

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.

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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 wych-hazel, 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 pharmacopœia. 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 pharmacopœia?’ 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, re-created 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.

Isàdas 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 Isàdas, ‘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. . . .’

Isâdas 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—’

Isâdas'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.

Isâdas 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—Isâdas, 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 Isâdas 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 Isâdas 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 Isâdas, 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 Isâdas, but his suggestion was received with a cold smile and the assurance that Mademoiselle Isâdas 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 Isâdas, 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. Isâdas 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 (Isâdas) 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 Marillier 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 Isâdas 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 Isâdas 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 Isâdas will answer for herself,' said the Pacha, grimly. 'Though it is no great thing that I ask of her.'

Rachel knelt 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 Isâdas 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 Isâdas 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 Isâdas, 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 now 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 any-rate, 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 Isâdas 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 Isâdas 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 Isâdas 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. Isâdas 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 to-night, *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 to-night 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 pocket-book 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 Arabian 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.