenever they had been thrown together had tried to make himself agreeable to the Pacha’s niece, though it had soon become evident to everybody in the Embassy that Ruel Bey must carry all before him. Now Ahmed Bey, with no specially malign design, saw a possibility of supplanting Ruel Bey, whose brain, disordered by the accident, must surely be incapacitated as a lover, as well as in his official position. Ahmed began a fussy little speech. He felt sure that the Emperor would not press Ruel Bey’s departure so soon after his illness, were his Majesty made aware that he had not yet recovered his strength. He—Ahmed Bey—would charge himself with the task of making this fact clear through the proper diplomatic channel. He should at once telegraph to the Grand Chancellor of Abaria and ascertain his Majesty’s pleasure. If Ruel Bey permitted, he would suggest that he himself, as next in official priority, should be named as a suitable person to escort Mademoiselle Isàdas to the Abarian Court and to deliver to the Emperor the late Ambassador’s orders. What did Caspar think of the proposition?

Marillier had at first listened stupidly to Ahmed Bey’s flowery speeches, but this proposal acted as a stimulant upon him, for behind it, he saw the young secretary’s scheme, and was braced to a half humorous opposition. He roused himself; the expression of his face changed; he threw off his dejection. Briefly thanking Ahmed Bey for his kind intentions, he declared himself perfectly able to discharge the high mission with which the Emperor had entrusted him. To no one could he delegate so important a trust, and, in the circumstances, it must, he said, be evident to Ahmed Bey that he had himself been chosen as the most fitting escort for Mademoiselle Isàdas on so long and trying a journey. His manner implied that the Emperor recognised his right as Mademoiselle Isàdas’s betrothed husband. Ahmed chafed inwardly, but it was not the first time that his

self-assumption, social and official, had been set down by Caspar Ruel. Ahmed felt puzzled, curious, certain that there was more than met the eye, but compelled to take the dismissal conveyed in his colleague's voice and manner. 'Bien!' he said, with a shrug. 'I wished only to be of service. You have all my sympathy. One understands the position which has no doubt been placed before his Majesty, and I offer you my felicitations. I only trust that these strange lapses of memory to which you now appear liable, may not cause inconvenience to Mademoiselle Isàdas during the journey. However, it is certain that the language of gallantry is less easily forgotten than an official cipher.'

Chapter XXI

THE EMPEROR'S COMMAND

Ahmed Bey left the room, but before closing the door behind him, he perceived the immovable figure of Akbar stationed in the shadow of the great stuffed leopard on the landing. He addressed the man in Abarian, and receiving Akbar's short answer and accompanying salaam, turned back.

'I forgot to mention—Akbar told me as I came in that he has orders to start back immediately with the answer to the Emperor's mandate.'

'The answer!' Marillier spoke in a dazed way. 'What answer?'

'An acknowledgment of the favour his Majesty confers, and an intimation of the date upon which you will depart with Mademoiselle Isàdas.'

Marillier stared absently on the ground. He was deep in thought. No choice was left him now; his fate was in the Emperor's hands, and that of Rachel also. What was the meaning of this unexpected honour? Why this sudden solicitude on behalf of the Ambassador's niece, who had hitherto been ignored? Was it possible that the Emperor had been made acquainted with the truth? Yet no—Isàdas had given into his own hand the letter in which it was contained, and that letter lay unopened in his iron safe in Harley Street. The thought was borne in on him that he must go and get that letter; and, besides, there was much to do, he had many preparations to make. Who knew when he might return? His brain throbbed; his mind was full of confusion. Rachel must be told of the Emperor's order. There was a possibility that she might refuse to obey it, since she counted herself no Abarian subject. Marillier, in the medley of his thoughts glancing up, caught Ahmed Bey's bright little eyes fixed inquisitively upon him. He stammered,—

'I suppose—yes, of course I should reply that—'

'That you receive his Majesty's command with joy and gratitude not to be expressed in common language, and that you fly to obey it on the wings of the wind, bearing Mademoiselle Isàdas along with you—which means that you catch the first convenient continental express and the Compagnie

Transatlantique's boat at Marseilles. Shall I bring you up the proper paper and the seal? Are you equal to the composition? But stay—the reply should be in cipher, for which once you had no need to refer to the code. It will be a trouble to you to construct the document since you have forgotten the cipher and would have to look up every word in the key.'

'I—yes, I have forgotten,' Marillier faltered, painfully conscious of his helplessness.

'Allow me a second time to place my services at your disposal. I have become sufficiently familiar with the cipher and style. One has only need to abase oneself at the feet of the most August. But assuredly, Caspar, you are scarcely equal to this journey.'

'I am entirely equal to it. I shall start—' he halted, 'as soon as possible.'

'Certainly as soon as possible. They don't like to be kept waiting in Abaria, though they are not particular about keeping us poor devils on tenterhooks. But what is the possible? You must not dream of tomorrow morning. The night train perhaps. It is etiquette, as you know, when Imperial orders are issued, to lose no time in obeying them. So tomorrow night, eh?—if Mademoiselle Isàdas's preparations are completed. And it should be conveyed to his Majesty that you rise from a sick bed to do his bidding, and may be compelled to take the journey in slow stages. Does that suit you, and shall I prepare the despatch?'

Marillier nodded impatiently. Ahmed turned a second time.

'Then I will tell Akbar his mind may be satisfied as well as his stomach. He is standing out there looking as hungry as the leopard might have done before he tried to eat the Emperor. Good bye for the moment, mon ami. Lucky dog! I don't know which I envy you most—the favour of the Emperor or of the lady. I'll bring you the despatch presently; you will have nothing to do but sign it.' Ahmed disappeared, patronisingly informing Akbar outside, that a despatch would shortly be ready for him, and that in the meanwhile he might rest and refresh himself.

Akbar made his automaton-like obeisance, but a scowl hung upon his fine Eastern features. He was not too well pleased with the manner of his reception. Not thus had the old Ambassador transacted correspondence with his Imperial master. Akbar felt the difference without wholly understanding it. Nevertheless

he was glad that he might minister to the needs of the flesh.

Meanwhile, Marillier, left alone, walked heavily to the mantelpiece, and laid his arms upon it, his head dropping wearily down upon them. So absorbed was he in his thickly-pressing thoughts, that he did not hear a light footfall cross the room, and started, thrilled in spite of his preoccupation by the touch of Rachel's hand upon his arm. He turned, to see her standing by his side. The questioning alarm in her face reminded him of the communication he must make, and he told her briefly of the Emperor's mandate.

She did not at first grasp its relation to herself; she thought only of the summons to her lover and her heart leaped in quick fear. Yet the summons seemed natural enough, especially that part of it referring to the delivery of the late Ambassador's orders. She told herself that she had expected it and dreaded it, even before the first secretary had told her of his probable mission to the Abarian court. Yet now his dark words and the sinister doubts which had assailed her returned in full force.

'Caspar!' she cried, 'you cannot leave me, and you must not leave me. I will not stay here while you go and place yourself in the power of that wicked man—go perhaps to your death, or what would be worse than death to me, lifelong parting. Caspar, you will do as I asked you? You will resign your post, but you will not go to Abaria and leave me alone?'

He was inexpressibly touched.

'Oh! my love, my love! You don't understand. You have not taken in the meaning of the despatch. It is no question of your remaining here alone, but of your going with me.'

'Going with you?' she said blankly.

'The Emperor desires to see you. He has ordered me to bring you to his court.' Marillier repeated as nearly as he could remember them the words of the message. She received them with surprise and indignation.

'Why should the Emperor require to see me? Why should he trouble himself even about my existence? I have nothing to do with the Emperor. Is it that he wants to scold me for staying on so long at the Embassy? He could not be so petty! No—it is more likely that he wishes to punish me for having dared to

think of marrying you, who are one of his favourite servants. Should I have asked the Emperor's permission before allowing myself to love you?'

'My dearest, you misunderstand. Do you not see that the Emperor intends to honour you by the invitation?'

'Invitation! Ah! then I can decline it.'

Marillier shook his head.

'I fear that you must obey it.'

'Why is there a "must." He has no right to claim obedience from me. Royal invitations are commands, I know, but when I leave the Embassy I shall be outside the Emperor's territory. It is only within these walls, under his own flag, that he has any power. Is it not only because he is the Emperor of Abaria that you say I must obey his command?'

'Partly because he is the Emperor of Abaria. Chiefly because—' Marillier hesitated.

'Then there is another reason!' she cried. 'All the time, I have felt that you were hiding something from me. The Emperor has some right—some authority over me of which I have been kept in ignorance? Tell me—is not this the fact?'

'Yes, it is the fact,' he admitted.

'I knew it! I knew it!' she cried.

'Even as the Emperor you could scarcely in the circumstances disregard his wishes,' Marillier went on, speaking calmly, but aware that he was only delaying by a few minutes the revelation which as yet he was hardly prepared to make. 'But in the double relation in which he stands to you, it is impossible that you can put his command aside.'

'The double relation! What may that be?'

She spoke with determination quite unusual in the timid Rachel.

'My dear, don't press me,' he replied. 'That is not for me, but for the Emperor'

himself to tell you.'

She stood perfectly still, her brows contracted, her lips firmly closed.

'Come, my love,' he urged, 'there are practical matters to be considered. You will have your preparations to make. It is suggested that we start if possible by the night mail tomorrow. It is necessary that you should have a woman with you—a friend as well as an attendant. No doubt Nurse Dalison will come, but if not someone else must be found.'

She made an imperious gesture with her hand as though she would not concern herself with such details while the main point was uncertain.

'You ask me to go blindfold to Abaria—to submit myself to the Emperor's pleasure, not knowing what claim he has upon me.'

'I shall be with you, beloved, to give my life for you if need be, to protect you in a surer way perhaps than if you remained here. We shall be safer together in Abaria than separated.'

'That is true,' she answered.

'Well, then, these may be the last few minutes in which we shall be alone before starting on our journey. Can we not spend them to better advantage than in discussing the Emperor's claims. Let us accept the inevitable and trust in each other.'

'No, Caspar, I have yielded to you in many things, and have been glad and proud to do so. In all things concerning our love, I yield willingly. But this is a matter on which I must be permitted to judge for myself. I refuse to go with you to Abaria unless you tell me plainly what authority the Emperor has over me beyond that of having been the master of my dead uncle.'

For the first time Marillier realised that there were depths in Rachel's nature which no one had ever suspected. He saw that she was in earnest; and while admiring her firmness he recognised her right. He saw that he could not bend her will, nor influence her by any plea of expediency. He must tell her the truth or lose her trust, and that he could not bear. After all, why should he not tell her? He was bound by no promise in that respect. She would be forewarned and forearmed against possible danger, and he himself in part relieved of the terrible

burden of his responsibility. Again he told himself that the Emperor could not have sent for her because of any knowledge he might have gained of her real parentage. That secret was in his own custody. It could only be that the Emperor wished to show kindness to the niece of his old friend and servant, the Ambassador. By making Rachel aware of the relationship, he might enlist her sympathies on her father's behalf and pave the way for a better understanding between them, and thus obtain greater security both for himself and her.

He looked gravely at her, weighing these aspects of the case as well as the agitation of his mind would permit. She, reading his face, saw that he was wavering, and pressed her point.

'Tell me the truth, Caspar. I ask it of you. I do more than ask—I demand it as my right. What is the Emperor's claim upon me?'

'He is your father,' said Marillier, bluntly.

The girl gave him a startled look. She lifted her arms with a sudden convulsive gesture, and crossed them upon her breast. Marillier had seen that gesture in a man struck mortally from behind. He moved forward in the impulse to support her, but she regained her self-control and shook her head. She could not doubt his word, but the shock had been great. She went white, and presently he saw that her lips were trembling.

She could only falter like a child, 'I should like to understand.' As shortly as possible he repeated to her the main facts of the story Isàdas Pacha had told him—the story of how Rachel O'Hara had entered the Imperial seraglio, had fled from it, and died soon after giving birth to her child in Algeria.

As she listened, there flashed through the girl's mind corroborative incidents, words she had heard in early childhood, vague remembrances of the Algerian convent, sayings of the Ambassador, more especially those in their last interview, his curious emotion in regard to her, his inexplicable dislike contrasting with his generosity about material matters, the real meaning of her equivocal position at the Embassy, many hitherto contradictory things which had puzzled her all now made clear. As she unconsciously lifted her hand her eyes fell upon the engraved emerald she wore—her passport, as Isàdas had said, to her father's favour. It was all true then, that strange fairy tale he had told her. She could realise it now, knowing that she was the Emperor's daughter. Had her

father only just become aware of her existence that he had sent for her? She asked Marillier the question, and he answered with truth, 'I do not know.'

She asked no more, but again the thoughts surged bewilderingly. She was the Emperor's daughter, and he had sworn an oath to her mother that he would grant any request she might make to him as long as they remained united.

Then he must have loved her mother deeply though she had fled from him, breaking their union and perhaps invalidating the oath. Nevertheless, the Pacha had assured her that it was his belief the Emperor would not disregard that oath were she to present the ring and claim his pledge. If that were so, she might not only secure her own happiness, and with it that of the man she loved, but she might obtain grace and favour for Caspar, and, altered though he seemed by his love for her, she knew that his worldly advancement had been to him of immense moment. He was willing to resign it for her sake, but she longed to return it to him fourfold, to make him what he wished to be, powerful and honoured. This she might accomplish if she went to Abaria and approached her father as a daughter should. But if she did not go, if she angered him, he might visit his displeasure not on her only, but on Caspar. The Emperor of Abaria was an absolute monarch, Caspar was his servant; he might degrade or imprison him, or order his death. In any case he might, and probably would, separate them. In her ignorance also, she did not know what power he might have over her even if she remained in England and defied him. If he demanded her as a daughter, could the English Government be compelled to give her up? What influence had she? How could she hope to stand against one so powerful, against, perhaps, international, certainly against natural law? Fears and questionings rose and tortured her. She pictured the Emperor to herself as she had always done, a fierce Eastern despot, evil, tyrannical, terrible. The sight of the ring, however, the oath of which it was the sign, somewhat changed her conception, and made him seem more human. He had loved her mother; he was her father, and she held the passport to his favour.

She turned to Marillier, who was watching her in deep anxiety as she had a few moments before watched him. He, too, saw the signs of softening, of wavering resolve. She was about to speak when the door opened noisily, and Ahmed Bey bustled in with a paper in his hand.

'I have brought the letter for your signature, Ruel Bey,' he said formally, having acknowledged with a deep bow Mademoiselle Isàdas's presence.

‘May I ask you to read it?’ said Marillier, with equal formality. ‘I have just told Mademoiselle Isàdas of the Emperor’s wishes, and she ought to know what has been said in reply.’

Ahmed immediately proceeded to translate into French the adulatory expressions of gratitude and devoted allegiance in which Ruel Bey accepted the honour his master had conferred on him. Rising from a sick-bed, he would obey with all the speed possible in his enfeebled condition the sacred command of his Majesty, while Mademoiselle Isàdas, prostrated like himself at the Imperial feet, and overwhelmed with gratitude and humility, promised swift compliance with the Emperor’s gracious desire.

When Ahmed Bey had finished rolling out complacently the concluding flourishes of his composition, he took up a pen from an escritoire near, and handed it with the document to Marillier.

Marillier walked to the escritoire, and as he thoughtfully fingered the pen, sought Rachel’s eyes for some expression of her opinions. She had moved a little, and stood with her gaze fixed on the portrait of the Emperor, which, in Marillier’s fancy, seemed to dominate the scene. On Rachel’s face was still something of the startled look with which she had received his announcement, but it had also a wistful expression, uncompromising and sad. Clearly, she had made up her mind, and again he was struck by the evidence of depths in her character and purpose for which he had not been prepared. He wondered if this arose from a sense of filial duty—Nature asserting her claim.

‘Mademoiselle Isàdas,’ he said pointedly, ‘does this reply meet your approval? Have I your permission to sign?’

At the sound of Marillier’s voice Rachel turned and bowed her head slightly. For the moment she could not speak.

‘This arrangement will suit you?’ Marillier persisted in a tone of forced calm. ‘You will be prepared to let me escort you to Abaria with Nurse Dalison, or any other woman friend and attendant you may prefer, as soon as preparations can be made?’

Rachel had a choking sensation in her throat, and her voice was husky, but she spoke with decision.

‘The answer meets my wishes. Sign it, if you please, Ruel Hey. I submit to the Emperor’s command, and will go with you to Abaria as soon as the preparations are made.’

Marillier gave her a long look, satisfying himself that her mind was assured, but saying nothing. She returned his look with one of perfect trust and tenderness. Ahmed Bey saw it, and inwardly cursed his fortunate colleague, happy in the Emperor’s favour and in the devotion of an adorable woman who had become more adorable since the Emperor had exalted her. Ahmed Hey sighed and anathematised his own lack of foresight. Surely he, too, might have had a chance had he entered the lists at the beginning.

Marillier silently signed the paper and returned it to Ahmed Hey.

‘Thank you. Before Akbar leaves I will see him again, shall I not, Ruel Hey, and obtain a few hints for your journey? There is much to be done. Baptiste should be sent for.’

Ahmed named the late Ambassador’s courier.

‘By all means. You will give me your help, Ahmed, in the arrangements for Mademoiselle Isàdas and her companion?’

‘I am entirely at your service, my comrade,’ replied Ahmed. ‘Do not trouble yourself. I will see that all is suitably provided for the comfort of mademoiselle.’

And with another bow to Rachel, Ahmed turned to depart. But as he did so, he glanced at the document which he was carrying away.

‘Your handwriting is shaky, Ruel Bey,’ he said.

Chapter XXII

TONIGHT!

The door closed behind Ahmed, and Marillier, who had been standing at the escritoire with his back to Rachel, turned at the click of the lock, which told him that they were alone. He appeared relieved, yet there was a look almost of despair upon his face. He realised painfully that the die was cast.

She went slowly towards him, her hands quietly folded, calmness in her manner; but when he attempted to embrace her she stopped a pace distant, checking his impulse by her silence and by the look of fixed purpose in her eyes. He dropped his arms and said, in an embarrassed way,—

‘It is decided then; you will go?’

‘Yes, I will go.’ She paused and added, ‘When all the preparations are made.’

The ‘all’ seemed to him significant. She had laid a slight stress on the word, but he would not by any question, imply doubt of her intention.

‘That is best, my dear,’ he said. ‘It does not do to fight against the powers that be. You must see from what I have told you that you owe something to the Emperor.’

He brought out the sentences jerkily, waiting between each for her to say a word of either approval or dissent, but she made no comment. He asked her whether she would be ready by the following evening, laying his hand, as he did so, upon her shoulder.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘that there is nothing for you to think of but your personal preparations, and your maid and Nurse Dalison can relieve you of those. You may depend on Ahmed and myself for the rest.’ Still she made no reply. He waited a minute, then said humbly, ‘So tomorrow evening, dearest? Your preparations will be over by then?’

‘Our preparations.’ She corrected him. ‘Yes, I think they will be over by then; at least I hope so. I hope that it will be possible for us to start by tomorrow

evening, but I am not sure. I must ask you, Caspar, if it will be possible.'

He felt that there was something at the back of her mind which would affect the plan.

'Of course,' he answered, with assumed lightness, 'I must go to the Harley Street house and look over some papers, and I must see Camperdowne. Afterwards I am at the Emperor's disposal.' He gave an uneasy laugh. 'And for you, dearest, as I said, your maid will do what is necessary. I don't anticipate any difficulty as regards Nurse Dalison. Of course we shall be ready.'

Rachel put up her hand and drew down his from her shoulder, fingering it softly with a caress that thrilled him.

'I wonder if you will be ready,' she said. 'Are you ready, Caspar, to take care of me?'

'To take care of you!' he exclaimed. 'You know that it is in order to take care of you, Rachel, that I am going. I would defy the Emperor's commands if it would help me to serve you better.'

'You would defy the Emperor's commands—and yet you owe him allegiance?'

'Possibly,' he answered, indifferently. 'I would pay such allegiance as is due from me to him; but you must bear in mind that he could not command my presence at the court of Abaria if I were no longer in his service. As you yourself suggested, I could easily quit it, and but for you, I would do so. In that case, I should no longer owe him allegiance.'

'You would leave the Emperor's service!' she said in surprise. 'I don't understand you, Caspar. I thought it was possible that you might be induced to resign it for my sake, but for your own, I supposed that you would prefer to remain in it, since it must mean to you the worldly advancement you have always cared so much about. Now you tell me that it is for my sake you are going to Abaria.'

'Yes, for your sake. But I am also going for the sake of the dead, for the sake of my promise to Isàdas Pacha—a promise of which I have told you nothing as yet, Rachel, but which I can only keep by obeying the Emperor's mandate. Therefore, whether it be for your sake or for the sake of my promise to the dead,

I shall go. And do not fear that I shall not protect you to the uttermost of which I am capable. Promise or no promise, that is my chief object in this mission.'

'And in protecting me,' she began shyly, but still with that underlying purpose in her voice, of which he was fully conscious, though he did not comprehend it; 'in protecting me, Caspar, you would wish, would you not, to take the surest means of so doing?'

'Beloved, need you ask me that question?'

'Then you would take any means that would ensure the impossibility of the Emperor separating us, should he desire it?' she persisted.

Marillier shook his head sadly.

'You speak of impossibility. Alas! I fear that we must not delude ourselves into false security. In Abaria, there would be few things impossible to the Emperor. As far as that goes, we must take our chance. But don't be afraid, darling. I am obliged to speak straightly to you, and we had better recognise the fact that in his own dominions Abdullulah Zobeir is supreme. Yet I have greater confidence in the Emperor than one might be warranted in feeling towards an Eastern despot. Abdullulah is not an ordinary Eastern despot. Isàdas loved and respected him after his own strange fashion. Isàdas believed that he would be true to his plighted word. I cannot help sharing Isàdas's confidence, and it may be that this was the Pacha's most valuable legacy to me, for in very truth, Rachel, if I had not some trust in the integrity of your father and in his sympathy for you, I should dread this journey even more than I do. As it is, I will not allow myself to be afraid.'

'But the Emperor'—Rachel stumbled slightly over the word: she could not say, 'My father'—'the Emperor is a man of strong will and passions, and is deadly in his vengeance against those who have offended him. That is what I have heard. The Emperor can be fierce and cruel, and he is, as you say, absolute in his own dominions. And I—' She drew herself again a little apart from Marillier and threw out her hands in a pathetic gesture, which, as the lace fell away from her wrists, showed their girlish slenderness, while, though there was fire in her eyes, her mouth trembled. 'I am only a weak woman, Caspar, and I shall be wholly in his power.'

Marillier caught the little nervous hands in a grip which almost hurt them.

‘Not wholly, since I shall be beside you, since I love you and you have told me that you love me in return. Our love gives me a right over you which even the Emperor will find it difficult to gainsay.’

‘Make it impossible for the Emperor to gainsay that right,’ she exclaimed impetuously, in a manner unlike that of the usually diffident and reserved Rachel. ‘Ratify your claim upon me, Caspar. Confirm your right. I ask this of you. In the conditions I require it of you. Redeem your pledge to me, and put it beyond the Emperor’s power or the will of any man to stand between us.’

He looked down into her eyes, which met his unabashed, steadfast, and glowing with that purpose of which now some faint glimmering began to dawn upon him. Yet still he could not believe that love had inspired such strength of will in the Rachel he had known.

‘Beloved, what do you mean? Tell me. I dare not accept your words as my own desire would bid me. Am I too presumptuous? Rachel, tell me.’

‘Yes, I will tell you. I must forget that what I am going to say may seem unfitting from a girl. I will remember only that I love you, and that I could not bear to lose you. Then, Caspar, there is but one way in which I can go with you to Abaria—one detail in the arrangements of which you have not thought, but without which’—Rachel turned away her head, blushing like a rose, but speaking calmly—‘one detail without which the preparations for my comfort and safety cannot be complete.’

And that?’ he said eagerly.

She glanced up.

‘Can’t you understand? Why do you force me to speak words that you should say? Caspar, I cannot go with you to Abaria unless you take me as your wife.’

‘As my wife! Oh, beloved, this is happiness and honour greater than I could have dreamed!’

He caught her in his arms, and she now willingly yielded herself to his embrace. He could hardly realise that he had heard her aright, that this was the motive which had been influencing her from the moment in which he had told her the truth about her birth. He looked rapturously into her face. Was this his Rachel,

his winsome, girlish love—so tender, but so reticent—this woman with the shining eyes, who called upon him to make good his plighted troth?

She released herself, and he stood rapt and listening, as, in low clear tones, the next sentences she uttered showed him how, in the midst of her shock and astonishment, and in all the hurry of decision which had been forced upon them, she had grasped the liabilities of the situation and formulated her plans. There should be a civil marriage immediately; the religious ceremony, the idea of which she could not relinquish, should be celebrated later. She reddened and clung to him, but her eyes were clear as a child's. She knew that they were both about to embark upon an enterprise full of danger, she told him, and it was their right, their duty to forearm themselves. So forearmed she would permit herself to trust as he did, as Isàdas had done, in the Emperor's personal integrity. And then she told him what he already knew—the story of the emerald. Holding that pledge and passport, and believing herself protected by English law, she would go fearlessly into her father's presence and claim the fulfilment of his oath to her dead mother. As Caspar's wife would she do this, but only as Caspar's wife would she venture upon the perilous journey.

Womanlike, she read his thoughts, and would not allow his scruples scope to shape themselves, and as she talked, hardly waiting for comment, his own mind, took the colour of hers, and he believed with her that Carriage lay the surest means of ensuring their joint safety. Her influence spurred him on, though some voice within him whispered that were he to palter with this conviction, it would lose its force and he would be swaying helplessly between love and honour. Yet, he argued, he had not schemed this thing; Fate had inspired her. Why should he hesitate since her happiness was so clearly involved. He could consider nothing else. Honour itself was bounded by his love for her. He would not weigh the issues of this step since she preferred any risk to that of separation from him. She was no blindfolded child now, acting in the dark; she knew the truth, and she had chosen without shadow of wavering. There was nothing for him but to accept her decision. Thus he lent himself to her summing up of practical considerations, amazed at the common sense she showed and her grasp of technical difficulties which somehow she succeeded in smoothing away. He wondered where she had obtained her knowledge of the manner in which the marriage of foreigners in England may be celebrated. He did not know that his cousin had occasionally discussed it with her when he was in the mood—a rare and reckless one—to rank love above liberty and political advancement.

So when Marillier left her, it was upon the understanding that he should go to a registrar and arrange for the marriage to take place that very evening at the Embassy, with Ahmed Hey and Nurse Dalison to act as witnesses. Rachel was certain of Nurse Dalison's compliance; she had found ample opportunities of gauging the character of that worldly-wise but highly romantic woman. She knew that nothing would appeal to Nurse Dalison more than this hastily planned wedding of which she would fully recognise the expediency on a superficial knowledge of the circumstances. Her sense of propriety would certainly suggest arguments in its favour, and all unconscious as Rachel intended her to be of the true bond between Abdullulah Zobeir, Emperor of Abaria, and the late Ambassador's so-called niece, she would feel that the intended honours for both, implied in the mandate, were sufficient guarantee of their sovereign's approval. Besides, Rachel knew that Nurse Dalison would delight in a visit to the picturesque Abarian court under such exceptionally favourable conditions.

She was right in her conjectures. Nurse Dalison was overwhelmed with pleasure at the double announcement. She had visions of the Order of the Leopard and Lotus decorating her own breast, and her practical mind seized upon the idea of profitably pursuing her profession in the Abarian capital, and after a year or two devoted to amassing a fortune in the most delightful of climates, might well, she thought, count upon honourable leisure in her own country where she would live encircled with an Oriental halo, and no doubt embellished by many Oriental jewels. Thus, at the Embassy that afternoon, all was bustle and confusion. Rachel sorted her papers and put away in safety her few most cherished girlish possessions, while her maid packed her clothes and Nurse Dalison hurried about her own preparations. Akbar had gone; Baptiste the courier made out routes and connections and despatched many telegrams, and Marillier transacted his own business, mostly at the house in Harley Street—his own by right of inheritance, no longer his own in the old familiar sense of home. It was strange, indeed tragic, to reflect that from this very house the mortal shell of Lucien Marillier had been carried a few weeks ago to its last resting—place in Kensal Green Cemetery, while the soul of Lucien Marillier had housed itself in Caspar Ruel's body. Strange, grotesque, incredible as the fairy tales of childhood might seem to the sober imagination of middle age—yet true, blissfully true. It was difficult to adjust the new personality to the old surroundings. He had the feeling of acting in a dream when he found himself in the consulting-room giving instructions to Mr Camperdowne the lawyer—instructions made as brief as possible in the fear of self-committal. He seemed in a dream too when alone, a little later, he beheld himself reflected as Caspar Ruel, fine of feature, magnificent of proportion, in

the same mirror that not long ago had given back the stern grey face, the square ungainly form of Lucien Marillier. Yet this very vision of himself as he now was, broke the dream illusion, for he knew himself no longer as the outwardly cold man of science devoured by hopeless love for a woman who had promised herself to his more brilliant rival—but that very rival, splendid, triumphant, the desire of his soul fulfilled, and in a few hours' time to be united indissolubly to the woman he adored.

With this consciousness upon him of a reality transcending his rosiest dreams, Marillier carefully secured the documents Isâdas had given him to deliver into the Emperor's hands, and also possessed himself of the gold box containing the mandrake. He would not open the box; an instinct of dread which he did not care to define held him back from so doing. He was in truth overpowered by something of the same superstition in regard to the root, as had dominated the Pacha. Without absolutely phrasing it, he was yet deeply imbued with the idea that to the mandrake he owed his present happiness, that through the mandrake's occult virtues, Rachel's love had been secured and the possession of her assured to him.

As Marillier dwelt on this thought, in spite of his reluctance to look at the fetich and ascertain for himself how much of life and power remained in it, a sense of superphysical elation filled him. It seemed to him that he was treading upon air, that he was in the enjoyment of all power not only spiritual but material also; for he seemed to know that his desires being in a certain measure material, the superhuman force that filled him, gave him the means of commanding their consummation.

It was still in this state of abnormal exaltation that, his preparations being completed, he ate a solitary and hurried meal at Harley Street, with the Pacha's letter to the Emperor in his breast pocket. Then he placed the gold box containing the mandrake in a leather case which he had procured for it, and carried it with him to the Embassy—the only one of his personal effects which he felt must be entrusted to no other keeping.

Chapter XXIII

THE INVISIBLE PRESENCE

In the large drawing-room—that room which contained the Emperor's portrait—Marillier and Ahmed Hey awaited the arrival of the Registrar. An intense excitement possessed Marillier. In truth, during these few hours, the man's whole nature seemed to—have changed, and he was neither the old Lucien nor the new Caspar, but a curious combination of both, braced and girt with his hope and his passion and the wild sense of elation that filled him. He walked—rapidly up and down the long room, almost unable to curb his eagerness, one moment stopping to finger tenderly a piece of work Rachel had left lying about or a bowl of flowers he knew she had arranged, the next, laughing boisterously and making youthful jokes with Ahmed, who, versatile though he knew mood. Ahmed put it down, however, to the natural Caspar to be, had never seen his comrade in this intoxication of a man about to wed the woman of his heart, and responded with genial banter, always alive to the desirability of ingratiating himself with one whose friendship might serve him in good stead. Ahmed Bey was more fussily important than usual, but Marillier, who might at any other time have felt irritated by his manner, smiled leniently upon the little man's pomposity, so lifted did he feel above the mundane trifles that yesterday would have annoyed him. He was really grateful to Ahmed for his sympathy and the trouble he had taken in making arrangements for the journey, and the two chatted cheerily till the door opened to the butler's announcement of the Registrar.

This gentleman was commonplace, yet with something of dignity in his manner. His arrival sobered Marillier. The solemnity of the whole situation came over him, and he said little, leaving his colleague to answer the Registrar's bland remarks upon the weather, the prospect of the journey—which had been given as a reason for this hurried marriage—some commercial aspects of England's relations with Abaria, and such like conventional topics. Ahmed Hey had himself arranged a table at what he considered a convenient angle, and had set out ink and pens; and now the Registrar's great book was opened and placed upon it. Marillier quietly watched these proceedings, scarcely seeming to be affected by them. The table happened to have been set in front of the Emperor's portrait; thus, when the Registrar took his seat with his back to the picture, it became evident that those about to be married must stand as it were before

Abdullulah Zobeir, whose pictured face gazing down upon the scene, seemed to Marillier, in the brief glance he cast at it, to have taken on an inscrutable and disagreeably cynical smile. Marillier observed the position of the table but would not alter it, though the portrait gave him the uncomfortable sense of an undesired witness to the ceremony. He feared that personality and dreaded its power, but he was determined at any cost to carry through his project, defying results, and therefore resolutely put from him all qualms. Presently the double door at the end of the room opened again and Rachel came in with Nurse Dalison. Ahmed Hey, in his character of witness and best man, went forward ceremoniously to meet her, and Rachel, surprisingly self-possessed, greeted him with a little friendly smile, and placed her hand upon his proffered arm, allowing him to escort her up the room.

The Registrar stood awkwardly staring. Never had he seen an image of such sweet dignity, of such girlish grace and beauty. She wore a grey gown of soft crape with some old Mechlin lace about her shoulders, and carried a bouquet of white roses, which gave a bridal touch to her appearance. Nurse Dalison had thought of this, and the roses were her gift to the bride. Marillier advancing, took his place beside Rachel, gravely as though they had been meeting in church. He gave one swift look at her face, a look which she answered with eyes full of love and trust, while the hand he clasped, returned his pressure closely. Then, almost before either had time to realise that the moment had come, they were replying to the questions of the Registrar, and the few simple words which united them were spoken.

The formal declarations made, there remained only the signatures. As Marillier took up the pen and bent over the book it seemed to him that something brushed against him, and he felt a soft but chilly breath pass over his hands. He fancied that the leaves of the book fluttered, and there came to him, with a stab, the memory of that invisible presence which had before obtruded itself between him and his love. But he would not let himself be deterred by any thought of a supernatural bar. A few strokes of the pen, and no power, dead or living, might intervene to separate him from Rachel. He could even imagine that this was she herself pressing to his side, and turned, half hoping that it was her dress that had brushed him, her breath that played upon his cheek and hand. But she had not moved. She stood a yard or more distant, a tender smile illumining her features, wholly insensible to anything but human influences. She was thanking Nurse Dalison, who softly murmured good wishes, with a calm happiness touching and beautiful. Marillier bent again over the book; his hand shook and he could not

see where to sign. The Registrar indicated the place with his blunt forefinger; he had some experience of emotional bridegrooms.

‘Caspar Ruel—Chargé d’Affaires—’ and there followed the official setting forth of his position in the service of his Majesty the Emperor of Abaria, his parentage, nationality, and the rest. There the name stood out in blurred but bold outlines, rather different from Ruel Hey’s customary signature, but sufficiently like it to be recognised. Marillier had a sense of having forged the name, and he laid down the pen with a sigh of relief. At that moment, he distinctly felt as if the icy presence withdrew itself. But again, as he saw Rachel stoop with the pen in her slight firm fingers, he seemed to feel the chill cloud rise between them, and she, too, looking up, gave a startled glance as though conscious of something antagonistic and terrifying. But she wrote her name unfalteringly, and the witnesses added their signatures. It was now Marillier’s turn to receive congratulations. Ahmed Hey and Nurse Dalison plied him with pleasant speeches, and he listened and laughed and answered, grateful for the relief which came to him with the effort he had to make in doing so, and in the healthy nearness of these two friends who, it was evident, were not aware of the vague terror that haunted him. The little scene was ended in what appeared an incredibly short space of time. The Registrar departed with his big book, and Ahmed Hey and Nurse Dalison obligingly withdrew in his wake, leaving the newly-wedded pair alone.

Then Rachel in her husband’s arms, glanced up for the first time at the portrait of her father, and she, too, fancied that she saw a cynical smile curving the full red lips.

With a little cry she buried her face in Marillier’s shoulder, and he, tenderly holding her to his breast, begged her to tell him what ailed her, but all the time he knew full well, for in a flash that passed from her to him he was able to read her thought.

‘The Emperor!’ she stammered. ‘Cruel—cruel—I cannot bear to look. Oh, Caspar, do you not see that strange, dreadful smile?’

‘Dear one, you are overwrought—and no wonder, after such a long, trying day. Don’t look at the picture if it makes you nervous.’

‘But can’t you see?’ she said, lifting her eyes as though some fascination drew

them.

‘I will not look,’ he answered with forced lightness.

‘It will be time enough to tremble at the Emperor when the real man faces us. We need not quake before his likeness.’

‘Yes, that is true,’ she said. ‘Till then, we need have no fears, and we will think only of each other. But I can’t stay here, Caspar. The picture may be only a picture, yet the eyes seem to strike into my soul.’

‘Let us go away then, and leave the picture to itself.’

‘I will take you to my own little sitting-room,’ she said brightly. ‘I don’t think you have ever seen it.’

Holding his hand in pleased childlike fashion, she led him through the second drawing-room and along him through the corridor, past the great mirrored ballroom to a small cheerful parlour which the Pacha had given her for her own use. It was a girl’s room; she had been allowed to choose the chintz hangings and low armchairs and little bits of modern furniture which contrasted with the heavy gilt console between the windows and the early Victorian carpet and cabinets. The place was in disorder, for Christine, Rachel’s maid, had been packing there, but it looked very homelike nevertheless. A big fire cast a red glow, and brought out the scent of violets and of a sheaf of mimosa. Rachel drew a chair forward to the fire.

‘Sit there, and let me come to your feet—that’s what I like best. Let us talk—I love talking in the firelight.’

There was a high fender-stool before the fire, but she chose a little fantastic seat made to resemble a toadstool and brought it close to the big armchair. He seated himself as she had desired, and leaned back against the cushions, his eyes wandering round the pretty room, full of her maidenly properties and the flowers she loved, then settling upon the slight form in its nunlike grey, crouching by his side, the brown head on a level with his elbow, the sweet face turned slightly, the slim fingers playing with the white roses in her lap. He let his gaze rest upon the beloved shape, happiness beaming from his eyes; he was filled with content by the very sight of Rachel, not his girl-love who had seemed to him a little while ago unattainable, but his wife in the sanctuary of their hearth. The wild elation

had subsided, giving place to this blissful quietude which he felt to be an earnest of deeper joy. No matter what tomorrow might bring forth, or any tomorrow near or distant, tonight was their own. Tonight made them one.

Yet as he put out his hand and stroked the brown head at his knee and the little caressing fingers which caught and clung to his, that former indefinable horror rose and enveloped him, holding him once more in its deadly toils. And not himself only, but Rachel as well. Upon her, too, the fear fell. He knew it even before he felt her shiver. She started, trembled, and raising her face, looked at him, alarm widening her eyes. He forgot his own dread in anxiety on her account, and braced himself to self-control, for he knew that he must face this ghostly assailant and cow it by the strength of his courage for her. But how fight the invisible—that which could only be felt—that at whose nature he could not, dared not, guess? What was this nameless, formless Thing which intruded itself upon the sanctity even of moments like this—which came between him and the new-made wife he would fain have taken to his breast? What was this terror which neither of them could comprehend? He told himself that, in the first instance, it had been the creation of his own brain and nerves enfeebled by illness. Rachel's fear must have grown from his, from the sight of how it had affected him on that first occasion of their meeting after his illness. Had it not been for his own lack of self-command she would probably never have become acquainted with his impalpable visitant. Now he must show himself of firmer mind. He must not acknowledge, even to himself, that this was aught but fancy. Besides, the feeling was absurd; his reason told him that it would wear off with returning health, change of scene, and, above all, happiness. He would not permit himself to be affected by it. Accordingly he sat up, and deliberately putting out his arms, drew Rachel towards him, with a movement in which there was less of passion than of calm determination. In the shelter of his embrace, in the haven which was her right, she should find security. But he had scarcely pressed her to his heart when the girl disengaged herself and shrank back, trembling violently, and gazing in a strange manner into space.

‘Rachel! What is it?’ he exclaimed. ‘What do you see?’—She still gazed fixedly for a moment or two, then her eyes dropped.

‘Nothing,’ she answered dully. ‘I wish that I could see something. I cannot; I can only feel. But...but...Caspar, there is something there. Someone—something came into this room with us.’

He was silent. At her words, he again felt the pressure of the icy hand he knew. Presently he spoke in a hard voice, making an effort to reassure her.

‘Nonsense, child! You closed the door yourself. Why do you shrink from me?’ He tried to take her hand, but she shivered anew and shook her head. ‘Come close to me,’ he entreated; ‘close, close, and let me warm and comfort you.’

‘I cannot,’ she cried with an hysterical sob. ‘Oh, Caspar, I wish I could. There is something preventing me. It’s as though a form stood between us, and I can’t reach you. I try in vain. I can’t even feel you.’

Her sob deepened with a sound of despair.

‘You can’t feel me?’ he asked harshly, clutching her hands in a grip like that of a vice. ‘Don’t you feel me now?’

She shook her head, drawing herself further away; then pulling her hands from his, she sank sobbing, her head bowed over her knees.

He sprang up with an oath. Marillier was unaccustomed to use rough language, but helpless affright on her account, and resentment at this violation of their privacy, goaded him to blind fury.

‘My God!’ he cried, ‘this is too horrible. What does it mean? Rachel—wife—look at me—speak to me.’

As he rose to his feet the cold shadow seemed to fall away from before him, but when he stooped over her he again felt it between them. Once more he sprang up, rearing himself defiantly, another oath trembling on his lips, and barely checked because he was afraid of terrifying her still further. Her sobs seemed to tear his heart; he did not know how to soothe her.

‘Darling—don’t cry. Believe me, there is nothing which can harm you. You are tired, overstrained, and I am to blame for it. I am, perhaps, not quite myself. We have both had an agitating day, and neither of us is in a specially well-strung condition. Our moods react upon each other. You must have a good night’s rest, and then you will laugh at this fancy. What else could it be? Look round. There is no one here.’

She obeyed him, and, lifting her head, gazed about, her eyes shifting uneasily,

her nostrils distended like those of a frightened animal. She had ceased sobbing, but her trembling would not be stilled, and she shuddered afresh when he came closer to her, beseeching his forgiveness with a pathetic smile, yet shrinking the more. He turned away baffled, suffering intensely.

‘I will leave you, my dear,’ he said, the words choking him. ‘It is best that I should go. Ask Nurse Dalison to give you a little bromide; that will make you sleep. Don’t distress yourself; you will be all right in the morning, and then I shall come and see you. Remember, you must get sleep, because of your journey.’

‘Yes,’ she replied meekly, looking up at him as he stood a few feet from her, supporting himself by the back of the chair from which he had risen. The immediate horror had died out of her face, but she still looked frightened and was very pale.

‘You are going, Caspar?’ There was a note of relief in her voice which hurt him, but he answered calmly.

‘I think, my dear,’ he said, ‘that we’ve neither of us got over the nerve upset of that horrid accident. I was not fit to see you the first time you came to me after it, and I believe that then I started this gruesome notion. The wisest thing I can do is to dose myself too, and sleep it off. You will see that when I come to you in the morning, we shall both be fresh and strong, and courageous enough to encounter either emperors or ghosts.’

His speech broke, and the laugh he tried to give ended in a quaver. He had not anticipated such a close to their marriage day, and as he thought of her brave giving of herself to him—an assurance of her love that he could not doubt—his disappointment was almost more than he could bear. He looked imploringly at her. Had she made a movement towards him, he would have tried to lock her in his arms again, but the shrinking in her was evident; a shrinking he felt to be not from him, but from the whole situation, from the terror she so clearly realised and could not understand. She put her hand upon the high fender-stool, and raised herself slowly and with difficulty; he dared not offer to help her. When she had risen, they stood face to face, the chair between them—the chair which to both seemed filled by an unearthly intruder. For a minute they were silent, spellbound. Then he roused himself.

‘Remember—you must have rest,’ he repeated. ‘Get to bed soon—it’s the best thing for you.’

‘Yes,’ she said submissively, her mouth twitching, her eyes upon his face, but with no light of love in them; his suggestion of leaving her was obviously not unwelcome. He paused and waited, but he knew it was in vain. How could she wish him to stay only to keep him at arm’s length? And there could be no closing of heart to heart, of lips to lips, since they were not alone. Invisible eyes were upon them.

‘Ring the bell,’ he said shakily. ‘You are nearest to it. Ask Nurse Dalison to come to you. She had better look after you tonight. I—I will go.’

Then, as the girl turned, thankfully it seemed to him, to press the electric button behind her, he walked back across the room to the door, a man with his desire frustrated even in the hour of fulfilment, that sweet desire beating like a live thing in his breast, but maimed, imprisoned, helpless.

Chapter XXIV

THE BLUE LAND

It was the country of the Kabyles—the Blue Land, as a French writer has called it.

A road wound round Djebel-el-Khâyal, which, being interpreted, is the Ghost Mountain, and which stands sentinel, as it were, at the entrance to those almost inaccessible fastnesses, where, in the past, the wild tribes struggled for so long, and held their independence against foreign invaders, and where indeed, at this very time, the fierce and fanatical Arabs of the Beni-Asser and other tribes are always in a condition of more or less smouldering revolt.

The distant sea of mountains rolled in great waves to the horizon, and there, in the clear light of that late January day, shone the pale crests of a snow-covered range like some far-off shore bounding an immense inland lake, while, in the foreground, sweeping lines of near hills were drawn against that misty sea, their furrowed sides, dark with pines, falling into the broad plain of the Bahira, that stretched like the estuary of a river to the coast.

Spring was spreading its earliest flush. The almond trees were abloom by the roadside about the white-washed Moorish houses with their thick straight walls and eyelet windows; the mimosa hung forth sheets of gold; the tender vine shoots on the sunny slopes, gave out a pleasant smell; the asphodels here and there, opened starry blossoms; on the hillsides, the pines had pale brownish-green spikes and tassels, and the bare trees were putting forth buds.

Curious sandy mounds rose on either side of this bit of road. Sometimes they were bald, with bubble-like protuberances in the crumbly earth, sometimes overgrown with lentiscus, which, in places, had a russet tinge like autumn foliage; sometimes, round these mounds, plants of the wild onion threw out tufts of flabby leaves and lifted tiny pillars of blue buds.

There came a turn in the winding road which always mounted steadily, and Khayal's great scarred hump seemed to rear itself like a barrier in front of a little cortège that was travelling at walking pace—three carriages drawn by lean Arab horses, and driven by Arab drivers. These carriages and their occupants

represented the following and appanage suitable to Mademoiselle Isàdas's rank, which the Emperor had desired should be provided for her journey to Abaria, In the first carriage, Rachel and Nurse Dalison sat on the front seat, accompanied by Marillier, who faced them; in the second were Baptiste the courier, Rachel's maid, and the valet of Ruel Bey; the third held luggage and two Arab servants engaged in Algiers.

The country grew wilder and the road more uneven. 'Eheu!...Chiffa!... Empske!...' cried the driver, flicking his bony beasts and shaking their rope harness; and down the carriage rattled where the road dipped and zigzagged, coming almost into collision with a pair of stately Bedouins who were riding slowly from the opposite direction. Now they passed a small procession of Kabyles, a family evidently moving house, their furniture strapped on mules, and two or three children striding beside the women, who wore striped haiks and huge barbaric—looking pins and necklaces. These smiled and gesticulated pleasantly at the foreigners with a freedom of manner different from that of the veiled women of the coast.

There was a stir of scirocco, and the wind blew almond blossoms almost into Rachel's lap as they passed through a tiny village where was a restaurant and one or two orange gardens. The scent of orange flowers mingled with the aromatic fragrance of limes and lentiscus and Mediterranean heath; the wind soughed and sighed dreamily; light clouds were drifting and throwing changeful shadows upon Khayal, making the ravines look blacker and more mysterious, and dappling the great grey plain of the Bahira. How beautiful it was, how intoxicating, this blue land, thought Rachel, laughing aloud with a childlike pleasure in the scene, in the thought that she was breathing her native air, that she was revisiting the country in which she had been born. But an expression of melancholy crossed her face, dimming its gladness just as a passing cloud darkened the sunshine on Khâyal. This was that land to which her mother had fled in pain and despair. Rachel O'Hara's dying eyes had gazed upon that blue sea of mountains, as her own eyes were gazing now. Beneath the shadow of Khayal lay her mother's grave, and here the Gate of Ghosts had in truth opened for that poor victim of an Eastern monarch's passion. It was odd that not till now had Rachel looked upon her mother as a definite fact in her existence. She had thought little of her before, had scarcely cared to speculate upon her fate, but since they had set foot in Algeria, the memory had been ever present with the girl, and she had been beset by a strong desire to see the old Moorish castle in which Rachel O'Hara had died, the house which was now her own.

Circumstance had favoured the fulfilment of her wish, though when she had mentioned it on board the steamer to Marillier he had shown a gentle opposition, pointing out to her that the Emperor's command made it incumbent upon them to present themselves with as little delay as possible at the court of Abaria. She had not at the time questioned his argument; shyness held her back, and a certain constraint seemed to have crept up between them. Whilst travelling, he made no attempt to break it, and there had naturally been few opportunities when they were on the railway for so doing. But when they arrived in Algiers it was found that the steamer in which they were to have continued their way along the coast was temporarily disabled, and that they had the choice of making a long and difficult land journey or of waiting four days till the boat was ready to put to sea. Marillier seemed half inclined for the land journey; in truth, he dreaded inaction, and, moreover, had an odd feeling that he must, as far as he was able, obey the Emperor's orders to the letter. It seemed to him, reasoning he owned somewhat fantastically, that having violated the unwritten code of honour by his marriage, he was bound to discharge literally every other obligation in regard to Rachel laid upon him by her father. There were moments, too, when he was struck by the disagreeable notion that he was being unconsciously influenced by the invisible intruder who had come between them upon their marriage night. However that might be, it was certain that something had held him back from making any further claim upon his wife, at least for the present, and with a pang he perceived that while wondering at his attitude, it was nevertheless a relief to her. Was it possible that she dreaded those four days in Algiers where they must be thrown more upon each other's company, and wished for the distraction of movement. He had nothing to say when she again brought forward her wish to see the place where her mother had died. The request was a perfectly natural one, and there was reason in her plea that as it was uncertain what the Emperor would decide in regard to their future life, they would be foolish in losing this chance of seeing a home legally hers, and in which she might later be compelled to live. She had ascertained that Bab-el-Khâyalât was a day's railway journey and a five or six hours' drive from Algiers, and that it would be quite practicable for them to spend a day and two nights at the château, and return in time to pick up their steamer. Thus she overruled his vague scruples, for which indeed, he had but slender ground. Baptiste set the telegraph wires in motion, and so it came about that they were now among the Kabyle mountains within a little distance of their destination.

There was pleased expectancy upon Rachel's face, and she showed a girlish interest in the unfamiliar sights and sounds around her. The beauty of the scenery

charmed her. The picturesque Arabs and Kabyles appealed to her imagination; the dress and manners of the people amused her; she was delighted to chatter French once more to the simple country folk at the inns and farmhouses at which they occasionally stopped. New scenes and the excitement of travelling had swept away the horror of her marriage night; she had not forgotten that strange supernatural dread which she had been forced to share with Lucien; in fact, each time she looked at her husband's worn face and noted his preoccupied air, she was reminded of it and compelled to realise the intangible barrier between them, but she was ready now to attribute the whole occurrence to overstrained nerves and to the brain injury he had undergone, from which she felt sure he had not yet recovered. Even that evening after he had left her, in all her own pain and perplexity, she had set herself so to look upon the matter, and Nurse Dalison's sympathetic and diplomatic counsel had strengthened the belief. Certainly Nurse Dalison had thought it strange that the newly-married pair should cut short their first interview after the marriage in a manner which Rachel's half-hysterical explanations showed her to be out of the ordinary course of things; but when the bridegroom's directions in regard to the administering of bromide and the necessity of procuring sleep for the overwrought girl had been given, she had accepted the situation as sufficiently explainable, only wondering at the forethought and consideration, which reminded her of Doctor Marillier, but for which she would hardly have given Ruel Bey credit.

Nurse Dalison saw at once that the girl was physically overdone, and decided that it was no strange matter that she should have been delivered into her care. Both nurse and woman in her were flattered by the trust, and she acquitted herself with discretion, bidding Rachel look happily forward to a deferred honeymoon amid the palms and orange groves of Abaria. Nurse Dalison herself was full of pleased anticipation, and all through the journey had been in a condition of mild effervescence. It was quite in accordance with her views upon the situation, that the hurriedly-united pair should delay their matrimonial confidences till under the shadow of the Emperor's protection. That would be what Nurse Dalison called 'nice.' She had no other word in which to express her feelings. It was much 'nicer' that she should continue for the present faithfully to discharge the duties of chaperon, and she was confirmed in these orthodox sentiments by the demeanour of the newly-married pair. Clearly, neither of them desired otherwise.

Nurse Dalison echoed Rachel's amused little exclamations and comments upon the scenes through which they were passing; she had a red Murray in her lap;

ever since their departure from England she had been reading it diligently, and was an encyclopedia, from the tourist's point of view, in regard to Algeria and all known parts of Abaria.

Marillier, sitting opposite the two women, said little; he frankly professed ignorance of such information as Murray's guide-book supplied, and silently encouraged Nurse Dalison to pour it forth liberally, welcoming the cover it gave to his own reflections. His mind, like Rachel's, was on the stretch, and full of a strange expectancy. In him, this took the form of foreboding, and he too looked forward, but with conflicting emotions, to the time they were to spend in the place where Rachel O'Hara had died, and the Pacha's tragedy had been enacted; where too, the mandrake had been torn from its kindred and from the soil which had nurtured it. Instinctively, his hand moved to the leather case on the seat beside him, which he never allowed to pass into other hands than his own. Nurse Dalison noticed the gesture.

'I have been wondering, Ruel Bey,' she said in her italicised fashion of speech, 'what important despatches you are carrying in that box. They must be very important, for—you will be amused—Baptiste complained to me pathetically the other day, when you were leaving the boat with Rachel on one arm and all the wraps and the precious box as well on the other, that there was not much *éclat* in travelling with a suite since monsieur insisted on making of himself a beast of burden.'

Nurse Dalison's thin little laugh was echoed by Marillier, but he said nothing. Rachel's hand stole timidly towards him and rested for a moment on his knee.

'Mon ami, the box and its contents do indeed seem to weigh heavily. I cannot rouse you to any interest in this wonderful country. Or is it that you have travelled through it so often that it has lost its charm.'

Marillier, thrilled by her touch, imprisoned the fluttering hand, but instantly released it, and Rachel drew back again into her corner of the carriage.

'Yet although the country has lost all its novelty for you because you know it so well,' she went on, with a pretty pettishness, 'you can't tell me anything about the Roman remains near Bab-el-Khâyalât, and which we must certainly try and see tomorrow.'

'Roman remains,' he echoed absently. 'I had not heard of them.'

‘But, my Caspar, I have heard you talk of this Kabyle country—though then I did not know that I should ever be the possessor of a Moorish castle in it. I have heard you speak of the Roman ruins.’

‘Many of the Moorish fortresses have been built of Roman stones,’ he said a little impatiently. ‘I am not an archæologist, my dear.’

‘At least,’ she said, disappointed, ‘I thought you would have been interested in knowing that the tower of Château Khayal is supposed to have been inhabited more or less in its original condition since the time of Genseric, who, the guide-book says, only partly destroyed it. Think of living in a building which Genseric tried to destroy! I should like to sleep there tonight, Caspar, if it is in any way possible.’

He smiled upon her, rousing himself to sympathy with her mood.

‘But I am interested, deeply interested,’ he said; and if it can be managed, and I haven’t the least doubt that Baptiste will be equal to the occasion, you shall have your wish and sleep in Genseric’s tower unless the rats and the bats have put it out of the question.’

‘I wish I had thought of it before,’ said Rachel, with a laugh. ‘Baptiste says that “Mademoiselle honoured of the Emperor has only to name her desires and they shall be fulfilled.” Now if I had told Baptiste, he would certainly have telegraphed, and I notice that whenever Baptiste telegraphs the impossible is accomplished.’

‘Perhaps there’s no telegraph station at Bab-el-Khâyâlât,’ remarked Nurse Dalison, who was always practical. ‘Now I think of it, he telegraphed to Milianah. I heard him saying that a messenger would be sent over. Yet I fancy that I read in the guide-book that Bab-el-Khayalat was a military post. We shall soon see,’ and she turned over the leaves of her Murray. Rachel bent over her and read out scraps of information.

‘The modern town...built on the Roman site...formerly barracks for infantry and cavalry...sometime since, disused. (Then I suppose there’s no telegraph.) Ancient bastioned wall...A remarkable fortress now a private residence...tower of great antiquity...built upon an abutment of the wall, and commanding a fine view of Mount Khâyal and the Gorge of the Bahira. Legend and superstition have woven strange romances about this tower, which is well worth a visit,

though it was furnished in modern fashion and turned into a summer residence by its first European occupant, General de Boissy Verneuil, to whom it was given in 1857 by the French government as a reward for his services in the subjugation of Kabylia. The château was sold later by General de Boissy Verneuil's heirs to an Avaranese gentleman in whose possession it remains, but by whom it has been left practically uninhabited. Admission, however, is almost impossible to obtain, as the present owner refuses entrance to tourists.'

'You see,' exclaimed Rachel, triumphantly, 'it is furnished in modern fashion. Then it must be habitable. I wonder who furnished it. I wonder—' she paused, and a wistful look came into her face. 'Tell me the date of the book,' she said. She was wondering if the last occupant of the tower had been her dead mother. She fell into reverie. Marillier divined her thought though he did not question her. The presence of Nurse Dalison restrained him, but Nurse Dalison was soon lost again in the red book and the other two were left to their reflections.

During the whole journey Marillier's mind had been chaotic, tumultuous. Hope, regret, fear, and wild defiance of the unexplainable influence which kept him from the full fruition of his love, blended confusedly within him—defiance predominating; but the time for battle was not yet. When it came, he was determined to wrestle for his love with the ghostly claimant who would take her from him, but, for the present, he felt he must be patient and wait, saying nothing, doing nothing which could augment Rachel's uneasiness. He saw that it still lingered, though he knew that she was trying to persuade herself that the whole thing was illusion due to overfatigue. Since the day it had taken place, she had not mentioned the marriage. He thought that perhaps she did not consider theirs a real marriage yet, and would not do so until the Church had blessed it. That was natural in a girl of such religious tendencies, brought up in the manner Rachel had been, and he liked it in her, but all the same, he longed to convince her of the reality of their union. She was very sweet to him, but the gentle friendliness of her manner made him understand more than any coldness could have done, that she held him at a distance, and he felt bitterly that she was glad to keep Nurse Dalison with them, and to ignore the fact of being his wedded wife. Yet she loved him as she had always done—of that he was convinced, and at times he surprised a look upon her face—a tender, beseeching look, as though she were mutely asking his forgiveness—which went to his heart. That she should feel so towards him touched and saddened him. It was in vain that he told himself that this was but the reaction he might have expected after her frank offering of herself upon their marriage day. Oh, for a few moments of straight

response from her soul to his, of the human self-surrender of wife to husband, the heart—oneness which was their right and should be their joy! He knew it would be his but for that ghostly intruder, and it was then that the spirit of defiance stirred in his breast. During the first part of the journey, he had resolutely put all thought of the spirit-presence from him, feeling, in the condition of his brain, how impossible it was for him to analyse it. But by degrees, some of the mental fog cleared, and he could look back upon that night with calmness though with total lack of understanding. The sea breezes, in their passage across the Mediterranean, had swept his mind and cleared it somewhat of ghastly fantasies. He felt stronger, healthier, more his ordinary self—that self to which he was not yet accustomed, the strange combination of Caspar and Lucien—Lucien, always the more powerful nature of the two, preponderating. His sense of wild elation had gone, and also the uncanny terror which had followed it. He could to some small extent—alas! a very small one—bring his scientific training to bear upon the problem; he felt himself more like the judicial Marillier of old—the man who could see his duty, and go where it bade him. Duty was leading him to Abaria—on that point he made no question. So far he could see. Beyond was darkness.

He had had time to think more collectedly during the stretch of railway from Algiers, and now in this day's drive, he took out his trouble and looked at it. No longer did it press upon his brain, deadening everything else; he could hold it out a little way from him and give it more dispassionate consideration. What was to be done if that ghost—he did not know what else to call it—invariably came between him and his wife? Were this to continue, the situation would become impossible. He tried to look upon it from the medical standpoint; to advise himself as he would have advised a patient similarly situated, who had brought him such a story. He turned over in his mind his past experience as a doctor, and recalled cases that had come under his notice, nearly or remotely resembling his own. But to no avail; he had never heard nor read of one like it. He could find no solution of the difficulty either in his own knowledge or in that which he had gleaned from others—not even in anything that the Pacha, that man of wisdom, had told him. He was obliged to own to himself that were such a story brought to him as a physician, he must, according to ordinary canons, regard it as hallucination. Yet his own experience, and not his own only, but Rachel's evidence as well, convinced him that this thing was no hallucination. And, if not, then what was it? What in fact, he questioned, constitutes a ghost, if it be not the creation of a disordered brain? Do spirits in very truth, as some believe, come and go as they list among men by means of and for reasons of their own? The

Pacha had talked of Wandering Ones doomed to everlasting banishment from material pleasures for which they still craved—could it be one of these? Was it possible that some exiled soul, snatching at opportunity, had found power to control them? It was a horrible thought. Who thus presumed to force the barrier of his presence between them, and by what right? Who amongst the dead dared claim tie or affinity with either Rachel or himself sufficient to compel them at his command, even to the wrecking of their peace and joy?

Swift as lightning, the answer leaped to his brain, Caspar! Only Caspar could find it possible—only Caspar would do it. Numbered amongst the dead; banished to that shadowland, but it might be, still in full consciousness, and doubtless yearning for living delights, Caspar had come to enforce his claim.

Chapter XXV

COUNT VARENZI

As this conviction seized Marillier, he struck his clenched hand upon his knee and a groan escaped him. Caspar was his opponent—Caspar his enemy. Caspar might still contend with him for the woman they both loved. In spite of its seeming contradiction with the known laws of Nature, this solution of the mystery appeared to Marillier a naked and appalling truth. He no longer told himself, as he would have done in days gone by, that there could be no certainty about such supermundane speculation. This, to him, was no wild conjecture, but an inspirational flash, which beat upon his reason and showed him clearly that he stood upon the borders of that world beyond matter, into which the Pacha had so longed to penetrate.

When at length he had entered it, the Pacha's dead hand had been extended from its confines, as he had said it would be, to protect the lonely girl he had been forced to leave. Marillier did not doubt this, and though he had occasionally wondered whether Isàdas, from his invisible vantage ground, had known and disapproved of that hasty marriage, he felt it would not be the Pacha's wish to separate them. In his own odd way the old man had cared for his doctor, and had desired only the girl's happiness. Even supposing he could have prevented their union, he would have been more likely to await results calmly and leave them to work out their own destiny. No, it was not the Pacha who had intervened between them—Marillier was convinced of that. It could be only Caspar. The revelation kindled fresh fire in his breast—fresh determination. He would fight with Caspar still; fight and conquer by the aid of those supreme forces of which the Pacha had spoken—Love and Will. They should arm him against this malignant influence, the more dreadful because of its unknown powers.

In awe, Marillier asked himself how much of Caspar had died, how much remained to wreak vengeance upon his supplanter, and how far would that vengeance extend? It was his own body—the body of Lucien Marillier—which crumbled in the grave at Kensal Green, but the spirit which had been released was not his own, and Marillier realised the deathless ness of spirit. Houseless, homeless, bereft, this spirit might well return to claim its human rights and its living habitation. For the fine frame that he had stolen, Marillier cared little in

itself; his position, social and official, the honours he so unwillingly bore, he would have relinquished gladly—he had usurped them only as the means to an end—but for Rachel he would contend with the living or the dead. He had wooed her under false colours, but her heart was, he knew, inalienably his, and not Caspar's. By the might of their mutual love and the strength of his will, he could make her entirely his own. Now that he recognised his opponent, the way seemed easier, the goal nearer. A sigh, as of relief, broke from him, his hand unclenched, and he became again conscious of his surroundings. Rachel, who had been disturbed by his exclamation, was looking at him anxiously with questioning eyes. She had not liked to break in upon his abstraction with an ill-timed remark, for she saw plainly that his mind was filled with painful thoughts. As the cloud partially cleared from his brow she met his look with a troubled smile, wondering how she could divert his attention. Just then the driver called out excitedly some words in Arabic, and bent back from his box gesticulating with his whip. 'Bab-el-Khâyalât,' he cried, 'Bab-el-Khâyalât!'

'Oh, look!' exclaimed Rachel. 'Caspar, that must be the town and the tower of the château. Oh, Caspar, you can never have seen anything half so beautiful.' In her eagerness she had risen, dragging Nurse Dalison from the seat, and both women, clinging to the back of it, were straining out over the ravine which the carriage was skirting. A sharp bend brought them in full view of one of the finest landscapes that even Marillier had ever beheld.

The central peak of Mount Khayal, a spur of which they had been rounding, reared itself close to their left—a gigantic rock cloven into mighty precipices, furrowed with great fissures, rising naked out of the dark pine forest below, desolate and gloomy beyond words; and, as it reflected the red light of a lowering sun, glowing with lurid and almost sinister splendour. The pine forest broke abruptly near the mountain base, and another great precipice dropped sheer into the ravine, which, from the point of view of the occupants of the carriage, seemed fathomless, but they could hear the roar of a torrent and could see a milky band winding down the valley to join the river which watered the plain of the Bahira.

The torrent came into sight, dashing in foamy eddies over the rocks of the ravine, where the spur terminated sharply as though a knife had cleft it uncertainly, leaving a little way below the summit, a natural ledge utilised for fortifications. Below again was a sheer drop of bare rock, making a precipice several hundred feet high, and from the base of this, sloped mounds of débris

covered with undergrowth, where big grey boulders seemed to be tumbling into the gorge. Beyond the spur, south and west to the horizon, spread the upheaved sea of mountains, their further peaks snow-covered, showing gorgeous opal hues against the sky. Between these distant peaks and the grey cloudy plain of the Bahira, humps and peaks uprose like foaming waves, shaping themselves in the strangest and most fantastic forms, which here and there, had a grotesque human semblance. No doubt it was this feature of the scenery that had suggested the Arab name of the place—Bab-el-Khâyalât, the Gate of Ghosts.

On the extreme point of the spur, crowning the precipice and commanding gorge and plain, stood what had formerly been an impregnable fortress. The bastions and buttresses and a mighty round tower, with square battlements, which had beneath them a machicolated parapet, stood out boldly against the sky. A very eyrie it looked, perched upon that abutting crag, and unapproachable except from the rear—the saddle-back ridge of the isthmus-like spur. Even here, the castle was guarded, for the irregular wall that encircled it dipped in the middle of the ridge, where clearly, a deep fosse had been dug. It did not seem surprising that the Numidian tribes had never been brought into strict allegiance to the empire of Rome, or that having in later ages enrolled themselves under the banner of the Prophet, the Berbers, entrenched in such strongholds as these, should in more modern times have defied Christian invasion.

The tower placed at one corner of the building which—as far as could be judged from a distance, seemed a curious blending of times and styles—stood on a slight projection of the crag, and almost overhung the ramparts and the torrent hundreds of feet below. It faced the Mount of Ghosts, and in every other direction, the view from its battlemented summit must have been superbly panoramic. As the road turned, it could be seen from the carriage that the rocky height sloped gradually on the side furthest from the tower, and was laid out in terraces and garden to the level of the rampart wall. Vivid patches of green flecked grey walls and bastions, and a brilliant sheet of yellow showed the position of a tiny orange grove, while here and there, were splashes of deep mauve, the colour of the bougainvillea blossoms; and growing slantwise, bent in that exposed place by the force of the wind, were a clump of venerable palms.

As the travellers drew nearer, and the twists of the zigzag gave a view of the castle from different points of observation, the rampart walk could be discerned stretching round the edge of the cliff, rounding it and breaking off abruptly at the steepest fall of the ground. It was accessible from the more modern town, half

French half Mahometan, which spread beyond the entrenchment along the top of the ridge. The town was a picturesque place of its sort, but it had the decayed and dreary appearance of a settlement once fairly flourishing, now no longer of importance. This was accounted for by its having been a military post, deserted when warlike operations ceased. On the outskirts, the empty barracks were falling to pieces, soldiers being no longer needed since the tribes had settled into peaceful submission to European rule, and the Berber chiefs had, metaphorically speaking, changed their swords into reaping hooks. For, though the Kabyle mountains still harboured a fierce spirit of revolt, it was evident that round the town at any rate, the population was more agricultural than predatory, notwithstanding that the poor soil lent itself unwillingly to the cultivation of vines and olive trees.

The carriages rolled along an avenue of unlopped planes, their bare leprous-looking branches interlacing overhead. The minaret of a mosque showed among them, and presently, the travellers passed by its outer court, wherein was a fountain shaded by two gnarled orange trees. The fruit hung upon them in golden balls, and there were flowers also, which scented the air faintly. Beyond was the tomb of a Marabout, ornamented with gay flags and Prophet's banners of green and gold. The white-draped, hooded Arabs and veiled women prostrate before it, turned at the rattle of the carriages, and suspended their devotions to take a look at the unwonted arrivals, but a group of more stately persons in turbans and burnouses, who were drinking coffee on a projecting part of the old wall, scarcely paused in their talk to notice the newcomers, and turned only the imperturbable Eastern gaze upon Rachel and Nurse Dalison, when their attention was attracted by the ejaculations of pleased surprise at the picturesqueness of the scene which both women involuntarily uttered.

The cortège halted before a pair of great gates set between massive walls of yellowish grey stone. At the corners of the wall, were rounded turrets, with loopholes, whence the approach of a marauding band might be seen afar for an immense distance. One of these turrets abutted on a square platform with low parapet, from which a few steps led to the ramparts. These ramparts, supported by great bulwarks and bastions of crumbling stone, seemed, as has been said, to extend round the end of the promontory upon which the castle was built. Facing the platform, and connected with it by a narrow roadway, was a small hotel restaurant, the link between ancient fortress and modern town. The platform was evidently used as an open-air drinking place supplied by the hotel, for Arab waiters were passing to and fro along the little causeway, carrying Moorish trays,

with brass jugs of thick steaming coffee, and little odd embossed egg-shaped cups.

Marillier, looking along the ramparts which appeared to overhang the gorge and the river, remembered the Pacha's account of his despairing vigils after the death of Rachel's mother, and the strange story of the finding of the mandrake that he had heard a few months back in the Abarian Embassy in London; the story which had then seemed to him distant and visionary as an Eastern fairy tale, but which now returned to him startlingly near and absolutely real. He found himself gazing curiously out upon the wooded spurs which projected below, and appeared to support the great hump of Djebel-el-Khâyal, and wondering upon which of these slopes the insane root had been gathered.

Now, as one of the Arab servants pulled the rusty bell wire, and set ghostly echoes reverberating, a toothless dame—an old French peasant woman in short blue skirt and flapping hat, just visible in the darkness of the doorway—left her distaff and spindle, and clanked her wooden clogs down the stone-paved way. She drew the bolts, and with difficulty and by aid of the Arabs, swung back the heavy gates, curtseying as the carriages passed through, and muttering in unintelligible patois some words of welcome.

Rachel, all radiant, smiled and nodded. She felt like a girl-queen entering for the first time her newly-inherited dominion. The gates clanged-to behind them. They were in a large, mediæval looking court, with a stone fountain and tall plane tree in the centre, and narrow windows looking down into it on two sides—the windows of what might once have been soldiers' quarters. The third side was filled by a higher, more imposing building, irregular in architecture, one end square, and though undoubtedly ancient, of more recent date than the huge round tower at the other end, which was built of great square blocks of a yellowish-grey stone, crumbling with age, yet of such solid masonry as to have defied during centuries, the ravages of time and weather. The tower had three stories, with a sort of balcony projecting below the battlemented top, and the immense thickness of its walls could be judged from the window openings, which, curiously, instead of narrowing, widened towards the summit.

The whole château was a strange mixture of the ancient Roman, Moorish and mediæval. The tower, at all events the body of it, went back to Pagan days, but there had been added on to it a Moorish palace, and presently the travellers found themselves in a tiled court where a fountain plashed and a gallery jutted

out supported on arabesque arches and slim pillars. Just outside the court was a slaves' gallery with tiled seats, and through an open archway within, a glimpse could be caught of what might once have been the harem garden, a dim walled-in square with gravelled walks roofed by the foliage of old orange trees.

The custodian, a venerable man in green livery, with long white hair and a quavering voice, ushered them through the outer Court, bowing all the time and walking backwards before Rachel, for Baptiste had already taken care to explain that this young lady, honoured by the Emperor of Abaria, was not only proprietress of the château, but, by special command, was on her way to the Abarian court, that she might be decorated with a distinguished order by the Imperial hands.

The custodian, who told them his name was Armand, looked duly impressed but somewhat bewildered. Encouraged by Rachel, however, he soon chattered volubly after the manner of an old retainer. For over twenty-five years, he said, he had been custodian of the château—he, and his wife who was now dead, and his son and daughter; and not once during that time since the day his master had left it had the state rooms been opened for the accommodation of a visitor. Picture then the surprise, the consternation, which had fallen upon them with the appearance of the messenger from Milianah, with the telegram bidding him prepare for the arrival of mademoiselle and her suite. How were they to provide comforts and repasts such as mademoiselle no doubt was accustomed to? He had been informed that mademoiselle was escorted by an honourable officer in the service of the Emperor. He craved the pardon of monsieur, and threw himself upon the clemency of mademoiselle and of his Excellency for the excuse of shortcomings. They had done their best in the haste that was necessary to make suitable preparations. The beds were aired, fires had been lighted since yesterday morning all over the château. Mademoiselle would find everything clean, well cared for, and each room exactly as it had been left at the departure of the Count and the death of the sweet madame, his kinswoman. Ah I but it had been a sad business! He—Armand—though twenty-five years were passed, remembered as if it had been yesterday, the beautiful lady who had died, and the grief of monsieur the Count. And the little baby—did mademoiselle know whether the child had lived and flourished, and would mademoiselle condescend to inform him concerning his master's health? For so many years no news had come to Armand, and for him, monsieur the Count had ceased to exist. It was true the payments were generous, and by them he knew that he was not forgotten, but they were always made through a notary, and the instructions were ever the same

—nothing to be disturbed—the rooms of the poor madame to be kept as she had left them, and, above all, no strangers to be admitted. Armand, as mademoiselle would see, had faithfully obeyed the orders, cherishing the hope that his master would one day return. Truly, he had become greatly attached to the Count during the months of his stay at the château, though that was so many years ago. It was a great soul, a noble and sympathetic heart, which had cared for the happiness of others, and especially for those who had done kindness to her he loved. Ah! there were people still in Bab-el-Khâyalât better off through the goodness of monsieur the Count. There were the children of the woman who had nursed madame and who owed their farm to him. And there was the maid of madame—dead now—she too had received a large dowry; and in truth there was no one who had ever done a kindness to madame or to the Count himself, whom this man with the great heart had not rewarded. It would be a joy, not to Armand only, but to those others too, if mademoiselle could give good news of monsieur the Count.

Rachel had been listening eagerly, scarcely speaking during the latter part of the old man's talk. He had brought them into a room with deep recesses, which were lined with Persian and Damascus tiles, and furnished with divans upholstered in faded embroidery. There were rugs upon the floor; a wood fire blazed upon the hearth, before which chairs were drawn, and the table in the middle was set. The room looked homelike, and Rachel had a dazed feeling that the twenty-five years must be a dream, and that only yesterday it was inhabited.

‘The Count,’ she repeated to Marillier. ‘I don't understand. Who does he mean?’

‘He is speaking of Count Varenzi, whom we have known as Isâdas Pacha,’ replied Marillier, gravely.

‘But,’ cried Rachel, ‘can it be Excellence of whom he tells such stories? Excellence never seemed to care about anyone.’

‘He loved your mother,’ said Marillier. ‘When she was taken from him he changed altogether. There were two persons in the man we knew—Varenzi of the great heart was one; Isâdas, the cynical Ambassador, was the other.’

Rachel turned away to hide a rush of tears. The memory of Isâdas in his softer moods came back to her; Isâdas, touched by the Irish melodies her mother had sung; Isâdas, as he had shown himself upon that last night of his life.

‘I knew that he was not really what he seemed,’ she said gently, as soon as she could speak. ‘He would have been kind and tender even to me if I had been more like my mother, and less my father’s child.’

Nurse Dalison who, with her usual tact, had turned away and occupied herself in studying the tiles over the fireplace, now addressed a few words to the old man in her excellent French, but he answered at random, his eyes fixed on Rachel. ‘If mademoiselle only knew how often he had thought of Count Varenzi,’ he went on, desiring to assure himself of his master’s well being. He feared that there must be something amiss. Probably monsieur was acquainted with the Count and knew in what country he had lived during all these years, and why he had never revisited Algeria. Had he then sold the château, since mademoiselle was now its proprietress?’

‘My friend,’ said Marillier, kindly, ‘I am sorry to tell you that you can never see your master again in Algeria. He died in England about six weeks ago. The château he bequeathed to this lady who may perhaps return here later, after her visit to Abaria, and for that reason wished to see it on her way to see the Emperor.’

‘My master dead!’ exclaimed the old man in genuine dismay. ‘But why in England, monsieur? I remember having heard him say to madame that of all countries in the world he would like least to live in England.’

‘Count Varenzi, as he was to you, held the post of Abarian Ambassador to the English court,’ explained Marillier. ‘We, who knew him in England, knew him as Isàdas Pacha.’

‘I have heard that name,’ answered the old man. ‘I have read in the journals of Isàdas Pacha—I never guessed that it was my master. But I understand—yes, I can comprehend. There was naught in the world for my master when madame died. He wished to bury the past, to take another country and another name.’

‘That is no doubt true,’ said Marillier. ‘Count Varenzi went back to the service of the Emperor of Abaria, which he had left for a short time, and became another man. Perhaps it is well you did not know him as Isàdas Pacha, for he must have greatly changed. Yet he was a man much honoured, and died full of years and dignities.’

The old custodian made an expressive movement.

‘Ay! twenty-five years ago the Count was no longer young, and I sometimes wondered even then that the fire of hope and love should burn so brightly in his heart. But there was the child, Excellency—the girl-baby whom my master took away—I have heard nothing of her since. Did the child die also, or did she live to be a daughter to the Count, and console him for the loss of her mother?’ He stopped and looked intently at Rachel. Her identity with that girl-baby had a moment ago occurred to him.

‘Blind fool that I am!’ he exclaimed. ‘How is it possible that I did not at once recognise the smile—the heavenly smile of madame which, notwithstanding the years, has remained imprinted on my memory? Yes, there is a resemblance, and yet it is not so very striking. Mademoiselle will pardon my stupidity. I am the very humble servant of my lady who has come to claim her inheritance.’

The tears shone still in Rachel’s eyes, though her lips were smiling. Deeply touched, she put out her hand, and the old man kissed it as some feudal dependant might have kissed the hand of his liege. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘I am grateful to you for remembering my mother, and for caring so much. Although, as this gentleman told you, your master seemed different afterwards from what you have described him to be when he was Count Varenzi, still I am certain his heart never really changed, and to the last day of his life he thought of my mother and loved her. By—and-by,’ she went on hurriedly, ‘I should like you to show me her rooms and everything that belonged to her.’

The old man explained that, not knowing for whom he had been bidden to make ready, and mindful of Count Varenzi’s orders, he had not thought of preparing those special rooms. Not that they had been neglected. Fires were regularly lighted, and the bits of furniture dusted and hangings brushed and kept in repair as far as was possible, but his master’s command had been that nothing should be taken down or disturbed, and so even the very flowers that madame had arranged the day before her death were crumbling into powder in their vases. The Count had himself locked the two rooms, her salon and the chamber in which she had died, and had given the keys to him—Armand—with injunctions that no one but he and his wife should enter them; he had faithfully obeyed that injunction. Now the keys must be delivered to mademoiselle. Meanwhile, it might please mademoiselle to inspect the ordinary apartments. This was the salon, and yonder—pointing to a further room lined with bookcases and with a large writing-table near the fireplace—was the library in which Count Varenzi had usually sat. The bedroom intended for mademoiselle opened into it, and

beyond was a small chamber where the Count's valet had slept. On the other side of the large salon, were the rooms which had been arranged for the rest of the party.

He led them round. A cheerful little chamber was assigned to Nurse Dalison, and one barer and less comfortable to Marillier. Rachel demurred at sight of it. Surely something better might be provided. The windows were curtainless, the outlook was sunless, the walls seemed damp. Monsieur was still an invalid, and the room was hardly suitable for one recovering from illness. Marillier laughed, and declared the accommodation was good enough—far more luxurious than he had expected to find it. Nevertheless, her solicitude on his behalf was delightful to him, and her pretty assumption of authority pleased him greatly. Rachel insisted that another room must be got ready. It was important in this gentleman's state of heath, she said, that he should have warm sunshine, and, above all, no draughts. The old custodian looked embarrassed and made wordy apologies. He was desolated, but what could he do? Sleeping resources, in spite of the size of the château, were limited. There was but one other guest-room in the inhabited part of the building, and that was in the tower. It was not a bad room, but for a quarter of a century no one had slept in it, and then only for the sake of coolness; it could not be recommended for a winter chamber or for an invalid. The bed certainly was aired; there could be no danger of damp. As for sunshine, truly the sun had free entrance from three sides of the heavens; there was as much as might be at this season, but from all four quarters of the sky the wind came in also, and mademoiselle might conceive that the snowy blast from the Djurdjura mountain would penetrate every crevice of the windows which went all round the tower and gave a view to which nothing in Algeria could compare. But for draughts and the requirements of an invalid, mademoiselle might judge for herself, and he shrugged eloquently.

Yes, mademoiselle would judge for herself Rachel laughed; she had an idea—so, with a quick glance, she informed Nurse Dalison and Marillier. They would see. Did Nurse Dalison think she might venture to make the tottering old man guide them up the tower staircase? Was there ever anything out of a romance so picturesque and fascinating as this dear faithful custodian? Nurse Dalison agreed. The old man appealed to her imagination; he was quite in the picture. She had gathered up a few art phrases in the course of her professional experience. Yes, he was perfectly harmonious with his setting; a different creature would have spoiled the composition. Of course, he was able to mount the stairs, far better than herself, as she must confess to the headache of

overfatigue which invariably attacked her after a day in the open air. But she couldn't resist the tower; they would go and look at it, only she sincerely hoped that there was nothing rash in Rachel's idea.

Rachel laughed again. They were in the room which had been allotted her, and which was large, well-carpeted and handsomely furnished, with a bed like a catafalque, heavily draped in deep crimson, and reminding her of the great bier in the ballroom of the Abarian Embassy, upon which the dead Pacha had lain in state. When told that this was the room Count Varenzi had occupied, she shuddered.

'I will not sleep here,' she said to Marillier. 'It is too gloomy. You shall take this room, mon ami, and I will go to the tower. That is my idea. It is not so very venturesome, is it? You see, Fate evidently intends to gratify my silly fancies. Didn't I say that I longed to sleep in the tower which is older than Genseric? Now, if Fate had not arranged matters, how is it likely that I should have found a room in it quite habitable, and where the bed has been aired in readiness?'

'Fate must have looked a long way ahead,' remarked Nurse Dalison, drily, 'for the room seems to have been arranged before you were born. I don't quite like your idea, Rachel; it's not a very wise one, but we'll come and have a look at the tower, and probably that will convince you better than I can.'

Nurse Dalison was obliged to own, however, that the tower room, though curtainless and exposed to all the winds that blew, was not uninviting. The furniture was comparatively modern, and the bed looked extremely comfortable. One might have conjectured that a woman had arranged it, there were so many suggestions of feminine taste. Rachel remarked this, and a deeper, if somewhat mournful, interest was imparted to the place by the custodian's reply.

The Count had arranged this room for madame, and she had slept in it for a short time during the great summer heat. That had been soon after her arrival at the château, when she had been still equal to mounting the steep staircase. Latterly, this had been impossible, and she had died in the bedroom below; but at the beginning, madame had liked to spend whole days in the tower, and in the long summer evenings, she and the Count used to amuse themselves studying the stars from the upper storey, where a telescope had been fixed and still remained in position.

There was no question now in Rachel's mind. She took off her hat and laid it down with an air of having definitely chosen her resting-place. She requested that her luggage might be brought her, and her maid sent up, and met with wilful raillery all the remonstrances which Nurse Dalison put forth.

'Lonely! I am never lonely when I have sky and mountains near me. Besides, the staircase leads almost directly into the salon, and if I felt frightened and cried out, you'd all hear me as distinctly as though I were calling through a speaking tube, and could rush up in a few moments and protect me, if there were any need, from bats and beetles, though I don't see any sign of either. Now you know I love draughts, and I never could have the windows open as I liked in England because of the fog. There's no fog here. And I adore the sound of the wind. It reminds me of my little turret at the convent. To be able once again to look straight up into the sky and see the stars will be a joy that I have longed for, ever since I left France. Now, my dear friend,' as Nurse Dalison continued to make objections, reasonable and unreasonable, 'just fancy your asking if there's a lightning conductor! Does one have thunderstorms in Algeria in January?' she demanded, in French, of the custodian.

He shook his head doubtfully. It was not usual, but in this mountainous region anything of the sort was possible. He remembered that the great thunderstorm, in which the Commandant's house was struck and the Commandant's son killed, had taken place in the beginning of February. Only last winter there had been a waterspout, and a thunderbolt had fallen and was now on view in the Musée at Milianah. Armand had heard, too, of an Arab prophet who declared that the destruction of the Commandant's house and son had been due to the vengeance of God—the God of Mahomet, of course—who was angry at the conquest of Kabylia and the subjection of his people. There were others—men of science—who attributed the frequent thunderstorms to certain properties of the mountains—the ironstone on the Djurdjuras which attracted lightning. But mademoiselle need have no alarm. It was not within the memory of man that lightning had struck the tower; and one of the legends concerning it maintained that the tower was guarded by those spirits which haunted Djebel-el-Khâyal, and after whom the gorge was called the Gate of Ghosts.

Chapter XXVI

IN THE TOWER

Night had closed in. The quaint brass lamps and the wood fire shed a dull glow over the tiles and embroideries and centre table in the salon where the little party had dined. Marillier and Rachel sat at the table, lingering over the oranges and fresh dates which had formed their dessert. They were alone, Nurse Dalison, pleading a headache, having retired to her own room. The headache was genuine, and not to be wondered at after the fatigue and excitement of the day; but Nurse Dalison had been actuated by diplomatic motives as well, for she felt that now, in their own home, it was right that the pair should be left alone as much as possible. So she had risen from the table, had made her pretty speeches, smiled her faded deprecatory smile, and departed. Before closing the door, however, she turned to ask Rachel whether Christine, the maid, should not have a bed made up in the lower tower room, so as to be at least within call of her mistress; but Rachel laughingly declined the suggestion, saying again that she was not in the least nervous, and that Christine would certainly die of cramp or fright if put into an unused lumber room, and that they might, if they pleased—nodding at the nurse and Marillier—leave their doors ajar into the salon, so that should she call for help against ghosts they might be certain of hearing her.

Nurse Dalison gave a little shiver and a laugh, and remarked that she thought even ghosts would find the tower too windy to be pleasant quarters, and would be much more likely to haunt her own room, and that of the Pacha, in which Marillier was sleeping. She was glad that she had a clear conscience and a good digestion, and as she was sure also of Rachel's conscience and digestion, she did not think they need worry themselves over the possibility of ghostly visitants. Indeed, it seemed to her that there was more to dread in the chance of a rising among the Arabs and an assault on the château, for, from all she heard, the district was continually in a state of disaffection.

Rachel, deriding the idea, declared that nothing would please her better than to live at the château and prove the loyalty of the Arabs around it. She playfully bade Nurse Dalison sleep off her alarms, and with a parting wish that they might have pleasant dreams, the tired lady left them, refusing the coffee and liqueur which at that moment Armand brought in.

Mademoiselle's orders had been attended to, the old man informed his mistress. This was veritable coffee of the country. The cups, which were of enamelled ware in jewelled silver holders, had been bought by the Count for madame, and were of great value, and the spoons he would recommend to mademoiselle's—notice for the sake of the precious stones which adorned the handles.

Mademoiselle would find, too, that the observatory in the tower had been lighted, and that such hurried attempts as were possible, had been made to render it worthy of mademoiselle's inspection.

Rachel thanked him, and examined the beautiful little egg-shaped cups and the embossed stands with a pathetic interest. Armand, in reply to her questioning, told her they had never been used till this evening, since the day when madame, as he called her, had last drunk from them. He bowed himself out, and the girl and her husband were alone. Rachel drank the thick aromatic concoction in an abstracted manner, saying nothing. She was thinking of her mother and of the dead Pacha. It was difficult to harmonise her own remembrance of the grim Ambassador with the custodian's description of Count Varenzi. What tender care, she reflected, had been given to the choice of this dainty and costly service, a gift to the woman he had loved; and how dearly he must have loved her to have kept up this place during all these years as a sort of shrine, everything that she had ever touched sacredly preserved in it, though his own sorrow for her loss had been too great to permit him to revisit the house in which she had died. Another man would have sold it and would have forgotten. Who would have believed that Isàdas could be so faithful?

Marillier, leaning back in his chair, sipping the tiny glass of cognac, watched her, half-divining her thoughts. And as he watched her, he felt happier and more secure than he had done since his marriage day. The girl was bending a little forward absently studying the pattern of her coffee spoon. She looked very lovely in the simple grey dress with its frill of soft lace which she had worn the evening she was married. Perhaps it was the greyness and softness of her gown and her slight paleness, or maybe something sweet and subdued in her manner that was so soothing to Marillier's irritated nerves. Up till now his mind had been full of the thoughts which all day had been torturing him. He had been longing for an Opportunity to talk with Rachel, and had yet dreaded it, not knowing what he should say, and fearful lest he might again disturb her serenity and the friendliness so dear and yet so hard to endure. Now, as he looked at her, his dread left him and he felt only the joy of knowing that she was securely bound to him. It was the first time that they had found themselves alone without

a chance of interruption since they had started on their journey, except, indeed, when they had sat together upon the deck of the steamer, and then he had seen that she was not yet quite at ease with him, and had purposely gone from her side. But now that uneasiness seemed completely banished, and he had never seen her more apparently free from care.

As she glanced up at him suddenly she smiled a smile full of content. This was one of those days when her heart seemed to go out to him, reminding him of the sweet time of their courtship—that stolen courtship, as he acknowledged to himself that he must call it. Yes, stolen, perhaps, but how inexpressibly precious.

He put his hand out to her across the corner of the table, and she answered the unspoken petition with an impulsive gesture, laying her little left hand in his. The plain gold band shone on her finger—the only present he had ever given her. It was somewhat large, and slipped down over the slender joint. He pushed it caressingly up with his thumb.

‘I must get you a guard for this,’ he said, ‘or you will be losing it. I wonder, my Rachel, which are the stones you like best? Diamonds seem to me too hard and flashing for you. I should like to give you sapphires; they seem to suit you better; the deepest, softest, most perfect sapphires that it is possible to procure. You will let me have my way, dearest, and humour my fancy?’

‘I shall love your fancy, Caspar, whatever it may be. Choose for me as you please, but I may tell you that I am fonder of sapphires than of any other stones; and I shall be fonder still of them now that I know you like them best too.’

Her pretty submission and the smile which went with the words were like wine to him. He kissed the hand he held. Then, again fingering the marriage ring, he said,—‘Perhaps I had better have this tightened; it is so much too large. I never thought of taking the size of your finger before I bought it. I thought of nothing but my wife to be.’

‘Oh,’ she cried ruefully, ‘I couldn’t have it tightened. You would have to take it away, and a married woman should never part with her ring. Besides, it is unlucky to have the ring altered after marriage. Nurse Dalison told me so.’

‘Silly child, do you believe in such superstitions?’

She laughed, shaking her head.

‘I don’t believe in many superstitions. I am not even afraid of ghosts; at least—’ she hesitated, and he fancied that her face changed. ‘I should never be afraid of anything I could see.’

There was silence for a moment. Both thought that they could read the other’s thought. Then she said, laughing once more, ‘No, no, Caspar, I don’t want to give up my ring, even to you; and even if it were to be only for a few hours. I am superstitious, I think, about that. The ring is the pledge of our union, and if I were to let it leave my finger I should feel that I might be opening the way for something to come and separate us.’

He gazed earnestly into her eyes. ‘Then you have no regret, Rachel? It would be a sorrow to you if anything were to separate us?’

She gave him a surprised look full of love.

‘Oh, Caspar, how can you ask that? Could I have become your wife if I had felt the least fear of regretting it?’

‘My wife!’ he said, his voice trembling. ‘Yes—my wife, now and always.’

She was moved by the emotion in him; and, rising from her chair, came round to where he sat. She placed her arm round his neck and touched his forehead with her lips.

‘I know what put that idea into your mind, Caspar, but you must never think such a thing of me.’

He drew the little caressing hand from his neck to his lips.

‘My dear, I understand,’ he said softly.

She bent again and kissed his forehead. Again there was a short silence, in which he was conscious of nothing but her nearness and the touch of her hand. Suddenly her mood changed. She went back to her seat; her fingers played absently with the Arab spoon she had been admiring, and her thoughts turned once more to the Eastern environment she found so attractive.

‘Oh, I want to tell you,’ she began. ‘You can’t think what a delightful discovery I made before coming down to dinner. Did you notice that the winding stair in the

tower doesn't end at my room. It gets narrower and steeper and goes up a still higher flight. I don't know yet what is at the top, though I did mount up a little way. I couldn't help beginning to explore it when I saw the stair after I had dressed for dinner; it looked so tempting. But it was dark and dusty, and half way up, something brushed my shoulder—some flying thing—and I was frightened and turned back. Do you think it was a bat?'

'Most likely,' he answered absently, thinking less of her question than of her beauty and winning changefulness.

She laughed like a pleased child.

'If it was a bat, I am glad, though I am terribly afraid of bats. I must tell you about another superstition—don't scoff at my superstitions—that old Caulah told me. Caulah, you know, was my Arab nurse who took me over to the convent from Algiers. The nuns converted her and she became a lay sister, and died when I was about twelve years old. Do you care to hear?'

'Yes,' he answered. 'Tell me about Caulah's superstition.'

'This is what she said—when a bat wheels round an unmarried girl and brushes her shoulder, it means—', Rachel hesitated, and gave another girlish laugh, blushing slightly.

'Well, what does it mean?' he asked. 'Something very silly?'

'Yes, very silly. Caulah told me it meant that the girl would soon be united to the man of her heart.'

'I don't call that a silly superstition,' he said. 'My love I My love! I accept the omen, and am thankful for it.'

Her eyes fell before the ardent look he gave her.

'Dear,' she said, 'I told them to light up the tower. I thought it would be nice if we were to go and explore it. There is so much to explore in this delightful old castle of mine.'

He smiled.

‘What a child you are, my Rachel—such a lighthearted child, a baby with a new toy. It amuses and delights me to see each fresh phase of you. Well, does the château come up to your expectations? You have been in such high spirits all day, looking forward to it, that I was half afraid you might be disappointed. Are you satisfied with the Pacha’s gift?’

‘Oh, more than satisfied!’ she cried. ‘Caspar, do you know,’ she went on shyly, ‘I think that this might be made a charming home. Of course it would need a great deal of repair; but I fancy,’ and she gave him a little merry glance, ‘I really think that we should find immense pleasure in making it habitable, and that we might exist here very comfortably—you and I.’

He sprang up, delighted, and half kneeling by her chair, took her in his arms as any ordinary lover would naturally have done. The pall of tragedy seemed lifted. What a creature of moods she was, this sweet wife of his, and in each mood he loved her better. He was charmed to find that at every step they made in their intercourse there was more for him to discover in her. At first, greatly as she had attracted him, dearly as he had always loved her, he had not realised her many-sidedness. That was because he had almost always, in the old days, found her pensive, sad, and apparently timid. But he had seen how Rachel, face to face with a problem to be solved, a decision to be made, could prove herself strong and self-reliant. He knew now, too, how radiant a being was Rachel, joyous and content.

‘We will explore the whole castle, dearest,’ he said, ‘tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow!’ she repeated; ‘I have been thinking so much of tomorrow. That one day, Caspar, is to be our very own—our first and only day in our new borne. There must not be a single dull or sorrowful hour in it. It is to be a perfectly happy day, and oh! it will be all too short for what I mean to do. I want to go over my mother’s rooms—to try and understand her and the life she led. I want you to know her too. My poor mother!’ Rachel spoke the name as though it had grown sacred to her, and this was the case. Here, in the house where she had died, Rachel O’Hara seemed an ever-present reality to the daughter who until now had had so slight a knowledge of her. After a pause Rachel spoke more brightly.

‘But, Caspar, I don’t want to leave everything till tomorrow. I want you to explore the tower with me tonight. I will show you the winding stair; it goes up

outside my room. Do let us start at once. You won't mind? You are not too tired?'

She pulled his hand like an excited child, and drew him to the door, her eyes dancing.

'Too tired! I am not tired. It is you who should be tired.'

'Oh, I am quite rested and refreshed. I do want to invade the bats' territory, for in spite of the pretty superstition, Caspar, I must confess that I am much more afraid of them than of ghosts, or rebel Arabs. I shouldn't sleep comfortably if I thought a bat was flying round and could get into my room.'

'We will certainly see,' he answered. 'I must make sure before you go to rest that you are safe from fright and disturbance. Come then, darling. Show me the way.'

They went like two children hand in hand through the disused lumber-room at the base of the tower and up the stone steps which were lighted by the glow from Rachel's bedchamber streaming through its open door. Outside the door was a small platform, where beyond a dark little archway, the narrower flight of stairs led to the topmost floor. The ceilings of both the lumber-room and Rachel's room were very lofty, and this low portal might easily have been overlooked. Rachel loosed his hand as they stood on the platform and went forward a few steps, peering up the gloomy stairway. Marillier lingered a moment, fascinated by the glimpse of that maiden chamber brightly lighted, the white bed, with her dainty dressing-gown upon it, set in order, and the table glittering with her silver-backed brushes and the toilet bottles her maid had arranged in readiness. Marillier saw a sanctuary from which he was barred. Rachel called to him, her foot upon the stairs, her hand extended to him backward. He took it in his, and they mounted, she still leading him. The place was not quite dark, a feeble light from a lamp above, made a glimmering dusk, and through the loophole windows of the staircase, came the pale glow of a clear starlit night. There were no bats, but Rachel exclaimed as they entered the upper room that she had seen one flying out by a broken window. It was no wonder, they thought, that some panes were broken, for this room, looking up, seemed all window, the openings here being more numerous than below, wider in proportion, and curiously shaped, so that they narrowed considerably where they ended about two feet from the floor. The walls of the tower were immensely thick, making very deep embrasures, and these were filled in beneath several of the windows by a carved bench on which

were tattered and mouldy cushions. Except a wooden chair, a very small tripod table, and a large telescope set on a pivot stand in the centre, the room was unfurnished. Over the telescope swung an old brass lamp, now corroded with verdigris, and with a metal shade almost black for want of cleaning. Evidently Armand had not considered it necessary to devote much time to this unused observatory.

There was one feature of this top storey of the tower distinguishing it from the others. It was smaller, for the battlemented summit contracted, leaving a projecting ledge with a parapet, which from the outside gave an appearance of machicolation. From one of the windows—that one in which most of the glass was broken—steps within and without, led to the balcony, which was wide enough for one person to stand upon, though the parapet made but an insecure barrier; it would have been a dangerous position for anyone who had not strong nerves.

Rachel, looking through the uncurtained window, could see the balcony plainly, and shuddered at the giddy chasm it overhung, from the blackness of which there only gleamed milky patches of the foaming torrent that ran along the bed of the gorge. Khâyal's rocky wall reared itself opposite, so close that the girl fancied she might almost, by stretching her arm, have touched the mountain side. She moved round from window to window, and the view changed as she went. From one, she looked down upon the courtyard of the castle, the great gates, and the lights of the town twinkling along the ridge; from another she saw the dim stretch of the Kabyle mountains extending inland, and on the northern side, the terraced garden lay immediately below, and beyond it, the widening Bahira. It was all beautiful, and unlike anything she had ever seen. Rachel thought again of her mother, wondering whether she had used this room, and whether in old days she had often gazed out upon the wonderful panorama upon which her daughter was gazing now. The girl wondered, too, if the telescope had been fixed for her mother's pleasure, or whether some scientific person had had it put up for purpose of study. She remembered that the Pacha used to know a great deal about astronomy, and concluded that he had gained some of his knowledge here. She remarked this to Marillier, who was watching her with yearning eyes, listening to her talk but scarcely answering it. Now she appealed to him to adjust the telescope so that she could look through it, and began to dust the smaller lens with her pocket-handkerchief. He lowered the instrument, and both fingered it, trying with no effect to arrange the focus to her vision. All the time he was acting mechanically, like a man possessed with some fixed idea. His mind was

full of that horrible thought of the power of Caspar's spirit and of his own determination to fight and conquer the unnatural thing. He knew that he was on the verge of some supernatural region where anything was possible, and he was resolved to cross every boundary, if need were, in his battle with the invisible—if in this way only, he could free himself from his formless rival, and finally secure Rachel for his own.

Rachel! All was summed up in that word. She was his love, his wife. There ought to be no barrier between them. Yet, though they stood here, husband and wife, together and alone, he was oppressed by a sense of separateness, the consciousness of an intangible wall keeping them apart. As they bent over the telescope her dress touched him, the scent of a spray of orange blossom—Nurse Dalison's suggestive gift—which she wore at her neck, floated up intoxicatingly to his nostrils; a loose strand of her hair was blown by the breeze against his cheek; her fingers, brushing his, thrilled him; the sweetness of her voice maddened him. He trembled in every joint; there were drops of moisture on his brow which the cold night wind, coming through the broken panes, turned to ice, though it failed to lower the fever of his blood or soothe the rapid beat of his pulse. Yet this was not only the feverish throb of man's desire towards the woman of his choice, but the rack of uncertainty even at the moment which should have meant fruition. Moreover, to Marillier, Rachel was at once woman and saint. Though he longed for her with his flesh, he worshipped her also with his soul. But she had assured him that she could never regret the gift of herself into his keeping. When—why, should he not draw her to his breast—his lawful wife? Why not for them full and perfect union?

The stillness and beauty of the night were in accord with his mood, and their isolation in this lonely tower, with no sound to disturb their communings save the faint murmur rising from the native quarter of the town. High above the turmoil of everyday life, there were none to see them save the stars shining through the wide windows from the arc of blue infinity. Marillier was not an imaginative man, but he knew himself no more as the cold scientist of old, to whom romance had been a dead letter. Here, in this dreamland of love, Rachel and he were the only real things, earth at their feet, and open to them that immeasurable space of star-spangled ether. Oh! that they might float away—he and Rachel—far into that profound blue, to some Paradise star, where neither emperor nor other mundane power could divide them—where even the spirit of the dead dared not follow. If he and Rachel were spirits too, and met that other upon equal ground, Rachel would have the right to repudiate whichever she

wished. She would know, and understand, and choose her mate.

A sudden joy filled Marillier's heart, for he knew that Rachel would choose himself. He knew that she loved him, Marillier, better than she had ever loved Caspar, and that though in the body of Caspar he had wooed her, it was the soul of Marillier which had taught her the meaning of love. He knew that were they three to stand confessed, the veil of flesh removed, Marillier, and not Caspar, would be her choice. By all the laws of true affinity she would be drawn to him, and in undying union they twain would be one. He felt that to this end, he could welcome even death for them both. Beyond it, might there not be greater happiness in store for them than any which this world could offer? For himself he would hail any change that made her irretrievably his. And to poor little Rachel, the sundering of mortal coils would be no great wrench. Life had not been so bounteous to her that she should cling to it. She had gone through much trouble, and he feared that there was more to come—trouble from which he would be powerless to shield her.—It might be well if, instead, they were to pass out of their material environment into a realm where no earthly limitations could affect them.

Chapter XXVII

THE COMBATANTS

While these thoughts passed through the mind of Marillier, he was standing behind Rachel as she bent over the telescope. He was gazing, not at her, but out into the night. A thin crescent moon was slowly rising, a virginal moon, suggestive of the girl, which seemed to be resting on the hump of Khâyal. While holding the tube of the telescope, her fingers, straying over it, touched his, and brought him back to the actual. His hand closed on hers, and, with an impulsive movement, carried it back, till it struck his left shoulder. She was drawn against his breast, not only by the strength of his arm, but by a yielding impulse in herself, and as her head fell upon his other shoulder, her face was turned upward to his, beaming with affection and trust. She did not speak, but only smiled, and he knew through every fibre of him that her whole being answered to his. He, too, was silent, watching the lamplight play upon her features and upon her brown hair, which, where the glow touched it, brightened into gold. But it seemed to him that her eyes reflected the starlight which streamed in a silvery bar through the window overlooking the Bahira. The pure radiance of her eyes and the sweetness of her smile brought heaven and earth together. His arm encircled her.

‘Beloved!’ he whispered. ‘Oh! my heart! It has been difficult to convince myself in these last days that you are really mine, pledged to me by your own will and word in a bond which no man can break. Have you realised this, my beloved? Do you rightly understand that you have given your sweet self to me, and that, all unworthy as I am, I may dare to claim my wife?’

She made no answer in words, but he felt the quickened beat of her heart, and a caressing pressure of her fingers where her hand fluttered about his neck. He bent his face to hers, and for a moment or an eternity—love knows not time—he entered Paradise. In very truth the walls of stone surrounding the pair might have melted away, and they two, conscious of nothing but each other, heart to heart, soul within soul, might have slipped out into that vast enfolding blue—the blended spirits a star-point in Infinity.

Rachel was the first to feel earth once more. She drew back with a maidenly

movement; her arms, which had clasped him, not falling away, but slackening, her eyes still shining up into his with perfect confidence. He looked down upon her yearningly, yet not unsatisfied, for the after taste of that heavenly interchange gave him a sense of future fulfilment for which he had scarcely dared to hope.

Then suddenly from the vantage ground of Paradise he seemed to see Hell yawning. It was in Rachel's eyes that he beheld it, for the radiance of them changed slowly into that fear-stricken expression he so well remembered. At first it was merely a startled look, but it deepened gradually into terror, her features stiffening, her lips agape and rigid, the soft hold of her arms tightening convulsively.

He recognised the signs. He knew that the unnameable presence had again invaded his sanctuary. The thought which had tormented him during the drive to Bab-el-Khâyalât flashed back now in a forcible determination to know the worst, to confront and defy his visionary foe. How could he be expected to relinquish Rachel after doing violence to his code of honour on her behalf and sinning against all the laws of righteousness to save her? Was it to save her, he suddenly reflected, or to possess her? No matter! This was no time for casuistic argument. One thing alone was certain. Neither to man nor to spirit would he now surrender Rachel.

He called to his aid all the mental energy of which he was capable. The Pacha's words recurred to him; that paradoxical utterance, 'The two supreme Forces... one omnipotent, the other subservient to it and yet its master—Love and Will. By the might of those Forces he had compelled to his service the occult power contained in the mandrake root;—that power should not be permitted to fail him. He would put forth his will and compel it again to serve him. This was the crisis, not of his own fate only, but of Rachel's fate as well. This was the hour in which for her sake, he, a mere mortal man, must wrestle with man who was not mortal.

He strained Rachel's now unyielding form wildly to his heart, so roughly that it seemed as though he had hurt her, for a faint cry escaped her lips. He entreated her pardon, yet, as he did so, embraced her still more violently, bending his face and trying to bring her lips to his. But the girl shrank unmistakably, throwing her head back and struggling like a bird with its capturer. Her feeble efforts touched the manliness in him; he loosed his hold, and she might have freed herself, but she in her turn was touched, and notwithstanding her shrinking, she let her arms still cling round him 'Caspar!...Oh!...Why? . . . Why?' she cried brokenly, in

accents of mingled reproach and contrition. 'Caspar, I did not mean... You are not angry with me, Caspar?'

'Angry! Oh, beloved, forgive me,' he answered brokenly too, and stricken also by a momentary contrition, though he was aware of the imprisoned brute within him, and hated, while he was partly controlled by it. 'Forgive me,' he stammered again. 'But I love you—I love you—and you deny yourself to me.'

Again she shrank visibly. She, like him, though in a different fashion, was torn by contrary emotions, tenderness and the vague sense of outrage contending. Her look was that of a child frightened by a sudden blow from one it had trusted. The tears gathered, her lips quivered; her voice shook as she tried to speak. Then slowly, as if she wished not to vex him by a rebuff, she unwound her arms and tried to draw herself away. But he would not let her go. Under his eager eyes, her face changed again, the horror in it intensified. She was white as a statue and almost as rigid, until a shiver shook her from head to foot.

The consciousness that he himself was not at this moment influenced by the grave-like chill that had before unnerved him, gave him unwonted courage—His own exemption made another man of him. No more of those dream-like fancies about dying and floating away to some star in space. The world was what he wanted. Life was what he desired—life and the stir and power and passion of it. These were the things he hungered for—that he meant to seize and enjoy. And life and love were thrilling him now. He was warm—he had a feeling of new and lusty vitality, and an almost devilish sense of triumph. He could reason to himself and plan with extraordinary wile how to deal with Rachel's terror. He would treat it as feminine weakness. He would be kind, but she must see that he was her master; he would show her how foolish it was to suppose that a husband would submit to be kept at arm's length as her hysterical whim dictated. Women always gave in at the imputation of hysteria—that was the line he would take.

He dropped his arms, releasing her, and moving a step from her, remarked,—

'My sweet one, you will permit me to suggest that it is scarcely fair to put a man of flesh and blood through an ordeal which would have sorely tried Saint Anthony.'

At the mocking ring in his voice, the light laugh, the characteristic shake of his shoulders, Rachel shuddered, and her eyes shot at him a startled, apprehensive

gleam. Her memory had leaped months and gone back to the day before the Pacha's funeral, when, in such a tone of sugared cynicism, with the same look, the same shrug, Caspar had suggested the postponement of their marriage and had asked her to go with him to Paris. She had only dimly guessed his meaning then; later she had understood it better; but the change in him following upon the accident, and, as she believed, the shock of Lucien Marillier's death, and which she had attributed to both those causes, drove the suspicion from her mind, so that in her new confidence she had quite forgotten her former doubts. Now the scene in the drawing-room of the Embassy interrupted by Marillier's entrance, came back to her, illuminated by a dreadful light, and she seemed to see again standing before her that former Caspar, the man whom in certain of his moods she had so feared, and no longer the new Caspar, to whom she had so unquestioningly given herself, and who had so completely won her love and her reverence. The feeling of revulsion was almost more than she could bear. Her head drooped; she grew faint and dizzy. His voice sounded far away as he went on, still in the same jarring manner,—

‘You are adorable in every mood, my love—always my sweet tropic flower who charms and bewilders and bewitches me. Yet I must own that I find this mood of yours strange, and not altogether to my taste. It savours somewhat of hysteria, sweet one, and you know I do not like hysterical women. I am distressed to see you giving way to that senseless fear which took possession of you after my illness, and has more than once made us both miserable. My own nerves, I confess, were a little to blame; but you see that now I can laugh at such morbid fancies. What is it you are trembling at? Nothing. You remember there was nothing; there is nothing. Look up. See! We are alone. There is not even a bat to be frightened of.’

His laugh rang shrilly, defiantly, and seemed to be taken up and to echo in the stillness of the tower. But obedient to his command, she raised her eyes and straightened herself, struggling pitifully for composure. She was trembling still. He stretched out his hands to her. ‘Come,’ he said, ‘I promise you that I will be the most humble wooer who ever sighed at the feet of a nun. Come to me and let me soothe away those childish fears.’

She swayed towards him, but, as though repelled by something stronger than herself, fell back, clinging to the stand of the telescope, and shook her head.

‘Caspar...I...I cannot...I...I...’ Her voice ended in a dry quaver more pathetic

than a burst of tears. She threw her hands over her face, struggling with each tremor that seized her.

‘What is it that you are afraid of?’ he said, speaking with a lightness that was forced, for his own determination was weakening, and he had become sensible of that deathly chill creeping upward to his heart. He braced himself in desperate resistance. Was he not fighting for her salvation even more than for his own? He gained strength with the idea of protecting her, and the savage impulse died momentarily down, only to rise again in greater force and cunning. He felt in a sub-conscious way that a battle was waging in his breast, and that his own being held two separate individualities engaged in mortal conflict. And now the scale of victory turned in favour of the base rather than the noble combatant within him. It was again in the bantering self-assured manner of Ruel Bey that he addressed her.

‘Foolish child! I assure you that this is some hobgoblin fancy which has lodged in your pretty head. Let me drive it out, as I wanted to, with kisses. Why do you shrink? You believe in me; you trust me. There is nothing to fear. I am with you, your lover, your husband.’

‘Caspar!’ The word, uttered scarcely audibly from behind the screen of her hands, seemed half appeal, half interrogation.

‘Yes, Caspar, your Caspar, who has never ceased to worship you. Come to me, my love.’

She did not answer, did not stir to meet his entreating arms. Her face was still hidden. He tried to draw down her hands. She resisted feebly, but presently he succeeded, and the brown eyes flashed up at him a glance of terrified questioning. Then with all her strength, she suddenly pulled herself away, making a barricade of the telescope, which swung round beneath her weight. He saw plainly that there was something in him which roused her alarm and distrust, and he did not know whether it was pain or anger that for a moment choked him. But determined to maintain his attitude, he recovered himself, and asked in a hard, quiet voice,—

‘Don’t you know me, Rachel?’

She stared bewilderedly, and made a faint negative gesture.

‘You don’t know me! Rachel, what do you mean?’

He put his hands upon her shoulders, holding her firmly, and he could tell from the way she cowered that his touch struck like ice. He repeated his question more imperatively, and she tried to answer but could not.

‘Rachel!’ he said harshly, ‘this is hysteria, neither more nor less, and as a disease it must be dealt with and conquered. Reason by your own common sense. You must know that this sort of thing cannot go on; it is destroying our married life at the outset. You say you love me—you have given yourself to me, yet you act in this manner. Remember your duty and the vows you have made. You are my wife, bound to me by both the civil and human law. Is my wife always to shrink from her husband as you shrink from me now?’

He stopped. His words and manner were, he could see, taking effect. Again she made that struggle for composure which was so pitiful. She gave him a quickly-averted glance; it was as though she dared not look lest her courage should fail.

‘I must remember my duty,’ she murmured in the tone of a child repeating a lesson, and advancing, put her hands in his.

‘I know that you are my husband, Caspar, and that my vows are binding. And it isn’t—’ she faltered. ‘I love you...I thought I loved you...dearly...dearly. But...I am...I...’ The whisper died.

‘Look at me, Rachel, look at me.’

Again she lifted her eyes. Again he saw the horror kindled in them. Again she tried to withdraw her hands, but he would not let her go.

‘What is it that you see in me which makes you shrink and refuse to look at me?’ he asked masterfully. ‘Tell me, Rachel. What is it in me that frightens you so?’

She was like a bird caught in a snare from which there is no escape. Her eyes roved wildly round the little room, and out into the starlit blue beyond. Something of the same fantastic longing which had been in his mind a little while before, filled her now. Oh, for freedom—flight into space with the loosed soul of the man she loved—the real man only discovered lately—simple, high-minded, considerate, gentle; the unexacting lover whose very diffidence had compelled her almost to offer herself; who, during all these weeks since that

time of illness, had been her reverential slave, not till now, her tyrant. How unlike in many ways was this later lover to the former Caspar who had won her heart in the early days when she had come, a shy, inexperienced girl, to the Embassy. She remembered points of character in that Caspar—a certain selfishness, worldliness, cynicism, a boldness of caresses which had jarred and would have affronted her but for her natural loyalty. All this she had been slowly realising, though at the time she would not have admitted it to herself what joy it had been to see the change which bodily weakness and the memory of Lucien Marillier had wrought. How, in his new and more timid wooing, this Caspar had become the rival of his former self, binding her to him by a closer bond than had ever before existed. What safety she had felt in his all-embracing tenderness! How she had been moved by his unselfish thought for her—his willingness to imperil, even to sacrifice, his career for her sake! And now where had he gone—this true-hearted, noble husband to whom she had promised wifely duty and love? This was not he—this man standing before her, with the hard, smiling lips, the cruel, amused, yet sensuous eyes. Nor was this quite the old Caspar, but an evil likeness of him in his worst mood intensified—his worst mood without the redeeming qualities with which her fancy had invested him, without the sanctifying halo cast by an ignorant girl's confiding affection. A sickening despair came over Rachel. Dared she look again? Fascinated, as some hapless prey beneath the charm of the snake, she turned her head and lifted those pathetic brown eyes, mutely pleading for grace. And that look cowed the demon. Marillier answered it.

‘Darling! It is agony to see that you shrink from me. Oh, Rachel! my saint, my beloved, is it possible that you can be afraid of me?’

As he spoke in accents of deep sorrow, it seemed to her that the mask of his features changed, that the burning gaze softened, and that for a few seconds the old tender love looked out once more. Her trust welled up. She would tell him all, and rely upon his kindness which in the recent past had never failed her.

‘Yes,’ she replied timidly, like a culprit confessing a fault. ‘Yes, Caspar, it is true that I feel afraid of you.’

‘Afraid of me!’ he repeated, wounded to the quick, but with the gentleness she knew. There was a pause, during which the eyes of each were fixed upon the other. And now Rachel saw again the strange transformation take place, the remorseful expression change into one of almost malevolent arrogance. It was

Caspar's ironical laugh which rang from the lips of her lover, and as he bent greedily forward to snatch a kiss, she quailed and retreated sharply, crouching against the wall of the room like a hunted creature at bay.

'I am afraid of you,' she cried, the sentences coming jerkily while she put out her hands as if to shield herself. 'I have never known you like this. You make me dread you. It's as though an evil spirit had come into you. Caspar, what does it mean? Tell me why you are so different?'

'So different! Dear, am I different?'

The frenzy in him had subsided. He looked stricken. A horrible fear had leaped up at her words, and it held the fiend in check. Was this thing true that she had said? In his foreboding of supernatural possibilities, this one had not occurred to him—this, the most terrible, the most likely, as he now felt it to be. She had said that it seemed as though an evil spirit was come into him, and truly he realised that he had not been himself, that he had been dominated by something alien, brutal, capable of actions, at which, in saner mood, he would shudder. And he had the sense of holding those fierce impulses only in leash. At any provocation they might spring up and throttle all that was noble and compassionate in his love for the woman before him. That evil from which he had tried to save her by the sin he had committed, was now lodged in himself and threatening to destroy her. His mind, working on scientific lines, grasped the hideous fact that with the body of Caspar he had taken over the man's physical temperament, and had thus established a link with the houseless spirit, and opened a door by which it might again enter. Desire of Rachel, denied but unquenched, was the attraction earthward of that Wandering One. Purified though that desire had become in himself, Marillier understood that when nearing fruition it might supply the fire needed by the dead man's spirit to re-vitalise itself. Was this the explanation of that grave-cold presence whenever as a lover he, Marillier, approached Rachel? And now that he had conquered all earthly barriers to their union, had the soul of his dead rival taken possession of the body from which it had been unjustly driven, with the malignant intention to deprive him of his stolen happiness; with—oh horrible!—the purpose of vicariously enjoying it? That could not be—that should not be. Better to renounce Rachel for ever in this life, better even to kill her than that she should suffer such desecration. He advanced a step, but seeing the girl blench and quiver at his approach, he went back and remained motionless, his hand resting on the tube of the telescope as the lamplight fell upon him, a grim, central figure in the setting of that lonely tower room with the

encirclement of mountains and sky beyond.

As he stood arrested in this attitude, the head a little forward, the frame inclining back, he was himself intensely conscious of the warring of two souls in his breast, the raging fiend which would have sprung forward and clasped the girl, willing or unwilling, in his arms, and the real self of him that yearned to the poor victim with an ineffable pity and tenderness. The man felt that by all the laws of righteousness this real self should gain the victory. But how? In battle, or in renunciation.

The quickened intuition of Marillier's soul told him that his own love, single-pointed and pure as human love can be, must be more powerful in essence than that of Caspar, in which ambition had dominated even passion. And so it proved. The battle was verily to the strong, and the God in man worsted the demon. In that combat of souls the former master of that fleshly tenement was beaten, and for the hour, at least, Marillier, the usurping occupant, held the citadel.

It could only have been during a minute or two that the death struggle lasted, but to Marillier it seemed an eternity. Great drops stood out upon his forehead when the crisis was passed, and the hand which had merely rested upon the telescope when spirits, not bodies, fought, now clung to it for support, as, shaken to the core, the man staggered like one fainting or drunken, and would have fallen but for that prop. Then, grasping the situation, spiritual and material, in one flash, as the drowning man before the final wave overwhelms him, sees in an instant the whole of his past life spread before him, Marillier realised that the only end to his futile striving for the winning of his heart's desire must be—renouncement.

He turned away from sight of that girlish form and sweet face which had been his intensest joy and his most poignant pain, and, flinging his arms over the tube of the instrument, dropped his head upon them and sobbed like a child.

Rachel watched him as she still cowered against the wall, terror giving place in her to pity, pity to self-reproach, and self-reproach to the womanlike longing to atone for the sorrow she had caused. She waited, but he gave no sign. Then she went hesitatingly towards him. She thought he would have heard her footfall on the bare floor, but he seemed too absorbed in his grief, for, even when she stood behind him, he did not turn or lift his head. She laid her hand upon his bent shoulder, and it went to her heart to feel the twitching of his body, and to bear the sobs which shook him.

‘Caspar!’ she said. Her voice was very low, but, only yesterday, she thought, he would have responded to her faintest murmur. Now he might have been deaf And yet she was relieved to see that he did not turn and take her in his arms, as she had half feared.

‘Caspar,’ she said again, and, bending more closely over him, drew her hand softly from his shoulder to his neck, ‘I cannot bear to see you so unhappy... Husband—’

At the whispered word he winced. Memory stabbed him with it, and he made a movement of withdrawal from her touch. Yes, he was her husband, and, notwithstanding, he had no right to the name, no right to kiss the sweet lips which faltered words of puzzlement and fear, and hope and love.

‘Oh! forgive me. I did not mean to hurt you. I don’t understand why you made me afraid. I could never fear you if you were always as I know you best and love you to be—dear and good and kind. But sometimes there comes a sudden strange look into your face, and your manner changes—and your voice. It chills and frightens me, and I cannot bear it...I cannot bear it. Caspar, you won’t let yourself be like that again? It will come right, won’t it, and we shall be happy once more?’

He lifted his head and looked at her, his face very grave, the mouth twitching slightly, the eyes intensely tender, but sad as the eyes of one who has looked on death.

‘Yes,’ he said quietly, ‘it will come right, Rachel.

It must come right. I hope, I pray, I believe, that you will be happy again.’

It deepened her remorse that he should say ‘you,’ not ‘we.’

‘I am not caring about myself only,’ she answered. ‘Do you think I don’t know how ill you have been? That is the cause of this trouble. I was foolish and unkind not to remember it sooner. You will get better, and by-and-by—I hope very soon—tonight will seem to us like a bad dream.’

‘Yes,’ he said again in the same quiet tone, ‘by-and-by, Rachel, tonight will seem to you like a bad dream.’

Again the exclusion of himself wrung her heart.

‘Say you forgive me, Caspar. Tell me that you know I didn’t mean to hurt you. I am so miserable at the thought of it. Only say that you forgive me.’

He took her hands in his and answered solemnly,—

‘My dear, I know that there has been no thought in your heart about me not wholly true and tender. I deserve your pity—grant it to me. But there is nothing for me to forgive. If there were, I would forgive it absolutely, but there is not, It is I who from the depths of my soul ask pardon of you, my saint—my angel—love.

Deeply moved, she held his hands against her bosom.

‘Won’t you—won’t you kiss me, Caspar?’

He withdrew his hands and gently placed them upon her head as though in benediction; then he bent down and reverentially kissed her forehead.

‘May Heaven bless and protect you, my beloved.’

She broke down completely, and with her head upon his shoulder wept the first natural tears she had shed that evening. He soothed her as her mother might have done.

‘Dear child, you are tired and overwrought, and I must again be your doctor and prescribe bromide to ensure you a good night’s sleep. Come, you are shivering still, and no wonder, for the wind is very cold; and, though we are in Algeria, remember it is winter. Let me take you down to your room and I will send your maid to you. Tomorrow morning you will be your bright, happy self again.’

Reassured by his manner, she laughed tremulously, and they went down the stairs together.

Chapter XXVIII

IN THE SANCTUARY

It was Marillier this time who walked first, leading her by the hand down the steep steps. On the landing outside her room he was about to leave her, but at that moment the maid appeared in the lighted doorway, and inquired if her mistress would now retire.

‘Presently, Christine—wait for me.’

The maid re-entered, half closing the door.

You will not forget my prescription,’ he said.

‘But I have no bromide. Nurse Dalison keeps it, and I should not like to disturb her. Besides she—’ Rachel hesitated. ‘She would not understand.’

‘True,’ he answered, ‘and it would be a pity to disturb her. I will mix the draught myself—I have a medicine chest with me—and will bring it up presently and give it to Christine for you. Don’t be nervous, my child. I know something of drugs, and you may take my word that it will make you sleep peacefully.’

He left her, and she listened to his footstep as it sounded on the stone stair, then went into her chamber and bade Christine hasten with her preparations for the night.

The maid was a sensible and sympathetic girl. She saw that her lady was tired and a little excited, and to Christine this seemed quite natural and attributable to the effect of her surroundings. This strange old château in which, as was already known among the little suite, mademoiselle’s—or ‘madame’s’—mother had died, and the odd life at the Embassy, the engagement to Ruel Bey—the hurried marriage, which, though ostensibly a secret, was none from the personal attendants of the two concerned—the mandate of the Emperor of Abaria—a portentous power in the background which conjured up in Christine’s mind visions of Eastern atrocities, fierce Moslems and the bowstring—all this had been somewhat upsetting to the simple Provençal maid.

'Ça me donne sur les nerfs,' she had complained pathetically to the valet of Ruel Bey. What wonder then that her mistress's nerves should be strained almost to breaking.

So she asked no questions beyond the range of her duty, and made no comments except that it was evident that mademoiselle was fatigued and not equal to a serious hair brushing, which could be better done in the morning. So the brown coils were merely unbound, and presently Rachel was nestling in bed, and Christine with a 'Bonne nuit, mademoiselle,' had departed, no word having been said by Rachel to retain her.

Meanwhile Marillier, in his own room below, had first sent away his man who was waiting there, and then unlocked a small medicine chest he always carried in his travels, though he had been careful not to entrust the key of it to the valet who had been Ruel Bey's servant, and who might have wondered at so unusual an adjunct to his master's luggage. It took Marillier a little while to weigh the powders and prepare the draught, for in the confusion of his mental faculties he had need to be specially careful and deliberate in mixing the ingredients. The dose was more complicated than he had led Rachel to suppose, and he made it as strong as might be to guard against any failure in its action.

At last it was ready, and he carried it up the tower stairs to Rachel's room.

The door was ajar, and he waited in the opening, expecting the maid to come and take the draught. But there was no sound of movement within, and he knocked softly. Rachel's voice replied,—

'Won't you come in and give it to me? Christine has gone.'

The man braced himself and crossed the threshold of that sanctuary which conscience had forbidden him to enter. But it was with no thrill of happy anticipation such as he had dreamed of lately. He walked across the room as a doctor might have done, bidden to the bedside of a patient, and went straight up to the bed, the glass containing the opiate in his hand. Rachel was lying raised upon the pillows, a soft flush upon her cheek, the brown hair a disordered mass around her. She put out her hand for the medicine and he gave it to her, bidding her swallow it slowly, and not mind if it tasted bitter.

She looked at the draught before putting it to her lips. Her agitation had subsided; she was quiet and gravely sweet, the old childlike trust in her eyes as

she lifted them to his face.

‘Is this my magic potion?’ she asked with a smile, and drank it as he had directed.

‘It is bitter,’ she said between the gulps, ‘not quite like Nurse Dalison’s bromide. But I am sure that you know what is best for me. You do sometimes seem to me half a doctor, Caspar.’

‘Do I? This will make you sleep, dear, perhaps better than the bromide.’ He took the glass and put it on the table beside her where a candle in a quaint brass candlestick was burning.

‘Does this worry you? Shall I put it out?’

‘Yes. There’s a night-light, and there’s the fire.’

He covered the wick with the extinguisher. The room seemed now filled with shadows cast by the dim flame of the night-lamp and the flickering firelight. He was turning to go.

‘Good-night, my dear. You are quite safe now.’

But she put out her hand and took his.

‘Won’t you stay a minute or two? I think I shall go to sleep sooner if you do.’

He was standing by the bedside looking down upon her. His fingers, clasping her hand, strayed with professional instinct to her pulse, and its quick fluttering told him that she still needed calming.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘But you must not talk. I will sit beside you until you go to sleep, if you will close your eyes and compose yourself.’

He took a low chair beside the bed, and obedient as a child she turned upon the pillow, her face towards him; and, still holding his hand, closed her eyes. Her confidence brought home to him the truth that her dread had been due, not to his own nature, but to the spirit that warred with it. Could he, as Lucien Marillier, have won her love, this was the heavenly trust his wife would have given him. He had seen an hour since, in the tower, what she would have become as the

wife of Caspar Ruel.

He sat by her side in the dimness and stillness of the room, his left hand in hers, his right shading his brow as he gazed upon her tranquil face—tranquil because she again knew herself to be safe in his care. Wild thoughts rose, but were not given rest in his mind. He would not permit himself to think of the place and the hour, of the fact that there was scarcely a soul stirring in the château, and that he was here alone, admitted for the first time into his wife's chamber—his wife, yet never to be his wife. He dared not dwell upon the unfamiliar charm of the room. He dared only look upon her pure face, which anchored him to his righteous resolution. The atmosphere, which seemed especially her own, soothed his nerves; the sense that he was on holy ground steadied his tumultuous fancies.

Presently he tried to draw his hand from Rachel's, thinking she was asleep, but instantly her fingers closed round his.

'Don't go yet,' she murmured drowsily. 'I shall be kept awake if you leave me.'

'No, my dear,' he answered. 'I said that I would stay with you till you were asleep, and I will not leave you until then.'

She lifted his hand, and he felt her lips upon it as she folded it between her own upon her breast. His simple words, the assurance that he would do as he had promised, satisfied her completely, and she settled peacefully into slumber. When her deep regular breathing made him certain of this, he slipped his hand carefully from within hers, and stood for a minute or two beside the bed, taking his last look at her as his wife—a yearning, compassionate look of farewell.

As she lay back, pure and pale, for the flush had died down, the brown eyelashes showing a dusky line upon her cheek, the lips slightly parted, a gleam of white between the red curves, her hands crossed on the girlish bosom, she might, he thought, have been the model of some pictured saint. He stooped, pressed one kiss upon the coverlet, and softly crept away.

He passed down the stair and through the lower room and the salon where they had dined. Here one lamp was burning, making eccentric shadows round the chairs and the carved bosses on the ceiling and door frames. The place was deserted, yet it seemed to his excited fancy full of invisible presences—ghosts of the dead men and women who had lived and loved and suffered within these walls. As he himself moved noiselessly over the thick carpet, he might himself

have been one of the ghosts with which his imagination peopled the building. He walked slowly, like a man in a somnambulistic state, yet his brain felt curiously, painfully active. The creaking of a great oak press when he passed it, struck his ear ominously. As he went by the door of Nurse Dalison's room, he could tell by her breathing that she lay wrapped in slumber. The duties of the day over, the somewhat perfunctory sympathy given forth, she might now, he thought, with a touch of humour, permit herself a natural self-absorption and dream her own dreams of happiness and good fortune, unaffected by wraiths of the past or tragedies of the present.

Marillier, on going up with Rachel's potion, had left the door of his room ajar and a light burning on the table. He entered now, carefully closing the door behind him. Advancing to the middle of the room, he stood motionless, his arms lifted and his fingers tightly pressed upon his temples. Here, in the solitude of his chamber, the dream mask fell from him, and he understood the world, life, himself, the grim tangle of his situation as they were in reality. So overpowering was the revelation that at first he could not steady his senses, and the room seemed to be rocking beneath him. He had the feeling of standing deserted upon a battlefield whereon his dearest had fallen, the fight over, and the outside world left desolate for him, to be faced with maimed limbs and a bleeding heart. He thought of the dead Pacha, of whose phantom presence he had seemed to be conscious on the tower stair and in the empty dining-hall, and wished that it might be possible for him to hold converse with Isàdas in this strait for which the old man was partly responsible. Only it was not so much for the Ambassador, the cynical roué, that he longed, but for Count Varenzi, the middle-aged man with the young heart, whom Armand had described, and who had buried his romance in Rachel O'Hara's grave.

Varenzi had slept in this very room, had lain in that great funereally-draped bed, had risen from it in his agony of despair to wander forth into the mountains where he had found the mandrake, and had then ceased to be Varenzi. The youth, the humanity, the capacity to love of Varenzi, had been lost, absorbed into that devilish root, and by some extraordinary metamorphosis Isàdas Pacha had flourished in his stead. There was not even a ghost of Varenzi to return to his former dwelling, which seemed in truth to resemble a mausoleum of dead hopes.

And for the Pacha—could his spirit revisit the place which had known his earlier self, his was not the aid which could succour Marillier now. What sympathy could Isàdas have with such emotions as were racking Marillier's soul?

The man's thoughts went back to those talks with the dying Ambassador, which had so impressed him. He seemed to hear again the trenchant tones in their fitful force, as the voice of one speaking from heights, only to be climbed by rugged steps of pain—heights whence the Promised Land of spiritual knowledge might be viewed. The Pacha had not seen that promised land, for his eyes were darkened. Though he had called man a demi-god, he had believed and had realised it himself, that man's opportunities are limited by time, that finality is shown in all things manifested, and that Death is lord of the universe.

But Marillier had learned that there was no such thing as death. There lay the Beyond, unknown, untrodden, but an absolute reality. And in face of this reality, the Pacha's philosophy remained incomplete. Yet certain words of his rang in his ears, like those of some seer of olden time commissioned to deliver truths which he had himself hardly grasped... 'If I had known a few years sooner all that I now know of the forces in Man and Nature, I would have concentrated my vital energy, not upon my desire, but upon the cultivation of will-strength, by which I might have everlastingly secured it. Had I conquered my own weakness, and turned love from my tyrant to my slave... I might have drunk of immortality... In subordinating Desire to Will I should have gained both, and the fleshly union would have become the eternal blending of spirit.'

Marillier felt that he had fatally missed the spiritual meaning of the old man's saying. The Pacha had spoken of human opportunities, and had conveyed that opportunity, according to a law of Nature, is always offered to those on the verge of knowledge; offered—but perchance only once. If the opportunity be not rightly used, it may never be permitted to return. The just Arbiter of human destinies had granted him his opportunity. The fact that he had been able to project his will with force sufficient to accomplish a seeming miracle, showed that he had been ripe for the giving. But—How had he acquitted himself? Had he passed unscathed through the temptation. Had selfless motive conquered, or had personal desire proved the strongest?

His conscience answered.

How then to win again that which had been lost? How to gain, in that dim and distant Beyond, the joy he was now compelled to forego? How to act so that the awful responsibility he had taken upon himself should be faithfully discharged—that atonement might be made to the wandering spirit unrighteously banished, and that the woman whose life was in his keeping might be held inviolate, and

yet spared the anguish of a double disillusionment?

It was a problem that baffled him. At this moment the man felt there could be no hope for him in the material or the spiritual world. He must run his course alone, unadvised and unassisted. Alone, he must decide his future path, and alone must he traverse its dreary length. There was only one decision; there could be only one road, and the name of its goal had been ringing in his ears since he had left the tower—renunciation.

He did not know how he should reach this goal. The battle itself had seemed less difficult, for, though lost, he knew it won. He had, as it were, sacrificed his life that he might gain his soul. The material crown of the conqueror was not the thing he coveted. In defeat lay his hope of lasting victory, and this victory for himself meant safety for Rachel. Whatever came, he must always protect her. He was determined, if it were best for her, to acknowledge her outwardly as his wife. This he would do; he would not play the coward; but to attempt again the ratification of the bond—that he would not. Henceforth, till their lives' end, Rachel should be sacred to him as a cloistered nun; and surely in that sanctity would be his best chance of preserving to her the tender friend, the considerate guardian, who had won her affection, and whom she so sorely needed.

A great temptation assailed him to fling down all disguises and own himself to the world, to the Emperor, to Rachel, as a thief and impostor. He knew that there would be immense relief for him in such casting away of sham, and he felt, too, that this might be a surer way than any other of counteracting the dead Caspar's evil designs. But to this, there came the objection that in so doing he would deprive the woman he loved of her only protector.

Then his thought moved slowly, painfully, along to a conclusion. The world could never know the truth—for one thing, it would be incapable of understanding it. The garment of flesh he had stolen must be worn while he lived, in silence and in shame. Never could he stand honestly confessed before his fellow-men. But Rachel? Need he abide beside her always an impostor—a husband, yet no husband, with the choice, as years went on, of losing even her confidence through the false position in which he must stand, or else of incurring her hatred, perhaps of goading her to self-destruction by the recurrence of such a scene as that which they had gone through in the tower? Would it not be better, kinder, to tell her all, and let her decide for herself whether or not she would leave him and throw herself upon the protection of her father—though in that

case it might be to rush on the fate from which her mother had wished to save her. For who could say what might be the Emperor's will concerning her, or what change in the character of Abdullulah Zobeir years of despotism might have wrought?

So, balancing possibilities dare he tell her? It was not the pain to himself which his confession would cause that troubled him, but the effect on her. Then the warm realisation of her love, not for the man Caspar Ruel, but for the man Lucien Marillier, flooded his being, and brought the sustaining belief that she would understand though the world would not, that she would forgive and trust him still, and that therein might lie the solution of that problem of the future which was so perplexing him. And were she to turn from him in scorn and indignation for the wrong he had committed, that, too, would be a solution, and he would bear his punishment. Yes, the conviction was strengthening in his mind to certainty—Rachel ought to know: it was her right to know. The more was it her due because he felt her to be a part of himself, the innermost core of his heart, the half of his soul. This had been borne in upon him when they had stood breast to breast in the little tower room—when he had dreamed of speeding with her to some heavenly star, the two beings blended in blissful unity.

But how could he have imagined that either ethereal or material oneness would have been possible with that unacknowledged deception between them? Falsity! Falsity! He had been false all through. False to his cousin; false to his trust; false to his love; false to himself. The remembrance of that brief touch with the girl's pure soul seemed as a star within him, a tiny reflex of supreme truth shining faintly on the first steps of the path that he must tread. Though it should lead him by thorn-strewn ways that he knew not, and though it should even separate him from Rachel, he would hesitate no longer.

From the instant that Marillier arrived at this decision he felt himself strong for action. All this time he had been standing in the same position, his head bent, his fingertips pressed tightly upon his temples. Presently he straightened himself, his hands dropped, and his eyes wandered round the room. They fell upon the gold box in its case which he had brought from his house in Harley Street. He had not been thinking of the mandrake; now it seized his mind. He walked up to the box, full of intense revulsion. He would be rid of the accursed thing, whose magic had turned the pure-hearted Varenzi into a cynical voluptuary, and himself into—yes, he must say it—a murderer. He put his hand out with the intention of opening the box so that he might look once more at the root before destroying it.

He scarcely knew how he should make away with it. His impulse had been to burn it, tear it in pieces, throw it into the torrent at the foot of the cliff, but, as his hand rested on the case, a new intention formed itself. Renouncement meant little unless it included restitution. For a wrong had been done to the mandrake also, and though he himself had not sinned against the poor embryonic creature in dragging it from its kindred and its native soil, it might be that he was sinning now in not restoring it. He determined that he would replace the root.

It was hardly possible that he could discover the exact spot of ground from which it had been torn, but perhaps on one of the spurs of Khayal he might find some soil in which it would again flourish. He sat down and tried with a great effort of memory to recall the exact words in which Isàdas had described his wanderings and the place where he had plucked the mandrake. Marillier hoped that he might thus gain some clue which would aid him in performing his pious duty to the insane root.

Chapter XXIX

THE HAREM WING

It was late the next morning when Rachel awoke, calm, and refreshed by sleep, and with the terrors of the previous evening partially effaced from her mind by the remembrance of her lover's later care for her, which had pleasantly haunted her dreams. A glow of sunshine filled the room, and, as she lay musing, the fresh mountain breeze blew in through an open window and shook the tattered curtains of striped Algerian stuff. Sounds came up faintly from below, among them a strange melodious cry which she had heard at sunset the day before, and which she had been told was the muezzin's call from the distant mosque. By some incongruous association she was reminded of the Angelus at the convent, when she was simple Rachel Isàdas, knowing nothing of what the future might bring her. Thence, her thoughts turned to the man whom she had supposed to be her only relative, apparently so devoid of human sympathies, yet in reality seared by sorrow, a perpetual mourner for the woman he had so madly loved. Her heart softened as she remembered that poor mother of whom she was to learn more to-day than she had ever known. Together, she and Caspar would examine her mother's rooms, finding out what had been the dead woman's tastes and occupations from the relics she had left, and which the Pacha had guarded so jealously, though he himself had been unable to bear the sight of them. Rachel fancied that they might enable her to realise better that she had never been Rachel Isàdas at all, but that she was the daughter of Rachel O'Hara and the Emperor of Abaria. The girl gave a little shudder. She felt thankful that she was married, so that even the Emperor could not take her away from her husband's protection. How truly protecting he had shown himself last night, patiently soothing her silly fears. The chair was beside her bed in which he had sat, and she blushed rosily at sight of it, remembering how peacefully she had gone to sleep at last, with her hand in his. It was almost impossible to believe that she had shrunk at his touch only a little while before. The girl nearly persuaded herself that the impression she retained of that interview in the tower room, was the result of nightmare, so buoyant and healthful was her waking state. Had she then in truth been a little hysterical the night before? She knew that for some time she had felt ill-balanced and emotional. No doubt her overstrained fancy had exaggerated a mere passing mood in him, and, verily, was not the old tower weird enough to account for any kind of nerve-excitation! Certainly she had

been foolish, carried beyond herself, quite capable of any absurdity. When she remembered his sobbing fit, how completely he had been upset, and his extreme gentleness and ready forgiveness of her contrariety, she blamed herself bitterly. To-day she would atone for her unkindness as far as she was able. Nothing should spoil their happiness. She would show him that she was resolved to forget that painful scene, and help him to do so too. Meanwhile, she would get up; it must be late. Christine had evidently been at work, for the fire was alight and the bath put ready. Rachel looked at her watch. At that moment the door opened, and Christine appeared with her mistress's breakfast, and there were exclamations and congratulations on mademoiselle's good night and improved looks.

'I must dress quickly, Christine,' Rachel said. 'There is a great deal to do to-day in looking over the castle, and Ruel Bey will be waiting.'

'Ah! but does not mademoiselle know that Ruel Bey went out early this morning before anyone else was astir. There is a letter on the tray which he left for mademoiselle.'

Rachel's face changed with surprise and disappointment. She tore open the letter, which was only a short one, written hurriedly.

'MY DEAREST,—I am obliged to leave you for a few hours on business connected with a bequest to me from the Pacha. The matter is imperative, and may detain me till evening. I grieve that we cannot spend this day together as you planned. Forgive me and try to be happy in your researches. On my return I will tell you everything.

'YOUR HUSBAND.'

The last word was written as with hesitation, and there was no other signature Rachel could have cried like a child in her vexation. Strange, she thought, that he had not mentioned this business before. She supposed he had forgotten it, or was it possible that he had not then known of it. It was all very puzzling and unsatisfactory. Well, it could not be helped now, and she must make the best of her day without him. After all, it might be possible to delay their departure the next day long enough for her to show him the result of her explorations.

It was in a downcast mood that she joined Nurse Dalison, who was waiting for her over a big fire in Varenzi's library, which, with its heavy cedar ceiling and lining of bookshelves, was a less cheerful place than the dining-hall, but, Nurse

Dalison said, not quite so draughty. Nurse Dalison related that she had explored a little on her own account, and had found a sunny and fairly weeded bit of terrace and some ancient garden chairs which she had made comfortable with rugs and cushions; also a piece of carpet that Armand had laid on the gravel for her feet. Here she meant to take her embroidery and a novel, and to spend a warm lazy morning while the lovers amused themselves in their own fashion. When Rachel told her tale of disappointment, however, the good woman rose to the occasion, and proposed that they two should make a journey of discovery through the castle, only remarking pathetically that, being slightly rheumatic, she trusted Rachel would not require her to go down into damp dungeons.

While they were talking, old Armand came in, and with the air of a seneschal, delivered his bunch of keys to the new châtelaine. Rachel bade him conduct them round the building, open everything, and leave them in the rooms which had been her mother's.

The old man obeyed, chattering over past times as he hobbled beside them. He had been a servant in the family of General de Boissy-Verneuil, and could point out the alterations—a door here, a window there, a loggia out of keeping with the architecture which had converted the old Moorish fortress-palace into a comparatively suitable modern dwelling. Rachel was more than ever certain that once free to leave Abaria, she would spend a good deal of time at Bab-el—Khayalat.

They passed by disused slaves' and servants' quarters; then back through the entrance court and into a central summer court beyond, which was covered by a huge trellis of Banksia roses and bougainvillea—a gigantic arbour where the fountain played no longer, its basin green with moss, and where unpruned shoots of the creepers trailed to the ground. Rachel would have lingered here, but Nurse Dalison shrank, apprehensive of insects and reptiles, and begged that they might go on.

Out of this verdure-roofed court many doors opened, and here another archway opened into the harem garden, accessible now from different parts of the house. This, too, was a tangle of rank box and unclipped foliage of orange branches interlacing, among which hung yellow fruit. The air was almost oppressive from the scent of orange flowers. From the harem enclosure, they passed by a modern door on to a terrace stretching before an abutting wing of the castle, which Armand told Rachel had been occupied by madame her mother, and contained

the room where she had been born. This terrace was in a state of utter dilapidation; part of the parapet had fallen; the stone vases placed at intervals along it, were broken by force of the roots of myrtle shrubs, mostly withered now, that had been planted twenty-five years ago, and the steps and coping stones were covered with lichen.

The garden beyond, which sloped down to the fortress wall, had the appearance of a tropical jungle, for by Count Varenzi's orders the trees or plants in it had not been touched since Rachel O'Hara had last walked among them. Part of it had been planted with roses, and here was a tangle like the rose-wilderness of Zola's romance. On the unhealthy-looking palms great fronds hung down dead and broken, and clusters of dates fell and rolled on the ground, there being no man to gather them. This garden was both a tomb and a nursery of vegetation, with flowers blooming rankly, and noxious weeds rising from the decaying undergrowth and exhaling corruption. Nothing could be imagined more dismal or more fascinating. Rachel thought she would like to come here by herself and find the paths along which her mother had walked; but Nurse Dalison cried out at the danger of miasma, and the girl, plucking some sickly white roses which seemed flowers of death, followed Armand through an entrance door, beside which were tiled benches for slaves, into the modernised harem. Here, still, in the tiny chambers, were raised platforms upon which the eunuchs had once slept. Most of these were ante-chambers that had not been lived in; but presently, with a certain solemnity, Armand opened the door of a larger room, square, once a small inner court, with arches leading into windowed recesses that looked out upon the terrace and garden. Adjoining it was another room, long and narrow, and with the same deep recesses, one of which made the alcove for a bed draped in rose-coloured satin with a coverlet of rare embroidery, while another held a sumptuously-furnished dressing-table with a mirror framed in silver, and silver ewers, boxes, and toilet implements. Over the bed hung a large crucifix, also of silver.

Rachel felt a lump rising in her throat; there was something inexpressibly pathetic in the appearance of habitation, which, in a cursory glance, the chamber still presented. One might at first have fancied that it had only just been quitted by its occupant. A jewel casket was open, some of the covers were off the boxes of pomade and powder, and the stoppers out of the scent bottles. A lace-trimmed peignoir was spread upon a chair, an embroidered slipper seemed to have been carelessly dropped, a filmy handkerchief lay upon the ledge of a prie-dieu beside a book of devotion. But the perfume and powder had dried up, leaving a faint

musty fragrance; the peignoir was yellow with age, the little slipper was mouldering, and the gossamer handkerchief might have fallen to pieces at a touch.

Rachel turned away, choked by a sob, and went back into the sitting-room. Here, too, was the look of recent occupation. Armand explained that the rooms were kept dusted and aired as far as was possible without removing or displacing anything. All was as it had been on the day when madame had been taken ill. Rachel asked no questions. She felt that she must discover for herself what manner of woman her mother had been—but not now—not till she was alone. Armand inquired if it were the ladies' pleasure that déjeuner should be served at mid-day, to which Nurse Dalison replied in the affirmative, and Armand went away.

Nurse Dalison remarked that it must be nearly twelve o'clock already, and that they would only just have time to look round this dear romantic room. She put up her pince-nez and peered at the tiles and embroideries and array of scimitars on the wall, and up at the beautiful ribbed ceiling and round at the furniture and nick-nacks which showed an odd variety of style and period—French eighteenth century cabinets and escritoire, a few pieces of the First Empire, low Turkish tables and divans covered with old embroidery; a finely-chased Arab lamp hanging between the pillars of one archway; a paroquet in modern porcelain swinging in a hoop from another.

A piano stood at an angle with one of the windows, and there was a piece of music on the desk. A work-basket had a bit of half-finished work, partly in, partly out. Dust had settled thickly on the cambric and on the reels of cotton which might not be taken from their place. There was a vase of mildewed roses on the writing-table, dry petals strewn on the blotting pad, and some flowering plants had died long since in their pots. The Aubusson carpet looked faded and moth eaten, and so did the velvet frames on a table by one of the divans, from which the pictures were almost falling out. These represented an oldish gentleman in flowered waistcoat and white lawn stock, and a lady in a low velvet bodice cut into a point at the breast. Rachel wondered if these could be portraits of her Irish grandfather and grandmother, and whether Rachel O'Hara had carried them with her when she fled from the Imperial palace. She was startled in these thoughts by an exclamation from Nurse Dalison,—

'Dear Rachel, do come and look at this photograph. I can't help thinking—yes, I

am quite sure that it must have been Isàdas Pacha when he was a much younger man.'

There could be no doubt of the identity. The photograph was a large half-length, taken in some official uniform, but without the fez in which Rachel had been accustomed to see the Pacha. Marks of time and climate were upon the picture, but it was only slightly blurred. The face was that of a man in the prime of life; the fine features clearly traceable as those of Isàdas, though the well-knit frame had little resemblance to the Ambassador's bowed form, and there were not the deep lines round the eye-sockets, the tired droop of the lids, and the hard, somewhat furtive gleam—which had given their peculiar character to the Pacha's eyes. This man's gaze was steadfast, earnest, full of hope and purpose; the expression of the face was grave, benevolent, strong and kindly; and the firm lips, in spite of their masculine determination, had in their gentle curves something of a woman's tenderness.

'Who could have believed,' murmured Nurse Dalison, 'that the poor old Pacha ever looked like this. But I always maintained—and I know Doctor Marillier agreed with me—that there was a better heart underneath that crusty outside than most people supposed. I can understand now why it used to be said that he could make any woman care for him.'

Rachel did not answer; her emotion was too keen for words. She walked to the *escritoire*, where the ink in its bowl was dried to a powdery film, and the pen in its pretty handle of mother—o'pearl and gold, had become a shapeless mass of rust. There were drawers in the upper part of the *escritoire*, and the girl opened them one by one, glancing at their contents. These did not seem to be of much value. There were no letters. Who should write to the poor prisoner in the harem, or the fugitive who had buried herself among these Kabyle hills? Some sheets of paper on which was writing, pointed and delicate, proved to be gardening notes, reminiscences, maybe, of the Irish home, setting forth the month in which various homely flowers should be sown; flowers common to cottage gardens; and opposite them times in other months, mostly of winter, to which in Algeria the season of planting might presumably correspond. Evidently the poor lady had interested herself in horticulture, and had no doubt found pleasure and occupation in that tangled wilderness outside. She had been interested in astronomy too, it seemed, for on some of the pieces of paper, other notes were scribbled, relating to the rising and setting of planets, and also some rough diagrams of constellations. One or two of these had remarks appended in what

Rachel knew had been the Pacha's handwriting.

For the rest, the contents of the drawers were mere feminine trifles, giving indications of a sweet womanly nature, but showing nothing of the tragedy of Rachel O'Hara's life. The girl Rachel had been half hoping, half fearing, that she might come across something connected with her father, a bit of writing, a miniature, a memento of some sort, which would give a clue to her mother's feelings towards the Emperor. But there was nothing, no portrait, no object which could possibly be associated with Abdullulah Zobeir. Apparently Count Varenzi had at this time been the only living interest in the woman's life. Rachel found nothing in the drawers of a private or personal nature, till in the last one, she came upon a thin manuscript book, the first pages of which were covered with her mother's writing. The girl, glancing through them, found that the book was a sort of diary, more of feelings than of events; only a slight record of the doings at Bab-el-Khayalat running through long passages, in which the woman's inner thoughts were revealed. On every page of the diary the name of Varenzi constantly recurred.

Another appeal from Nurse Dalison made Rachel pause and hurriedly thrust the book back into its drawer. Not under these conditions could she read the outpourings of her mother's soul. For that she must be alone.

'Have you found anything interesting, dear Rachel?' asked her companion, and without waiting for a reply went on, 'I have been looking over this bookcase, and have come to the conclusion that your dear mother, or whoever collected the books—perhaps after all it was one of the Boissy-Verneuil—must have been a romantic, cultivated and highly religious woman. One can tell that by the marked bits. I wish we were going to stay a little longer, so that I might have an opportunity of reading them—that is if you would allow me. Here are some biographies of saints that I've always wanted to study, and there is a delightful French translation of Hafiz, and several others of those dear Eastern people one knows nothing about. Do you think that we shall come here again on our way back from Abaria?'

'I don't know—I hope we shall,' replied Rachel, dreamily.

Nurse Dalison turned at the sound of her voice.

'Dear Rachel,' she exclaimed, 'I really don't think you ought to stay in this cold

room any longer. You are quite pale, and I believe you are shivering. If you have taken a chill, you ought to eat something as soon as possible, and I am sure it must be luncheon-time by now. I am famishing myself, and my rheumatic joints are aching. Let us go back to the salon.'

Rachel acquiesced without demur, and as the two threaded again the tortuous way they had come, Armand met them, announcing that dejeuner was served. The girl was very silent during the meal, and Nurse Dalison tactfully abstained from comment, attributing her depression to concern at her husband's absence.

After lunch Nurse Dalison returned to her room for digestive repose, recommending her friend to follow her example. But Rachel only waited till the nurse, wrapped up warmly, was blinking over a novel, and then went back again to the harem wing and to the perusal of her mother's diary.

Chapter XXX

HER MOTHER'S DIARY

Rachel sat at the escritoire beneath one of the long, narrow windows which she had contrived to open, so that the scent of roses floated in upon her, and there, passed several hours, her head bent, her hand supporting her cheek, absorbed in the close, delicate writing which she had discovered. The journal must have been begun soon after Rachel O'Hara's arrival at Bab-el—Khayalat. In the first entries in the book there were traces of physical exhaustion and of mental reaction after the effort of will which had sustained her flight, but the dominant note of them was intense gratitude to the man who had rescued her, and wonder, almost awe, at the unselfish devotion that had inspired his aid.

'He says that he asks nothing of me,'—Rachel O'Hara wrote—'nothing but acceptance of his service and permission to love me at the distance which our circumstances compel...His goodness to me, the tender forethought which he has shown in preparations for my comfort here, are beyond all words. .

And then his chivalrous forbearance, his delicate sympathy when the misery of these last two years rises and overwhelms me, and I am as Saul, tormented, and can find no solace except in the old melodies of my childhood which he loves to hear me sing...How can I express the gratitude that I owe him?'

Then after some rhapsodic sentences of thankfulness for her escape from a life she loathed came the following outburst:—'Had God forsaken me when He permitted me to succumb to that overpowering temptation of the lust of the eye and the pride of sovereignty? Fool that I was to imagine that I, a weak, ignorant Irish girl, could overthrow a social system and control such a nature as that of Abdullulah Zobeir! Subtle, sensual, deadly in revenge, from the beginning he was my tyrant, even when he adored me and called himself my slave. Truly, when the doors of the Women's Palace closed upon me I was as a child lured into the den of a monster, fascinated, but wholly helpless...Oh! how well I remember...No, I cannot write of it. The recollection sickens me... That I, Rachel O'Hara, the descendant of pure-blooded, true-hearted Irish kings, should have become a Sultan's odalisque! I wonder if my dead father and mother looking down from the free heavens, saw their imprisoned daughter's shame...

‘Yes, I was tempted, but not only by the prospect of power, by the jewels, the pomp, the Eastern luxury, which appealed to one whose life had been all grinding poverty—it was not only for the sake of these things that I fell—Dead Sea fruit as they became. I was attracted by the man himself—his handsome, weary face, his soft voice, and the glamour of his whole personality. Emperor or not, Abdullulah Zobeir has the gift of charm. It is no wonder that he can captivate romantic women and secure the fidelity of brave men. Varenzi has loved him almost as David loved Jonathan. Varenzi would even now, I verily believe, lay down his life in the Emperor’s defence. Varenzi has dreamed of Abdullulah as a god-appointed instrument for the regeneration of Abaria—of the whole East; the founder of a new Caliphate; the later Prophet commissioned from on high to be the people’s saviour. Wild vision, but the motive, so far—till he first met me—of all Varenzi’s actions. Even still, I feel instinctively he has not entirely awakened from his dream. Though he tells me that he has resigned his post on the plea of family affairs requiring his absence in Avaran for many months to come, I see that devotion to Abaria—his adopted country, Catholic though he is—fills his heart, and that he would continue to love and serve the Emperor if he could reconcile patriotism with his love for me. For it is I who stand between him and the allegiance he has sworn; it is I who have destroyed his ambition, brought poison into his faith, and ruined his career. I read this in the sadness of his eyes when he looks at me, in his melancholy absorption in study and in the fits of restlessness which he tries to overcome by hunting lions and panthers in the hills. Would it not be far better were I to die, rather than live to be a drag and a curse upon this noble nature? How could my devotion—if it were within the bounds of possibility that I could love him as he deserves and marry him perhaps, in the future—how could anything I might give him counterbalance the misfortune I have brought upon this man whose evil fate it is to love me too well?’

On the next page Rachel read:—

‘I have opened my heart to Varenzi. I know now that my well-being is dearer to him than that of Abaria, and that his love for me, barren as it must seem to him, outweighs his devotion to the Emperor...I am shamed by his disinterestedness... Had ever man so great a soul?’

Lower,—

‘Varenzi has been less restless lately. He is occupied about my garden. I have

been describing to him the rosery in my Irish home. He has sent for cuttings...

‘A cartload of Parisian novelties has arrived. Who but he would have remembered all the foolish fancies I ever expressed in his hearing?...The swinging bird is too comical...

‘He has persuaded me out of my silly terror of being seen and recognised. We have driven to the outskirts of Milianah...’

Here and there in the diary, came pretty natural touches—the description of a great thunderstorm, of a visitation of locusts, of an excursion inland among the Kabyles, with quotations from Varenzi concerning the antiquity of the race, and the traces still to be seen of the worship of Melkarth, the Tyrian Venus. Now, such passages as these showed a less morbid tone in the poor woman’s regretful self-analysis:—

‘Varenzi advises me to read more, to occupy my mind with abstract study, and so keep painful thoughts at bay. He has made me a collection of French books from the library, and has sent to England for some good novels and poetry. His own mind is in itself a library, so varied is his knowledge on every subject. I did not know that he was so learned, nor had I guessed that the religious sentiment in him was so strong. Yesterday he read beautifully from the *Pensées* of Pascal, and afterwards he brought me the *Memoirs* of Madame de Krüdener, the Catholic mystic...To-day we sat on the terrace and I read to him *Pippa passes*...The state of intellectual torpor into which I had fallen is breaking. I begin to feel myself once again a woman possessed of a mind, of resources within herself, capable of reading the great book of Nature if I choose to learn its alphabet. Varenzi is my teacher. He has been instructing me in astronomy; telling me what is known of the planets, and pointing out to me the different constellations. The other day he gave me a delightful surprise in the shape of a large telescope which he ordered from Paris, and has had fixed in the topmost room of the tower, in order that we may study the heavens together on these glorious summer evenings. He has not, I am sure, approved of my spending so much time alone in the tower, though he did not like to invade my solitude without a legitimate pretext. But he has one now in the telescope, which seems, even in the daytime, to require much adjustment of position and lenses.

‘It has flashed into my mind that he is sometimes afraid I may destroy myself. One evening, when we were standing on the parapet—he and I—after a long

silence, I turned and saw him watching my face with the keenest anxiety; I felt then that he understood why I liked to be in the tower. For as I stand on the parapet which hangs over the river a thousand feet below, I know myself to be absolutely safe. Were Abdullulah to discover my retreat, there would still be a certain means of escape...'

Following this, the tone of the journal became less retrospective and more devotional. It appeared greatly to distress the poor lady that she was now unable to attend the Catholic chapel in the village, and that the priest who visited her in the performance of his office, was narrow-minded and illiterate, and incapable of understanding the workings of her mind, widened by the influence of Varenzi, who, in Rachel O'Hara's phrase, 'saw God in all creeds and beyond them.'

By and by came the lines:—

'I live altogether downstairs now. Varenzi has given up the stars in order that he may sit with me in the evenings. Sometimes I sing to him; more often he reads while I sew...

'Varenzi's tenderness grows every hour. He is to me father, brother and husband all in one. Husband—have I written the word? Heaven pardon me the hope which has lately come into my heart—the same which I know dwells in his—of a fair future in which we shall be always together, the hideous past wiped out and forgotten. For I love him!...I must own it to myself—I love him...'

Now the last entry of all:—

'Varenzi has brought a most interesting Arab doctor to see me whose skill and knowledge he tells me are marvellous, and far beyond those of any European physician he has ever known. They call this man the Medicine Moor...'

It was dark when Rachel finished the manuscript. She had found it difficult to decipher the last words. During all these hours, she had not moved from her place except to go for half an hour to the salon when Nurse Dalison announced tea. She had not asked the nurse to go back with her, but saying she had still papers of her mother's to go over, had returned alone to the perusal of the journal. Now that it was ended, she put away the book, and rising from the table, flung herself on the divan near which was the Pacha's portrait, and where, from the heaped-up cushions at one end, she fancied her mother must often have lain.

The strange love story which after so many years had revealed itself stirred her pity deeply for the two chiefly concerned in it, but she felt also a curious compassion for her father, that gloomy, yet fascinating personage, out of the picture, but always the centre of the drama. It seemed to his daughter that he had been the victim of his nationality, temperament and fatal position of sovereignty, which had made him regard all women as instruments to his pleasure and stifled the germ of pure passion which Rachel O'Hara had undoubtedly inspired in him. Rachel recognised a certain similarity between her own nature and experience and those of her mother. It was that Eastern taint in the relations of man with woman which had at times repelled her in the old Caspar; it was the all-protecting tenderness of the new Caspar which had won her whole-souled love. She began to realise that there were two beings in the man she had married—two men who corresponded with those other two men by whom her mother's destiny had been swayed. Rachel Isàdas had been fascinated by the good looks and charm of Ruel Bey, but had never wholly given her heart away till, in his new character, he had won her trust as well as her love. So also Rachel O'Hara had fallen under the glamour of Abdullulah Zobeir, eventually learning to loathe the lord of the seraglio, and she had at last been taught the true meaning of love by Varenzi's chivalrous devotion. It had seemed hard at first to reconcile Varenzi of Bab-el-Khayalat with the grim Pacha of the Abarian Embassy, but now it was not so difficult. The pendulum swings and rebounds; iron glows in the furnace, and at the shock of cold water is turned into steel; sunshine fructifies the blossom, frost comes, blackening the fruit.

The pathos of the Pacha's cynical old age and lonely death returned to Rachel with fresh force. Oh! if only she had known his story sooner; if only she had gone sooner in her mother's name and had won her way into his affections. But she remembered that would have been impossible, for though her voice was the voice of Rachel O'Hara, her eyes were the eyes of Abdullulah Zobeir.

And now she felt the personal sting of neglect, and bitterness rose within her at the thought of how unwelcome she must have been to the young mother who bore her. This was clear from the omission of any definite mention of impending motherhood in Rachel's O'Hara's diary. There was no suggestion of the natural joy of maternity. Could it be that her mother had died hating her for being the Emperor's child. It was cruel; it was unjust; and she could hardly believe this the fact. The story which Manlier had heard from the Pacha; the emerald ring upon her finger showed that Rachel O'Hara had felt some anxiety as to her daughter's future, and had wished to guard her from that Eastern system under which she

had so sorely suffered.

Nurse Dalison's knock sounded at the closed door, and Rachel started up, recalled to the present, her first thought of Caspar and her disappointment apparent at sight of the tall thin figure dressed in a tea-gown ready for dinner. She wondered how she could have forgotten Caspar for so long. And why was he so late? Could any evil have befallen him? Nurse Dalison had no news. Possibly Ruel Bey had gone to Milianah, and might be waiting there for telegrams, for, in diplomatic life, cipher telegrams were the explanation of everything out of the ordinary course of things. Nobody could tell what news he might have found at Milianah; they had seen no newspapers and had received no letters since leaving Algiers. A war might have broken out, or a crowned head might have died for all they could tell. Rachel might be certain, however, that nothing unfortunate could happen to Ruel Bey. His was a charmed life, and he had been born to good fortune.

So Nurse Dalison prattled on, soothing the deserted bride, whom she led back to the warmth and brightness of the salon, and thence to the tower bedroom, where a bright fire burned, and Christine was waiting to dress her mistress for dinner.

The meal was put off for a little while, then, there being no sign of Ruel Bey, Rachel at last ordered it to be served, and a portion kept back till he should arrive.

The two women went through their cheerless repast, Rachel pale, abstracted, looking in her white dress as though she had come out of another world. This was indeed the case, for, in spite of her anxiety about her husband, she could not rid herself of the impression her mother's diary had made. She was silent, listening eagerly to every sound that came from the courtyard outside. Nurse Dalison made a brave effort at conversation, but it was with little effect, and even she relapsed into gloom. They had just finished dinner when Marillier staggered in; staggered, in the literal meaning of the word, for he was too exhausted to stand upright. So pale and weary did he look as he fell into a chair, that Rachel ran to him greatly alarmed. Had he had an accident? Had he again hurt his head? She was sure something was amiss. Would he not tell her, and let them send to the town to see if there were a doctor? He stayed her with a motion of his hand.

'No, my dear, there has been no accident. I am quite well; only tired, and

wanting food.'

Rachel bade Armand bring dinner back immediately. He must eat it as he was, she said, and she would wait upon him. Nurse Dalison poured out a tumblerful of red wine, and made him drink it and eat a biscuit; then, with her usual tact, went into the library, leaving husband and wife alone.

His strength revived with the wine, and she brought him presently to the table, and, dismissing Armand, waited upon him herself, as she had said, watching the colour come back into his cheeks, and refraining from questions till he had eaten and drunk. She said, at length, when he seemed able to answer her,—

'You have something to tell me, Caspar?'

He bent his head in acquiescence.

'Yes, I have something to tell you—a great deal to tell you, Rachel. You will need all your strength to bear it.'

'I knew,' she answered, 'that something serious was troubling you. But don't think me weak, Caspar. I am strong enough to bear whatever you have to say.'

He was looking at her with eyes that scarcely seemed to see her. She leaned forward, gently stretching out her hand to him across the table, as she had done on the evening before.

'You will remember that, will you not?' she persisted. 'Tell me all you have to say without any fear. Perhaps I may be able to help you. At least I can share your trouble.'

He got up then and drew back, until the chair he had sat in was between them.

'That is just the thing,' he said slowly, 'you cannot share this trouble, and I must tell you why.'

Rachel blanched, but answered bravely,—

'I can't agree with you, Caspar. Come what may, we shall share the trouble. But tell me everything.'

He looked round the room with the air of a man driven against a wall. He knew that the moment had come; he had believed himself strong, but at the last, his courage was failing him. Yet he knew that this was because physical weakness again overcame him. He steadied himself by the back of the chair, and, clearing his throat, for his voice was husky, he began to speak. At that moment, however, old Armand entered. He had come to remove the things from the table. Should he wait longer, he asked his mistress deferentially? Had monsieur finished?

‘Yes, monsieur has finished—but—’

Rachel stopped. She did not want their privacy invaded, nor did she wish to call the servants’ attention to special need for guarding it. Her thoughts moved quickly. Nurse Dalison was in the library. Should she take him to her mother’s sitting-room? No; Rachel shrank from bringing grief and perplexities of to-day into that sanctuary of bygone love and sorrow. There remained only the tower room where they would not again be interrupted. She took her resolve.

‘Is the lamp lighted in the observatory, Armand?’ she inquired.

The old man told her that he had just lighted it.

‘Come, Caspar,’ she said to her husband, ‘we will go upstairs. I want to see the stars again.’

‘Mademoiselle will see something of rough weather from the tower tonight,’ said Armand. ‘The wind is getting up, and mademoiselle may have heard that when Khayal is grey like a ghost at sunset, it means that there will be a storm. Perhaps mademoiselle did not observe that Khayal was livid as the corpse of a mountain this evening. It is a saying in these parts,’ and the old man nodded impressively. ‘But mademoiselle need not be alarmed,’ he added. ‘The thunderstorm will be nothing to tremble at. It is a prodigy when that happens in winter. There will not be many stars, but the wind is driving the clouds and the moon has just risen.’

Rachel hardly heard what he said, nor did Marillier. She had turned to the door, and he followed her blindly as she led the way through the corridor to the lower room of the tower. Then he realised where she was taking him.

‘Rachel!’ he exclaimed in a choked voice; ‘not up there! You cannot go up there again.’

‘Yes, there,’ she replied. They had reached the foot of the stairs, and she turned and faced him standing a step above him.

‘You think that I will not go up to the observatory, my Caspar, because of last night,’ she went on. ‘That is exactly the reason why I wish to go—to prove to you that where you are concerned I am determined to fear nothing; to make you understand that no power, living or dead, can alter my love, or separate me from you. Come; Caspar.’

Living or dead! Why had she said those words. His heart quailed; the utterance seemed fateful. And she had spoken in all ignorance. She was thinking of the living Emperor, the dead Pacha—those two powers the only ones she fancied able to come between her and the man she loved.

‘Come, Caspar,’ she repeated.

He made no further opposition; in truth he had not the strength to do so. He felt a strange weakness and lack of vitality, and it was with difficulty, and only by holding on to the stone moulding on either side of the wall, that he pulled himself up the steep staircase.

Chapter XXXI

IN A STRANGE COUNTRY

When some sixteen hours earlier Marillier started on his search for the mandrake's land, the young moon, so suggestive to him of Rachel's pure loveliness, had sunk behind the distant range of the Djurdjuras, and stormy clouds obscuring the stars made the night a heavy blackness. It seemed to him that the darkness overhanging the world was in accordance with the gloom which had fallen upon his own life. The moon had sunk and Rachel was lost to him.

He stole out of the castle by a side door that he had observed leading to the garden from the outer court, avoiding the principal entrance, where he knew that he must be checked by manifold bars and bolts. A lamp which had been left lighted in one of the corridors shed a glimmering ray across the square enclosure which, full as it seemed to Marillier of shadows and whispering sounds, gave him again an impression of ghostly occupancy.

The leaves rustled in the harem garden, and the scent of orange blossom was borne in to his nostrils, mingling with the fainter odours of the creepers overhead. Trailing shoots of the bougainvillea swayed in the night breeze, and a branch of Banksia roses struck him, the clusters of blossom making a scented rain upon his face. As the delicate petals brushed his cheek their softness and fragrance again reminded him of Rachel, and brought back the intoxicating memory of her kisses. But he would not let his courage be overcome by such fancies, and bracing himself anew, he passed out into the night.

Thrusting his arms before him to feel his way among the walls and pillars of the open courts, he at length reached the garden, and after carefully stepping from terrace to terrace, dropped down the low wall at the bottom and found himself upon the ramparts. Here, too, he was obliged to tread cautiously, and cling to the garden wall, for the paved ledge took curves and angles, and in places was broken away, and he knew that death lay in the black chasm which yawned below. A rift in the clouds showed him the tower dimly rising to his left, a dark shapeless mass immediately above him, which he succeeded in skirting. Further on towards the town, the rampart line projected in a wide semi-circle and then

dropped down. A flight of steps led up from it to the platform near the castle gates, where they had seen Arabs drinking coffee; while the fortifications descending, and apparently making a double line, curved again inward, and he was brought to a stop by what he supposed to be the face of the precipice. He could feel that here the parapet was again broken, or had purposely been left incomplete. He had a vague recollection of having noticed, while driving, a steep zigzag drawn on the cliff, and guessed that this might be the point from which some path led down to the bed of the gorge.

Now he found himself for the time confronted by an insuperable difficulty. He had brought with him a compass, and, written on his mind, it seemed to him indelibly, were the words in which the Pacha had described his memorable excursion. But compass or directions availed him nothing in this gloom. He looked down into impenetrable blackness. Far below, through the silence of the night, he could hear the torrent roaring and rumbling at the foot of Khayal. Before him, a denser darkness than that at his feet, rose the grim walls of the mountain itself, seeming in his fancy like some gigantic mythologic monster, endowed with supernatural intelligence, and set to guard the mandrake land, that mysterious region to which he must penetrate before he could replace the root that had wrought him so much ill. And yet, notwithstanding all the evil, he thought, had it not brought him a taste of Paradise which, till his dying hour, could never be forgotten.

At first, the hopelessness of his quest dismayed him. He felt that it would be impossible to cross that gorge, to scale that mountain side. And even supposing that he could do so, what awaited him? A trackless waste of forest and rock where it would be futile to attempt finding the spot in which the family of mandrakes had their habitation. For he knew it to be one of the human characteristics of the root not to grow alone, or in scattered clumps, but to establish a colony in one especial place, leaving the rest of the district barren of its kind. Marillier stood hesitating whether to proceed with the search or to abandon it. One false step forward, and he himself would be plunged into those Immensities of which the Pacha had spoken, and though he did not fear death, for Rachel's sake he dared not risk it.

So he stood uncertain. Again there came a gleam of starlight. Away to the left he could faintly discern the white road rounding the gorge, along which they had driven that afternoon. That road, were he to follow it, would ultimately lead him nearer to Mount Khayal, for it was usually chosen by tourists, mountaineers, and

hunters of big game as the easiest point from which to begin the ascent. But would that help him? The road was long. It had seemed interminable that afternoon when they had traversed it, buoyed up by anticipation, cheered by each other's company, and looking forward pleasantly to their destination. How much longer it would seem now in the darkness. And he doubted whether it would not take him further away still from the goal he wished to gain.

Marillier cursed his impulsiveness in not having waited for the dawn to take his bearings with such exactitude as might be possible. Then, at anyrate, he would have had some light to guide him. He might have set forth at sunrise and still possibly have got back in time to go over part of the castle with Rachel. But first it had seemed to him that the act of restitution must be performed without delay, and he had feared to let himself pause lest he should be tempted to relinquish the expedition, fraught with difficulty, and half hopeless as it was. Perhaps this lurking dread in his mind made him unwilling to retrace his steps in order to await the light of morning. Rather, he would await it here.

He sat down on the edge of the rampart beneath Khâyal's great hump that loomed just in front of him, alone, with only the roar of the torrent below him to break the silence. The lamps in the little native town had been put out; there were no lights to be seen on the minarets of the mosque, but he could perceive like flickering glow-worms the tiny oil lamps burning on the graves of the faithful in the Moslem cemetery which stretched down the hillside. Only a few stars shone clearly overhead in a broad blue track where the clouds had parted—Sirius and Orion and the soft pure glow of Venus near her setting. By this pale illumination he could see the leather case which contained the golden casket of the mandrake that he had brought with him, and had placed at his side on the broken stones of the parapet. It seemed to him that in this box he had been carrying a live thing, or, at least, a creature which had once been living and should now receive burial. He shrank from the case as he would have shrunk from a coffin which held the remains of a dead enemy, sitting beside it through the hours that followed as a watcher might sit by a corpse.

His body was bent forward, his limbs drooping flaccidly, his elbows resting upon his knees, his head upon his hands. The silence of the night soothed his tortured spirit; he felt in those desolate hours that he could have borne no other sound than that of the distant torrent. It was as though his soul were wandering through abysses deep and dark as the gorge below, its only light the beacon blaze of the star of renunciation within his breast, the effulgence that arose from slain desire.

When at length the first silver streak of dawn gleamed behind Mount Khâyal, he raised his head thankfully. Not only was that faint radiance the herald of day, but the herald also of his soul's emergence from murk as of Hades.

As the pale luminosity expanded, Khâyal, Mount of Ghosts, reared against it, appeared more monstrous still, and more unearthly. In that solemn hush of daybreak, Nature held herself in readiness to greet her lord. Now in the far East there shone a soft streak of golden light; the edges of the broken clouds caught its glow, one by one, in faint lines and patches that deepened and spread, till all the purple masses became a wonderful bluish pink like flames bursting through billows of smoke. Floating cloudlets above Khâyal were etherealised and metamorphosed into air-spirits acclaiming the sun. Then the Ghost Mountain gave her welcome, the pink flush on her dark front spreading down the upper precipice and along the pine forest to her rocky base.

There arose a soft murmuring in the air, faint chirpings and twitterings and stirrings as the birds awoke to swell the greeting, and the fiercer creatures of the forest slipped silently away to their lairs. No sign of human life came yet from the native town, or the castle on the hillside. Nature only broke the solitude, a solitude in which the man, alone of his kind, felt at once his own significance and his own greatness; solitude in which it seemed to him that Khâyal, custodian of Nature's secrets, was no longer a grim sentinel, barring approach to the forbidden home of the mandrakes, her helpless embryonic children, but a pleader that the half-human creature the mysterious link between man and vegetable, might be restored to its own place and its appointed order in the scheme of evolution.

Khâyal no longer forbade; she beckoned; she bade Marillier come. High behind her, the rose—gold clouds parted, and a shaft tipped with flame sped down and cast a halo round her. Fiery lights sprang up on all the eastern horizon, and before them, the paling stars crept tremblingly away. From far-off worlds beyond that golden veil, the sun rode forth.

Marillier waited until the mountainside was illuminated by the orb's splendour. He had yearned in the darkness for that gleam of warmth and glory. Now, it encouraged him to begin his difficult and painful descent into the gorge.

As he had suspected, the zigzag path started from this curve of the ramparts, and led tortuously down the cliff. He followed it warily, placing his feet with great

precision, and clinging with one hand at first to projections upon the precipice and to creepers growing in its fissures; then, where the ground sloped a little, to great scarred boulders that might have been hurled there in some prehistoric convulsion, so strangely were they shaped and so unexpected their position. The descent was long and no easy matter, impeded as he was by the case holding the mandrake, and he regretted his want of forethought in not having provided himself with a strap by which he might have slung it across his shoulders.

Nearer the bottom of the gorge, where soil had gathered and was overhung by sheltering rocks, vegetation was rank, and the air was heavy with its exhalations. Deep in the shadows among thick leaves of a pale green, bloomed lurid-looking flowers, a splash of bright orange or vivid crimson showing out as he approached. Curious rock lilies they seemed, uncannily striped, with weird heads resembling certain orchids he remembered having seen in English hot-houses. They nodded and seemed to gibe at him as the wind stirred them. A sudden gust swept down the gorge and whistled past him as he went on. Had it been in his face it might have given him fresh life, but coming from above and whirling by with a shriek and an eddying in the air, he could fancy that the wild spirits of morning were driving him on and laughing at his slowness.

On, on, into the bowels of the earth it seemed, so high rose the walls of rock on either side of him. Enormous boulders, cloven and slanting apart so that in places he could pass through them, and charred by the action of volcanic fires, choked the bed of the ravine. Pools of stagnant water had gathered in the hollows where the stream had overflowed and subsided, and the ground oozed beneath his tread. Noxious plants grew in clumps in the moist places—plants he had never seen before, with succulent stems and pale mottled leaves from which an ill-smelling slime exuded. Grey mist crept up round him—thick miasmatic vapour not yet dispelled by the sun's rays here in this deep valley, but which was beginning to rise in light wreaths upon the mountainside. It filled his nostrils and impeded his breathing, and to it he attributed the weariness of body that weighted him, and with which he had to fight continually as he proceeded.

The zigzag terminated in a rough bridge of boulders across the bottom of the gorge and was carried on upon the other side, where, as it climbed up the rocky height to the zone of forest which girdled the mountain, it looked more perilous than even that by which he had come. Marillier longed more than ever for a strap with which to bind his box upon his back, or even for a stout staff to support his steps, but he had neither.

The stones forming the bridge lay loosely at irregular intervals across the bed of the stream—great stepping-stones, over some of which the torrent dashed. Marillier wondered whether Nature or the hand of man had laid them. Doubtless, they had been swept down over a cascade higher up the gorge which made the roaring he had heard on the ramparts, and which now deafened him to every other sound. A difficult transit it would have been to an unencumbered man; as it was, to Marilher it appeared well-nigh impracticable. But he did not hesitate. The wanderings of his younger days had accustomed him to rough places. Sitting down for a moment at the edge of the stream, he took off his shoes and tied them by their laces round his neck. His socks he thrust into one of his coat pockets, and then turning up his trousers at the bottom, he started upon his dangerous passage. A slip of the foot and he might have been carried down by the current into one of the eddying whirlpools which formed at every bend of the stream. He found the task, however, easier than he had anticipated. Perhaps it was his determination to cross the gorge at any cost which buoyed him up and enabled him to poise himself successfully on one stone after another, clinging with his bare feet where it would have been impossible for an ordinarily shod man to find a footing. How he got over, he could not afterwards imagine. He did not pause either to think or to balance himself a second longer than was necessary. It took but a short time, and soon he was standing upon the farther side immediately beneath the wall of great Khayal. Here he sat down on a patch of the driest ground he could find and put on his socks and shoes. Then he began the upward climb.

Arduous indeed he found it. The rocky base of the mountain on this side was even steeper than the cliff he had descended, and it seemed to him much higher. Here, too, a goat track led giddily in tortuous lines up the face of the precipice. He had seen from his observation of the mountain on the previous day that above the precipice and extending to the foot of the hump, which again seemed formed of almost naked rock, a vast pine forest spread, intersected by ravines and with rocky excrescences jutting out here and there, making light grey patches among the dark green. Marillier knew not what danger of wild beasts might lurk in the forest; but to this he had paid no heed, beyond taking the caution of placing a loaded revolver in his breast pocket.

From indications in the Pacha's story he understood that it would not be necessary to climb the mountains to any height. The Pacha had spoken, he remembered, of rounding the middle of Khâyal and of her crest behind him as he faced the mandrake land. It was probable that the Pacha had followed this same

goat track; for now, after a few hundred yards of steeper and more breathless climbing, Marillier found the ground sloping gradually and less encumbered with rocks. He passed along a fringe of evergreen oaks, interspersed with pines through a tangle of lentiscus and low-growing shrubs, then into the gloom of the forest, where the great cedar boughs met and closed over his head, making a cool and murmurous dusk.

He saw that this forest resembled the well-known one of Teniet-el-Ahd, with part of which he was familiar, only it appeared to him, as he penetrated further, that it was wilder and more beautiful. He examined his compass and took his bearings, making a south-easterly direction, which he believed, according to the Pacha's account, to be the correct one. He knew that a mighty gorge cleft Khayal from below her hump to the plain of the Bahira, a gigantic fissure making a dark, triangular blot on her side as though the mountain had been cleft half asunder in some tremendous subterranean convulsion. This chasm must, he knew, bar his progress, and he trusted, by taking an upward line, to round the head of it, and thus reach the mandrake region, from other points inaccessible. He wandered on through the vast forests, silent except for the occasional cry of some mountain bird and the melancholy sighing of wind among the pine branches overhead. Though the sun only came in flickering beams through the roof, of foliage, the air was intensely close, and the breeze which he could hear playing overhead could not pierce the thick canopy to bring him coolness and refreshment. Once or twice he stopped to drink from a nil trickling among rocks, but of food he had had none since dinner the previous evening, and, indeed, had no desire to eat. He could not tell the time, or how long he had been walking, for on looking at his watch, he found that it must have been injured in a fall he had had when descending the gorge, for it had stopped with the hour hand at the figure eight.

He was weary, but not with the natural healthy fatigue that follows physical effort. His heart beat languidly, and notwithstanding the closeness of the atmosphere, his body was hardly warm. The mandrake box weighed heavily on his arm, and there came into his mind the thought that perhaps by his voluntary restitution of the root, he was giving back to it that life which had at first been absorbed by Isàdas, and then, with ownership of the fetich, transferred to himself. It might be so, he could not tell; but he would not allow himself to dwell on any thoughts save the one object upon which he was engaged. Adjusting the load a little more easily, he struggled on.

At last he became aware that the barrier was reached, and that to accomplish his

end he must skirt the dividing chasm, climbing more directly upward. The dead limb of a cedar tree dropping on the ground in front of him, arrested his steps, and he found himself on the verge of an abyss which, looking down, seemed unfathomable, for his eye could not pierce the depths of greenery, so dark as to be almost black, which filled up the great cleft. He thought he could hear the sound of water deep down—no tumultuous cataract, but a stealthily-flowing stream. The cedar trees on the margin of this ravine were larger than most of the cedar trees he had ever seen. Great bare arms stretched laterally from huge bulbous trunks, and some of them, like many others in the forest, were withered at the top where locusts had ravaged or lightning blasted. He mounted along the line of giants, which he could easily distinguish by their slanting position and exposed limbs stretching over the darkness of the gorge.

The sun, as far as he could tell, was now at his back, and his compass told him he was climbing northward. By-and-by he knew that he must have gained the head of the ravine, for he had to strike out eastward again, over a stony col projecting from the forest, which he had great difficulty in surmounting, so bare and slippery was its surface. Now his pulse beat quick with anticipation. He remembered that the Pacha had spoken of a volcanic knoll, and here was a hillock of heaped-up boulders, lichenous and blackened as by fire—a huge natural cairn that might have been built by Titans before history began. As Marillier turned it, he stood still, dizzy with astonishment, for he knew that his quest was ended. Was it the magic of the mandrake he carried that had guided him hither? Here in truth there spread before him that desolate landscape the Pacha had described; the same undulating hillside thinly grown with blasted pines, their tops withered, their twisted arms with forked extremities stretched westward, as if imploring the sun. As he gazed round, no longer shut in by gorge and forest, he seemed to himself a speck on Khâyal's rugged bosom, her great grey head rearing itself close above him, a protruding crag and two black hollows on either side giving a grotesque similitude of human features. He understood now why she was called the Ghost Mountain. But as he looked, her face ceased to be grey and ghostlike, for the sun, coming forth from a thick cloud, shone full upon her, and Khâyal, bathed in golden light, seemed to flush and breathe under the kiss of her hot wooer. Marillier too felt himself at the moment warmed and revived. He scanned the scene eagerly, comparing each point with the Pacha's story. He recognised the stone pines, the grey-brown furrows, the crumbling soil, the earth-bubbles on its surface, the clumps of fleshy-leaved plants. Could these be leaves of mandrake roots? If so, there were many to choose from, and how should he discover that especial one—the female

root with the infants in her arms, from whose side his own mandrake had been torn.

He rapidly consulted his memory. The Pacha had spoken of a bank, and of a skeleton tree against which he had leaned when his feet, hanging over the bank, had struck the mandrake and evoked a cry from the wounded root. Marillier again keenly surveyed the land. The trees did not grow so thickly but that it would be easy to single out one particularly weird and bare among them. The undulations were many; yet anything that could be called a bank was not at first readily discernible. He took a few steps forward, his eye roving round the area in which the mandrakes grew. Yes, there to the left and somewhat below him, the ground sloped down, then running level for a yard or two, dropped sharply, forming a distinct bank. Two or three clumps of the thick broad leaves grew at its base, and just upon the verge of it, lifting its pale limbs to the sky, there, rose the ghost of a tree. Long ago its green cone had withered and rotted away; long ago its sap must have run dry and every flicker of life have been extinguished within it.

Marillier hastened down the slope. The distance was greater than it appeared, and he was a minute or two reaching the bank. The sun went again behind a cloud, leaving the scene one of solemn silence and shadow. The trees were motionless, and seemed to be standing expectant. Marillier felt himself to be in a strange country where some inexplicable sympathy seemed to unite all these creatures of the vegetable world, and now compelled their attention to what he was about to do. He stood beneath the skeleton pine, looking at the slanting ground below it where the clumps of mandrakes grew. Then he stepped down amongst them, careful to avoid crushing any of the leaves, while he chose beside a withered plant a spot where it seemed to him most likely that his mandrake had originally grown. He thought of what the Pacha had said about the widowed mate bearing rudimentary infants at her breast, and though he could not know that this was the root which had been left behind, the sight of it prompted his choice of a grave for his own.

Placing the leather case beside him on the ground, he began shovelling out the earth with his hands in order to make a hole. The soil was dry, and he found the work difficult. Looking up, he saw a small stunted bough hanging from the stem of the dead tree above him, and breaking it off, began to dig with this awkward implement, holding it in his right hand, and scooping away the earth with his left. Presently the bit of wood he was working with, struck against something

that offered it a more decided resistance, and he realised that he must be coming upon the withered root of the adjacent plant. He redoubled his efforts, widening his little trench, and gently scraping away the earth which surrounded the root. And now he found that the Pacha's story was borne out in every detail. Extraordinary as was the chance, he had certainly fallen upon the exact spot out of which the mandrake had been taken, and the spouse from which it had been torn.

In a minute or two the shrunken form of the poor little female lay exposed to view. Her babes had long ago shrivelled on her breast, and she herself was a mere mummified similitude of what she had once been. Marillier felt a curious pity as he bent over the thing. He forgot that she was, as his scientific reasoning would formerly have assured him, a mere vegetable production—one of Nature's freaks—but was ready to believe that the embryonic form bore within it a germ of life holding promise of future fulfilment. On the other hand, when he thought of the various legends gathered round the insane root, he almost accounted to himself for its grotesquely human resemblance on the theory that here were the remains of an almost moribund type which had proved an evolutionary failure. Was it possible that the attributes of the mandrake were the working out of some primæval curse hurled down upon the sinful children of an earlier creation? Marillier had already convinced himself that there are stranger things on earth, as in space, than those which science has classified.

The female mandrake appeared quite dead, showing when he touched it not the least sign of sensibility. Leaving it in the ground, he now proceeded to unpack the box which contained his own. The lid flew open easily when he touched the topaz that covered the spring, and there, under the silken wrapper which was slightly displaced, he could trace the outline of the limbs. He did not shrink; he had no more cause for fear. The magic of the mandrake was no longer needed, and in this act of restoration, lay his immunity from further danger of its spell. There was no horror in his mind as he drew away the wrapper—no curiosity, only an awed certainty. As he had expected, the creature was palpitating, its skin soft and filled out, and its tiny arms, instead of lying by its side, as he had last seen them, were crossed upon its breast as if it had been struggling in its coffin. When Marillier put his hand upon it, the mandrake writhed—of that there could be no question. Yet still he did not shrink. He lifted it out of the box, and laid it in its silken wrapper at the edge of the hole he had dug. The thing seemed to turn its head; he was sure that it was trying to draw itself a little nearer to the hole, wherein stood, three parts exposed, the root that had been its mate. Marillier

raised it again, and taking out with one hand a few clods of earth that had fallen down the sides of the hole, with the other he carefully set the root upright in what he felt certain had been its place. He pulled the silken covering gently away from behind it, and hardly had the soil touched the little shape than it turned its head again, and made a feeble movement with its small arms towards its spouse, as though in a futile attempt at an embrace. Manlier felt only the deepest compunction as he gazed on the reunited pair—the living and the dead. The male mandrake had apparently not yet become conscious of the death of his spouse, but as Marillier shovelled back the earth round them, there came from the grave a strange and terrible sound—the wail of the living mandrake bereaved, and conscious for the first time of its bereavement.

Though Marillier had heard and read of the shriek of the mandrake, his nerves were not prepared for this unearthly scream. He shook so that it was a difficult matter to fill the hole with earth, but at last it was done, and he smoothed the mound with his hands, muffling the cries which grew fainter and at last ceased. Then he rose to his feet, still shaking like a man stricken by palsy, and with a horrible sense of having buried a living being beside a corpse. As he supported himself against the skeleton tree its boughs rattled like a gibbet in the wind. A sudden gust had risen, and a growl of thunder burst from the heavy clouds that were massing in the west. The roar, portentous in his ear, though distance deadened it, was caught up and echoed shrilly by the blast which swept over the slopes, bending the crests of the pines and snapping off dead twigs as it hurried shrieking and whirling away across the Bahira. In that wild sweep, so sudden and unexpected, the swaying trees pointed their giant arms towards Khâyal, seeming to wave Marillier back whence he had come. He remembered the Pacha's words. Truly it appeared that no wanderer was permitted to linger in this haunted region. There was no need for him to delay, however, for his task was finished, and he was thankful to retrace his steps knowing that he had done all he could, but feeling ominously that somewhere and somehow payment would be demanded by higher powers for the wrong man had inflicted upon Nature's deformed offspring.

The wind whistled madly. It was easy to imagine that this desolate region, not frequented by mankind, was the playground of unbenign spirits, and he fancied, as the Pacha had done, that elfish beings scoffed among the pines upon the plain. He hastened as well as his weakness would allow towards the rocky knoll and over the slippery ridge, longing to gain the shelter of Khâyal, on whom the dusky veil of evening was already descending. When he re-entered the gloom

beneath the cedars, a nearer peal of thunder reverberated overhead, as though even the heavens were uttering maledictions over the despoilment of the helpless creatures of the earth.

Chapter XXXII

GOD'S JAVELIN

It was a wild night, as old Armand had said—a strange, uncertain night. The wind, sweeping across from the mountains in sudden squalls, shrieked round the tower, and subsided into feeble moans, which at intervals died away, leaving in the air a brooding hush.

As Marillier and Rachel mounted the topmost stair a strong gust blew through one of the unglazed windows in the upper room, striking their faces, then, caught in the circle of the tower, it whirled round the little room, making eerie noises as though it were a live thing imprisoned there. The lamp in the observatory was swinging to and fro, its flame flaring and casting moving shadows beneath the tube and framework of the telescope. Through a window on one side, the moon could be seen shining in a small clear space of the heavens, veiled at times by flying scud, and with inky clouds beneath it, spreading westward. Amid the clouds forked lightning played occasionally. A little to the moon's right, rose Khâyal's black mass—a denser blot on the darkness of the night. From the bed of the gorge, the voice of the torrent rose angrily. After the shriek which hailed them as they mounted, the wind fell suddenly, and gradually the lamp ceased swaying, and the shadow of the telescope became stationary. The bare room, with its gaping apertures where the windows were set, struck Rachel as cold and cheerless; but tonight she was fully mistress of herself and determined not to be affected by her surroundings. She went in and stood waiting as he followed her with laboured steps. His weakness and agitation were apparent, and filled her with anxiety, but she felt that further comment would be ill-placed. She saw that the communication he had to make would be difficult and painful, and that she must sustain him by her own strength. Advancing across the room, she sat down on a carved bench in the embrasure of one of the windows. The strain of the situation made itself keenly felt, but her apprehension was on his account rather than on her own. Fear, as she had known it the evening before, was gone from her entirely.

She spoke to him as he stood leaning against the telescope—a man weighed down, not by cowardice, but by bodily infirmity. He was staring at her, the head thrust forward; the chin protruding; the shoulders slightly hunched, in something

of Marillier's old manner when pondering a knotty question; the chest bent in; the hands thrust into his pockets. By his attitude Rachel was involuntarily reminded of Lucien Marillier, and wondered why the thought of him should come to her as she looked at Ruel Bey.

'I am ready, Caspar,' she said, steadying her tone which still had a ring of anxiety. 'I am ready to hear what you have to tell me. I beg you, tell me all. I am strong enough to bear it. Hide nothing from me.'

He began, 'I—I—Rachel!' His voice was husky, and he cleared his throat—an old trick of Marillier's before delivering sentence on a patient. 'Rachel!' he began again, 'if I tell you everything you will think me mad.'

'It does not matter what I think you,' she answered. 'You are my husband, and it is my right as your wife to know what is troubling you.'

His staring eyes remained fixed upon her. The glare of the lamp above, showed her the trembling of his mouth as he tried to speak. It was womanish in him, but it touched her to the quick. She lifted her hands in a little rapid gesture and held them out to him, but did not leave her seat.

'I repeat that I am your wife, and that this is my right,' she said. 'But oh! Caspar, I don't want to talk of rights. You said that there is something I must know. Will you not tell it to me?'

'Yes,' he answered, 'I must. That is what I am here to do.' He spoke slowly and hesitatingly, as though he were anxious to impress upon himself the force of his own words.

'Won't you come and sit beside me?' she pleaded. 'There is room,' and she moved a little. He shook his head, and again gave his husky cough, as, still in the same position—his head dropped forward, his chin on his chest, his eyes falling slowly from her face to the tip of her dainty shoe—he began his story.

Where and how he began it, neither knew, for the first sentences were so broken and involved as to be almost unintelligible, but he gained power as he proceeded, and Rachel would not interrupt him with questions. She listened, making no sound nor movement, save to clutch the edge of the bench on either side of her. As, bit by bit, the meaning of his strange tale became clear, the soft fingertips pressed more hardly into the unyielding wood till their skin was

bruised and sore. She was not conscious of it; she felt nothing, saw nothing but the man before her—the man whom she had thought she knew, but whom she now understood for the first time, and who seemed to her at once so strange and yet so familiar. Every word which came from the pallid lips was borne out by the man's manner, by the very bend of his figure, and by certain peculiarities of speech which she had observed before and had attributed to the relationship between the cousins, but which she could no longer account for in this way, for they now stood out with startling distinctness and individuality. So she listened, not at first comprehending its drift, to his account of the Pacha's wanderings and finding of the mandrake, referring to the scene she had herself witnessed when the Ambassador gave him the casket containing the fetich. He spoke of the lying-in-state; of his unintentional overhearing of Ruel Bey's proposal, which had so fired him with indignation; of the Pacha's funeral; the scene at the cemetery gates, and the accident to the first secretary. He described his sense of the dead hand interposing and the commission to himself to save her from treachery and dishonour, and painted his feelings at sight of his cousin lying unconscious before him. He told of the drive to Harley Street; the examination in the consulting-room, his diagnosis of the case—all in a dull, concise way, as though he were giving evidence about a matter which did not closely concern him. Next he related briefly how he had been left alone by Heathcote with the insensible man, and had then been assailed by fierce temptation; and here came a note of emotion into the hollow voice which recounted the extraordinary events that followed.

As he did so, Rachel seemed to see the operating-room with its shaded lights, the still form on the couch, the passion-racked man beside it, and a little way off, in its golden box, the arbiter of their fate—the mandrake. She drew her breath sharply as he described the foggy atmosphere when he had thrown up the window to ease his own tumultuous breathings. Her eyes never left his downcast eyelids. He was telling her of his impulsive opening of the box; of how he had walked back to the operating-room with the mandrake stirring on his breast; of his sudden realisation that the Pacha's prophecy was fulfilled, and that he was face to face with the hour, the desire, and the opportunity. He told her of that fiery effort of will, and the love that gave it power; of the blankness that came afterwards; of the awakening; the sight of Marillier's prostrate form on the ground with the mandrake beside it; the image of Caspar Ruel in the mirror.

Rachel did not utter a word. The story carried her imagination along, and enchained her attention. She did not know whether or not she credited the tale,

whether the magic of the mandrake were a fact, the metamorphosis a reality; but as she looked at the man before her, the man who was not Caspar Ruel, nor Lucien Marillier, but a mysterious blending of both, she could not doubt that there was truth in his statement.

He narrated quickly the return of Heathcote, and his own impulse to go at once to the Embassy on account of his anxiety to spare Rachel shock and pain; and as he spoke, the girl's heart gave an answering throb. He had always been her loyal friend and lover—always, from then till now. The scene between them in the firelight rushed back upon her. She heard his kind voice, she felt his protecting arm, she was moved anew by his reverential tenderness; she saw him again kneeling beside her—not the old half-cynical, half-patronising Caspar, but a new wooer, passionate but humble, laying for the first time sacred fire upon her heart's altar—that Holy of Holies into which Caspar Ruel had never penetrated.

'The rest you know,' he said, and then came a few gruff sentences. He would not waste speech upon his diplomatic difficulties, his sense of having brought himself into a position that he was wholly incompetent to fill. Nevertheless Rachel must understand something of this, so he touched lightly upon his perplexities and the assistance rendered him by Ahmed Bey. He made little comment upon his illness, only alluding to his sensations during their first meeting when he became convalescent, and the knowledge then forced upon him of that ghostly third separating them. Perhaps, he said, it might have been better had he at once accepted the warning, but he could regret nothing that had ensured him her love.

His voice broke at last; for a moment he could not speak. He drew his hands from his pockets and half extended them towards Rachel, looking for the first time since he began his narration fully into her eyes.

'I want you to understand this. I want you to know that though I was ready to pay any price to gain you I could not have taken you at any cost to yourself. If I had not seen that you loved me, Rachel—me, myself; if I had not believed that I could protect you best as your husband, I would not have allowed you to bind yourself to me. But things being as they were, how could I be sorry for what has brought me in any sense nearer to you.'

She would have put out her hands to meet his, but there was no time for her to do so; he drew his arms back at once, and folding them on his breast, stood

aloof, his head erect, squaring his shoulders in a way that had been commonly noticeable in Doctor Marillier.

‘So we were married,’ he said, ‘and since that time circumstances, not lack of love in me, have held us apart.’ His voice was firmer now, and he spoke with quiet sadness of the power which had made itself felt upon their marriage day, and ultimately driven him from his bride.

He passed over the journey till their arrival at the castle and the scene in that same room which had so unnerved them both.

‘I was not myself,’ he exclaimed. ‘You know—you must know, that it was not I—not Lucien Marillier—who filled you with fear. This is Lucien Marillier, or the best part of him.’ He raised his arms and let them fall again upon his breast. ‘That was someone else. My dear!’—his voice rang strongly with the old burr that she remembered—‘do you know who spoke to you then through these lips?’

In a flash the answer was written on her brain.

‘It was Caspar,’ she whispered.

‘Yes, it was Caspar—the soul I had robbed and wronged. Do you know how he came? I desired you, my wife, with all a man’s passion, and that desire was the door by which Caspar’s expelled spirit entered in and controlled the body I had stolen. I understood the mystery when my reason was able to work once more. You had shown me the truth. I knew that by the laws I had violated, I was condemned.’ His eyes fell again to the ground; he kept his arms folded, and his whole appearance betokened firm resolve. But it was in the very depth of humility that he stood at last confessed before her. She answered gently,—‘And so you thought that because of the misfortune which has come upon us you ought to separate yourself altogether from me. You intended that we should part.’

She spoke, not in a questioning tone, but as if she were stating a fact of which she was perfectly aware. She had risen and moved towards him, her eyes, grave and sweet, lighting up the solemnity of her face. He drew back, straightening himself against the stand of the telescope.

‘Do you understand what I have been telling you?’ he asked. ‘Perhaps, my dear, you don’t believe my story. I said that you would think me mad.’

‘Yes, I believe it,’ she replied. ‘Have I not seen for myself? If you are mad, then I too am mad.’

‘But—but,’ he stammered. ‘What do you mean, Rachel?’

‘Are we not husband and wife?’ she said. ‘Can anything break that bond?’

‘But you married me in ignorance, believing me to be your old lover. It was Caspar to whom you gave yourself.’

‘And it is Lucien whom I have learned to love,’ she said, flinging away restraint. ‘Can you not see that? I thought once that I cared for Caspar. I know myself better now. Take me to your heart, Lucien—my true love, my husband.’

Though he had hoped that she would receive his confession thus, he could hardly now convince himself that he heard aright. Yet there was no mistaking the integrity of her purpose, no possibility of doubting her love. She was offering herself to him again, not in ignorance, but in full knowledge.

‘Lucien!’ she repeated, dwelling caressingly on the unaccustomed syllables, and he, enraptured at hearing his own name thus spoken by her lips, caught her to his breast, holding her there as though he could never let her go. But it was no second foretaste of Paradise that he now experienced. They had both gone down into the deeps of suffering; the waves of spiritual anguish had well-nigh overwhelmed them, and even now, he felt a deathly clutch dragging him down. He put her from him with great tenderness, staggering as he leaned against the telescope. She saw that he looked white and ill again, and was full of concern.

‘It is nothing, child,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what is the matter with me. I feel strangely weak; it is certain that I am not well; but no doubt this is exhaustion after my long walk. Do not trouble about that. I have more to tell you—all about to-day.’

‘Sit down beside me,’ she said, drawing him to the bench. ‘You will not refuse me now, Lucien?’

Her sweet understanding was just what he needed, it gave him confidence. His worshipping look was one of utter thankfulness. He sat down on the bench, and, as rapidly as he was able—for his breath came heavily—he told her of his adventure that day. While he talked, there was a vivid flash of lightning, and

after some seconds, a growl of distant thunder. The wind, which had been quite still, now rose and set the lamp swaying and flickering again. She was too deeply interested in his story, too distressed also at his evident weakness and difficulty in getting speech, to notice the gathering of the storm.

‘And now,’ he concluded, ‘I have told you everything. I am free from the accursed power of the mandrake—free, too, I hope, from the assaults of the dead. And you, too, my love, are free: Caspar Ruel cannot claim the wife who disavows him. Only give me this assurance, now that you know all. Have you any personal regret for the man who might have been your husband but for my rash and wicked act?’

‘He might have died in any case,’ she said in a low voice.

‘True. That is possible; but, I think, not probable. I hoped at the time to save him; I believed that I could do so. Honestly, Rachel, when I performed that operation I had no thought of him as my successful rival. Professional instinct prompted what seemed the only means of saving his life. If those means had failed, you would have lost your lover, but I should not have been to blame. I might then have wooed you—if I had dared.’

‘If you had dared!’ she repeated. ‘You might not have dared. And how could I bear my life, having lost Caspar, and not having found Lucien?’

‘Perhaps I am not accountable for Caspar’s death,’ he said, in so faint a voice that she had to bend nearer to catch the words. ‘Perhaps I am less guilty than I have believed; but supposing it is not so—supposing that I am in very truth a usurper with the brand of Cain upon me, tell me, Rachel, does my love yet stand to you in the stead of his?’

She saw that his heart ached for her asseveration. She kneeled down on the ground beside him, as he sat huddled on the bench in the angle of the window embrasure, and took both his hands in hers, lifting up her face, while with the solemnity of a nun taking her vow, she answered him.

‘Hear me. I knew Caspar, my lover, as he used to be, and I always felt a little afraid of him; I always distrusted him. That is why my love was a pain and not a joy. I knew Lucien as my friend; I have known Lucien as my lover—true and loyal in each relation. I repeat, it is Lucien whom I love. It is Lucien’s heart and soul to which my heart and soul respond. I ask of Heaven no future in which

Lucien may not share; for where Lucien leads I will follow, and it is with Lucien that I would unite myself, here and through all eternity.'

Her feverish fingers holding his, which had become clammy, received a feeble pressure. She clasped both his hands in one of hers, and with the other, drew down his face while she lifted her warm lips to his cold ones, crowning her self-surrender. In that moment's fervour, his life flamed up one last brief flicker before it left the now totally exhausted frame, and by that sacred kiss Rachel's vow was registered in records that are eternal.

As their lips met, a flash of lightning illuminated the dark spaces of the windows, and a louder and nearer thunderclap shook the tower's foundations. The tempest was approaching; the wind crashed with the force of breakers against the solid walls of the castle. A fiercer gust rushed in and caught the swinging lamp, making the shadows dance madly. Almost simultaneously with the life that leaped and sank, the flame of the lamp flared up and was extinguished.

The room became a dense darkness, a darkness deeper than that of the night outside. It was a terrifying darkness, and with it an awful sense of loneliness fell upon Rachel. She did not know yet that Lucien was dead; she was only sensible of the weight of his body against hers, but fear seized her. The hands she held, dropped rigidly when she took hers away, and the form she tried to raise and put back into a sitting posture was inert. She put her ear down to his heart and knew that it had ceased beating. Now the truth burst upon her, and she drew back with a cry that pierced the darkness and rose above the wind's wail. As she did so, the body slipped and would have fallen heavily on the ground, had she not put out her arms, with difficulty sustaining it, and at last contriving to lay it gently down.

Her next thought was that perhaps he had only fainted, and she had the impulse to rush down and get brandy. She went to the head of the stairs, stood irresolutely a moment, and turned. Something told her that it was too late; there was nothing to be done. He was dead.

But dead or living, he was still her husband—Lucien, not Caspar—the man she loved, and to whom she had made her vows for life and in death also. She walked stumblingly back to where he lay in the darkness, and kneeling beside him, pillowed his head upon her arm. She felt his hands; they were stiff and cold. She listened once more to his heart; there was not the faintest flutter. She kissed

him, but the lips she touched, were as marble. Yet, she said to herself again, though he were dead he was still hers; no one now could come between them.

Then a dreadful thought troubled her. She took his head from her arm and laid it upon the ground; and, drawing back from him, remained crouched, her hands between her knees, staring out into the darkness that enveloped her. If he were dead—this—this thing before her was not Lucien any longer; it was the body of Caspar. Lucien's body had been buried long ago. Lucien's soul had inhabited this house of flesh only by right of violent seizure, by force of will, by—yes, she was certain of it—the magic of the mandrake. And now the spell of the mandrake was broken, the root was buried in its old place, and the power had returned to its source. Therefore Lucien might no longer retain this earthly tabernacle of which he had taken unlawful possession.

Another flash of lightning played vividly upon the ashen face, and the still form seemed to confirm her wild suspicion. There was no trace of Lucien here. That form and face—the faint smile which, in her excited fancy, seemed to curve the lips, were Caspar's. Even at this moment Caspar's spirit might be struggling to re-enter the body of which it had been deprived. Caspar might come back. Caspar might claim not only that which was lying there, but all else that had been his. He might claim his wife.

Panic seized the unhappy girl. She sprang to her feet with a mad longing to fly—to escape, she cared not how, she cared not where. As the lightning gleamed intermittently, her eyes went round the tower room, the stone walls, the dark windows, the stormy blackness beyond. She pressed her hand upon her forehead in the effort to think collectedly. If Lucien were here he would save her. From the first day of their meeting till now, he had never failed her. She called his name, 'Lucien!...Oh! help me!...Lucien!...I am alone...I am afraid.'

And there came a response to her frenzied appeal. She became conscious of a gentle presence soothing and sustaining her. Her eyes strained into the darkness.

'Lucien!' she whispered.

There was no reply in words. The wind had lulled again. There was the stillness that comes just before a tempest breaks overhead; but out of that silence a voice seemed to speak to her heart, bidding her have faith, and not to fear.

She answered the voice, speaking aloud with childlike simplicity.

‘I will do whatever you bid me, Lucien...I am not afraid now I know that you are here...I am sure that you would never go far from me. Guide me, Lucien...’

She stopped; then spoke again hesitatingly, as one who longs, yet dreads, to make a suggestion. ‘Can’t you take me with you?’ she said very slowly, and hardly above a whisper. ‘You wouldn’t want to go without me, Lucien...It...it...wouldn’t be painful...I...I could...’

She stopped again. Her conscience, her Catholic upbringing, told her that self-destruction was a crime.

‘I must not,’ she said aloud in answer to her own thought. ‘You would not like it. You always said it was your duty to save life. I must not—it would be wicked. But...oh! show me the way, Lucien. Do not leave me alone.’

She had moved nearer one of the windows. The dead body lay on the floor behind her. She would not look at it again. She had said that she was not afraid. She was determined not to let herself be afraid, but she could not fight against her horror of that dead thing, and she felt a greater horror lest it should be living.

She looked out through the window from which a step led up to the stone ledge outside. The glass door had all been broken away. In the stillness she could hear herself breathe. It was darker than ever. The whole heavens seemed to be covered with a black pall. Suddenly in the dim aperture she fancied that she saw a vaporous shape—the square form, the grey face of Lucien Marillier as she had first known him. She sprang forward. The form seemed to raise a beckoning hand; the grey face smiled.

‘Lucien!’ she cried. A glimmer of lightning showed her the parapet and the yawning gulf below; showed her too, the Ghost Mountain looming, but only for an instant. The black curtain fell, impenetrable again. But in that gleam the road to rest of which her mother had dreamed flashed before Rachel. There, Rachel O’Hara had known she could take refuge from Abdullulah Zobeir; there also, might the girl Rachel seek safety from Caspar Ruel. But once more she recoiled.

‘Lucien,’ she repeated, ‘oh! not that. You could not have meant that, for you know that it would be deadly sin.’

The grey figure seemed to withdraw itself into the night. But surely its hand was beckoning still.

Her foot was on the window-sill. The childlike voice still pleaded.

‘Oh! Lucien, must I—? I want to come, but must it be that way?...Lead me, Lucien—I trust you... You always said that I must trust you...Lucien, you wouldn’t let me do wrong?...’

She stepped upon the parapet. A wild, wordless prayer rose from her breast—‘If it might be the Hand of God, and not—’

And the prayer was heard. A great light shone upon Khâyal, and God’s javelin descended and struck the white form which stood with arms upraised to welcome the stroke.

There was a faint rushing sound in the air, and the storm burst.

THE END