

## 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 Isâdas. 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 Isâdas 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 flew 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 knelt 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. To-morrow, 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 to-morrow.’

‘Yes, to-morrow,’ 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 over-strained 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 Isâdas 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 to-night, 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. j 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 loud-ness. 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 heaven-sent 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.'