

CHAPTER XXI

THE EMPEROR'S COMMAND

Ahmed Bey left the room, but before closing the door behind him, he perceived the immovable figure of Akbar stationed in the shadow of the great stuffed leopard on the landing. He addressed the man in Abarian, and receiving Akbar's short answer and accompanying salaam, turned back.

'I forgot to mention—Akbar told me as I came in that he has orders to start back immediately with the answer to the Emperor's mandate.'

'The answer!' Marillier spoke in a dazed way. 'What answer?'

'An acknowledgment of the favour his Majesty confers, and an intimation of the date upon which you will depart with Mademoiselle Isâdas.'

Marillier stared absently on the ground. He was deep in thought. No choice was left him now; his fate was in the Emperor's hands, and that of Rachel also. What was the meaning of this unexpected honour? Why this sudden solicitude on behalf of the Ambassador's niece, who had hitherto been ignored? Was it possible that the Emperor had been made acquainted with the truth? Yet no—Isâdas had given into his own hand the letter in which it was contained, and that letter lay unopened in his iron safe in Harley Street. The thought was borne in on him that he must go and get that letter; and, besides, there was much to do, he had many preparations to make. Who knew when he might return? His brain throbbed; his mind was full of confusion. Rachel must be told of the Emperor's order. There was a possibility that she might refuse to obey it, since she counted herself no Abarian subject. Marillier, in the medley of his thoughts glancing up, caught Ahmed Bey's bright little eyes fixed inquisitively upon him. He stammered,—

'I suppose—yes, of course I should reply that—'

'That you receive his Majesty's command with joy and gratitude not to be expressed in common language, and that you fly to obey it on the wings of the wind, bearing Mademoiselle Isâdas along with you—which means that you catch the first convenient continental express and the Compagnie Transatlantique's boat at Marseilles. Shall I bring you up the proper paper and the seal? Are you equal to the composition? But stay—the reply should be in cipher, for which once you had no need to refer to the code. It will be a trouble to you to construct the document since you have forgotten the cipher and would have to look up every word in the key.'

'I—yes, I have forgotten,' Marillier faltered, painfully conscious of his helplessness.

'Allow me a second time to place my services at your disposal. I have become sufficiently familiar with the cipher and style. One has only need to abase oneself at the feet of the most August. But assuredly, Caspar, you are scarcely equal to this journey.'

'I am entirely equal to it. I shall start—' he halted, 'as soon as possible.'

'Certainly as soon as possible. They don't like to be kept waiting in Abaria, though they are not particular about keeping us poor devils on tenterhooks. But what is the possible? You must not dream of to-morrow morning. The night train perhaps. It is etiquette, as you know, when Imperial orders are issued, to lose no time in obeying them. So to-morrow night, eh?—if Mademoiselle Isâdas's preparations are completed. And it should be conveyed to his Majesty that you rise from a sick bed to do his bidding, and may be compelled to take the journey in slow stages. Does that suit you, and shall I prepare the despatch?'

Marillier nodded impatiently. Ahmed turned a second time.

'Then I will tell Akbar his mind may be satisfied as well as his stomach. He is standing out there looking as hungry as the leopard might have done before he tried to eat the Emperor. Good-

bye for the moment, *mon ami*. Lucky dog! I don't know which I envy you most—the favour of the Emperor or of the lady. I'll bring you the despatch presently; you will have nothing to do but sign it.'

Ahmed disappeared, patronisingly informing Akbar outside, that a despatch would shortly be ready for him, and that in the meanwhile he might rest and refresh himself.

Akbar made his automaton-like obeisance, but a scowl hung upon his fine Eastern features. He was not too well pleased with the manner of his reception. Not thus had the old Ambassador transacted correspondence with his Imperial master. Akbar felt the difference without wholly understanding it. Nevertheless he was glad that he might minister to the needs of the flesh.

Meanwhile, Marillier, left alone, walked heavily to the mantelpiece, and laid his arms upon it, his head dropping wearily down upon them. So absorbed was he in his thickly-pressing thoughts, that he did not hear a light footfall cross the room, and started, thrilled in spite of his preoccupation by the touch of Rachel's hand upon his arm. He turned, to see her standing by his side. The questioning alarm in her face reminded him of the communication he must make, and he told her briefly of the Emperor's mandate.

She did not at first grasp its relation to herself; she thought only of the summons to her lover and her heart leaped in quick fear. Yet the summons seemed natural enough, especially that part of it referring to the delivery of the late Ambassador's orders. She told herself that she had expected it and dreaded it, even before the first secretary had told her of his probable mission to the Abarian court. Yet now his dark words and the sinister doubts which had assailed her returned in full force.

'Caspar!' she cried, 'you cannot leave me, and you must not leave me. I will not stay here while you go and place yourself in the power of that wicked man—go perhaps to your death, or what would be worse than death to me, lifelong parting. Caspar, you will do as I asked you? You will resign your post, but you will not go to Abaria and leave me alone?'

He was inexpressibly touched.

'Oh! my love, my love! You don't understand. You have not taken in the meaning of the despatch. It is no question of your remaining here alone, but of your going with me.'

'Going with you?' she said blankly.

'The Emperor desires to see you. He has ordered me to bring you to his court.' Marillier repeated as nearly as he could remember them the words of the message. She received them with surprise and indignation.

'Why should the Emperor require to see me? Why should he trouble himself even about my existence? I have nothing to do with the Emperor. Is it that he wants to scold me for staying on so long at the Embassy? He could not be so petty! No—it is more likely that he wishes to punish me for having dared to think of marrying you, who are one of his favourite servants. Should I have asked the Emperor's permission before allowing myself to love you?'

'My dearest, you misunderstand. Do you not see that the Emperor intends to honour you by the invitation?'

'Invitation! Ah! then I can decline it.'

Marillier shook his head.

'I fear that you must obey it.'

'Why is there a "must." He has no right to claim obedience from me. Royal invitations are commands, I know, but when I leave the Embassy I shall be outside the Emperor's territory. It is only within these walls, under his own flag, that he has any power.

Is it not only because he is the Emperor of Abaria that you say I must obey his command?'

‘Partly because he is the Emperor of Abaria. Chiefly because—’ Marillier hesitated.

‘Then there *is* another reason!’ she cried. ‘All the time, I have felt that you were hiding something from me. The Emperor has some right—some authority over me of which I have been kept in ignorance? Tell me—is not this the fact?’

‘Yes, it is the fact,’ he admitted.

‘I knew it! I knew it!’ she cried.

‘Even as the Emperor you could scarcely in the circumstances disregard his wishes,’ Marillier went on, speaking calmly, but aware that he was only delaying by a few minutes the revelation which as yet he was hardly prepared to make. ‘But in the double relation in which he stands to you, it is impossible that you can put his command aside.’

‘The double relation! What may that be?’

She spoke with determination quite unusual in the timid Rachel.

‘My dear, don’t press me,’ he replied. ‘That is not for me, but for the Emperor himself to tell you.’

She stood perfectly still, her brows contracted, her lips firmly closed.

‘Come, my love,’ he urged, ‘there are practical matters to be considered. You will have your preparations to make. It is suggested that we start if possible by the night mail to-morrow. It is necessary that you should have a woman with you—a friend as well as an attendant. No doubt Nurse Dalison will come, but if not someone else must be found.’

She made an imperious gesture with her hand as though she would not concern herself with such details while the main point was uncertain.

‘You ask me to go blindfold to Abaria—to submit myself to the Emperor’s pleasure, not knowing what claim he has upon me.’

‘I shall be with you, beloved, to give my life for you if need be, to protect you in a surer way perhaps than if you remained here. We shall be safer together in Abaria than separated.’

‘That is true,’ she answered.

‘Well, then, these may be the last few minutes in which we shall be alone before starting on our journey. Can we not spend them to better advantage than in discussing the Emperor’s claims. Let us accept the inevitable and trust in each other.’

‘No, Caspar, I have yielded to you in many things, and have been glad and proud to do so. In all things concerning our love, I yield willingly. But this is a matter on which I must be permitted to judge for myself. I refuse to go with you to Abaria unless you tell me plainly what authority the Emperor has over me beyond that of having been the master of my dead uncle.’

For the first time Marillier realised that there were depths in Rachel’s nature which no one had ever suspected. He saw that she was in earnest; and while admiring her firmness he recognised her right. He saw that he could not bend her will, nor influence her by any plea of expediency. He must tell her the truth or lose her trust, and that he could not bear. After all, why should he not tell her? He was bound by no promise in that respect. She would be forewarned and forearmed against possible danger, and he himself in part relieved of the terrible burden of his responsibility. Again he told himself that the Emperor could not have sent for her because of any knowledge he might have gained of her real parentage. That secret was in his own custody. It could only be that the Emperor wished to show kindness to the niece of his old friend and servant, the Ambassador. By making Rachel aware of the relationship, he might enlist her sympathies on her father’s behalf and pave the way for a better understanding between them, and thus obtain greater security both for himself and her.

He looked gravely at her, weighing these aspects of the case as well as the agitation of his mind would permit. She, reading his face, saw that he was wavering, and pressed her point.

‘Tell me the truth, Caspar. I ask it of you. I do more than ask—I demand it as my right. What is the Emperor’s claim upon me?’

‘He is your father,’ said Marillier, bluntly.

The girl gave him a startled look. She lifted her arms with a sudden convulsive gesture, and crossed them upon her breast. Marillier had seen that gesture in a man struck mortally from behind. He moved forward in the impulse to support her, but she regained her self-control and shook her head. She could not doubt his word, but the shock had been great. She went white, and presently he saw that her lips were trembling.

She could only falter like a child, ‘I should like to understand.’ As shortly as possible he repeated to her the main facts of the story Isàdas Pacha had told him—the story of how Rachel O’Hara had entered the Imperial seraglio, had fled from it, and died soon after giving birth to her child in Algeria.

As she listened, there flashed through the girl’s mind corroborative incidents, words she had heard in early childhood, vague remembrances of the Algerian convent, sayings of the Ambassador, more especially those in their last interview, his curious emotion in regard to her, his inexplicable dislike contrasting with his generosity about material matters, the real meaning of her equivocal position at the Embassy, many hitherto contradictory things which had puzzled her all now made clear. As she unconsciously lifted her hand her eyes fell upon the engraved emerald she wore—her passport, as Isàdas had said, to her father’s favour. It was all true then, that strange fairy tale he had told her. She could realise it now, knowing that she was the Emperor’s daughter. Had her father only just become aware of her existence that he had sent for her? She asked Marillier the question, and he answered with truth, ‘I do not know.’

She asked no more, but again the thoughts surged bewilderingly. She was the Emperor’s daughter, and he had sworn an oath to her mother that he would grant any request she might make to him as long as they remained united.

Then he must have loved her mother deeply though she had fled from him, breaking their union and perhaps invalidating the oath. Nevertheless, the Pacha had assured her that it was his belief the Emperor would not disregard that oath were she to present the ring and claim his pledge. If that were so, she might not only secure her own happiness, and with it that of the man she loved, but she might obtain grace and favour for Caspar, and, altered though he seemed by his love for her, she knew that his worldly advancement had been to him of immense moment. He was willing to resign it for her sake, but she longed to return it to him fourfold, to make him what he wished to be, powerful and honoured. This she might accomplish if she went to Abaria and approached her father as a daughter should. But if she did not go, if she angered him, he might visit his displeasure not on her only, but on Caspar. The Emperor of Abaria was an absolute monarch, Caspar was his servant; he might degrade or imprison him, or order his death. In any case he might, and probably would, separate them. In her ignorance also, she did not know what power he might have over her even if she remained in England and defied him. If he demanded her as a daughter, could the English Government be compelled to give her up? What influence had she? How could she hope to stand against one so powerful, against, perhaps, international, certainly against natural law? Fears and questionings rose and tortured her. She pictured the Emperor to herself as she had always done, a fierce Eastern despot, evil, tyrannical, terrible. The sight of the ring, however, the oath of which it was the sign, somewhat changed her

conception, and made him seem more human. He had loved her mother; he was her father, and she held the passport to his favour.

She turned to Marillier, who was watching her in deep anxiety as she had a few moments before watched him. He, too, saw the signs of softening, of wavering resolve. She was about to speak when the door opened noisily, and Ahmed Bey bustled in with a paper in his hand.

‘I have brought the letter for your signature, Ruel Bey,’ he said formally, having acknowledged with a deep bow Mademoiselle Isàdas’s presence.

‘May I ask you to read it?’ said Marillier, with equal formality. ‘I have just told Mademoiselle Isàdas of the Emperor’s wishes, and she ought to know what has been said in reply.’

Ahmed immediately proceeded to translate into French the adulatory expressions of gratitude and devoted allegiance in which Ruel Bey accepted the honour his master had conferred on him. Rising from a sick-bed, he would obey with all the speed possible in his enfeebled condition the sacred command of his Majesty, while Mademoiselle Isàdas, prostrated like himself at the Imperial feet, and overwhelmed with gratitude and humility, promised swift compliance with the Emperor’s gracious desire.

When Ahmed Bey had finished rolling out complacently the concluding flourishes of his composition, he took up a pen from an escritoire near, and handed it with the document to Marillier.

Marillier walked to the escritoire, and as he thoughtfully fingered the pen, sought Rachel’s eyes for some expression of her opinions. She had moved a little, and stood with her gaze fixed on the portrait of the Emperor, which, in Marillier’s fancy, seemed to dominate the scene. On Rachel’s face was still something of the startled look with which she had received his announcement, but it had also a wistful expression, uncompromising and sad. Clearly, she had made up her mind, and again he was struck by the evidence of depths in her character and purpose for which he had not been prepared. He wondered if this arose from a sense of filial duty—Nature asserting her claim.

‘Mademoiselle Isàdas,’ he said pointedly, ‘does this reply meet your approval? Have I your permission to sign?’

At the sound of Marillier’s voice Rachel turned and bowed her head slightly. For the moment she could not speak.

‘This arrangement will suit you?’ Marillier persisted in a tone of forced calm. ‘You will be prepared to let me escort you to Abaria with Nurse Dalison, or any other woman friend and attendant you may prefer, as soon as preparations can be made?’

Rachel had a choking sensation in her throat, and her voice was husky, but she spoke with decision.

‘The answer meets my wishes. Sign it, if you please, Ruel Hey. I submit to the Emperor’s command, and will go with you to Abaria as soon as the preparations are made.’

Marillier gave her a long look, satisfying himself that her mind was assured, but saying nothing. She returned his look with one of perfect trust and tenderness. Ahmed Bey saw it, and inwardly cursed his fortunate colleague, happy in the Emperor’s favour and in the devotion of an adorable woman who had become more adorable since the Emperor had exalted her. Ahmed Hey sighed and anathematised his own lack of foresight. Surely he, too, might have had a chance had he entered the lists at the beginning.

Marillier silently signed the paper and returned it to Ahmed Hey.

‘Thank you. Before Akbar leaves I will see him again, shall I not, Ruel Hey, and obtain a few hints for your journey? There is much to be done. Baptiste should be sent for.’

Ahmed named the late Ambassador's courier.

'By all means. You will give me your help, Ahmed, in the arrangements for Mademoiselle Isâdas and her companion?'

'I am entirely at your service, my comrade,' replied Ahmed. 'Do not trouble yourself. I will see that all is suitably provided for the comfort of mademoiselle.'

And with another bow to Rachel, Ahmed turned to depart. But as he did so, he glanced at the document which he was carrying away.

'Your handwriting is shaky, Ruel Bey,' he said.

CHAPTER XXII

TO-NIGHT!

The door closed behind Ahmed, and Marillier, who had been standing at the *escritoire* with his back to Rachel, turned at the click of the lock, which told him that they were alone. He appeared relieved, yet there was a look almost of despair upon his face. He realised painfully that the die was cast.

She went slowly towards him, her hands quietly folded, calmness in her manner; but when he attempted to embrace her she stopped a pace distant, checking his impulse by her silence and by the look of fixed purpose in her eyes. He dropped his arms and said, in an embarrassed way,—

‘It is decided then; you will go?’

‘Yes, I will go.’ She paused and added, ‘When all the preparations are made.’

The ‘all’ seemed to him significant. She had laid a slight stress on the word, but he would not by any question, imply doubt of her intention.

‘That is best, my dear,’ he said. ‘It does not do to fight against the powers that be. You must see from what I have told you that you owe something to the Emperor.’

He brought out the sentences jerkily, waiting between each for her to say a word of either approval or dissent, but she made no comment. He asked her whether she would be ready by the following evening, laying his hand, as he did so, upon her shoulder.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘that there is nothing for you to think of but your personal preparations, and your maid and Nurse Dalison can relieve you of those. You may depend on Ahmed and myself for the rest.’ Still she made no reply. He waited a minute, then said humbly, ‘So to-morrow evening, dearest? Your preparations will be over by then?’

‘*Our* preparations.’ She corrected him. ‘Yes, I think they will be over by then; at least I hope so. I hope that it will be possible for us to start by to-morrow evening, but I am not sure. I must ask *you*, Caspar, if it will be possible.’

He felt that there was something at the back of her mind which would affect the plan.

‘Of course,’ he answered, with assumed lightness, ‘I must go to the Harley Street house and look over some papers, and I must see Camperdowne. Afterwards I am at the Emperor’s disposal.’ He gave an uneasy laugh. ‘And for you, dearest, as I said, your maid will do what is necessary. I don’t anticipate any difficulty as regards Nurse Dalison. Of course we shall be ready.’

Rachel put up her hand and drew down his from her shoulder, fingering it softly with a caress that thrilled him.

‘I wonder if you will be ready,’ she said. ‘*Are* you ready, Caspar, to take care of me?’

‘To take care of you!’ he exclaimed. ‘You know that it is in order to take care of you, Rachel, that I am going. I would defy the Emperor’s commands if it would help me to serve you better.’

‘You would defy the Emperor’s commands—and yet you owe him allegiance?’

‘Possibly,’ he answered, indifferently. ‘I would pay such allegiance as is due from me to him; but you must bear in mind that he could not command my presence at the court of Abaria if I were no longer in his service. As you yourself suggested, I could easily quit it, and but for you, I would do so. In that case, I should no longer owe him allegiance.’

‘You would leave the Emperor’s service!’ she said in surprise. ‘I don’t understand you, Caspar. I thought it was possible that you might be induced to resign it for my sake, but for your own, I supposed that you would prefer to remain in it, since it must mean to you the worldly

advancement you have always cared so much about. Now you tell me that it is for *my* sake you are going to Abaria.'

'Yes, for your sake. But I am also going for the sake of the dead, for the sake of my promise to Isàdas Pacha—a promise of which I have told you nothing as yet, Rachel, but which I can only keep by obeying the Emperor's mandate. Therefore, whether it be for your sake or for the sake of my promise to the dead, I shall go. And do not fear that I shall not protect you to the uttermost of which I am capable. Promise or no promise, that is my chief object in this mission.'

'And in protecting me,' she began shyly, but still with that underlying purpose in her voice, of which he was fully conscious, though he did not comprehend it; 'in protecting me, Caspar, you would wish, would you not, to take the surest means of so doing?'

'Beloved, need you ask me that question?'

'Then you would take any means that would ensure the impossibility of the Emperor separating us, should he desire it?' she persisted.

Marillier shook his head sadly.

'You speak of impossibility. Alas! I fear that we must not delude ourselves into false security. In Abaria, there would be few things impossible to the Emperor. As far as that goes, we must take our chance. But don't be afraid, darling. I am obliged to speak straightly to you, and we had better recognise the fact that in his own dominions Abdullulah Zobeir is supreme. Yet I have greater confidence in the Emperor than one might be warranted in feeling towards an Eastern despot. Abdullulah is not an ordinary Eastern despot. Isàdas loved and respected him after his own strange fashion. Isàdas believed that he would be true to his plighted word. I cannot help sharing Isàdas's confidence, and it may be that this was the Pacha's most valuable legacy to me, for in very truth, Rachel, if I had not some trust in the integrity of your father and in his sympathy for you, I should dread this journey even more than I do. As it is, I will not allow myself to be afraid.'

'But the Emperor'—Rachel stumbled slightly over the word: she could not say, 'My father'—'the Emperor is a man of strong will and passions, and is deadly in his vengeance against those who have offended him. That is what I have heard. The Emperor can be fierce and cruel, and he is, as you say, absolute in his own dominions. And I—' She drew herself again a little apart from Marillier and threw out her hands in a pathetic gesture, which, as the lace fell away from her wrists, showed their girlish slenderness, while, though there was fire in her eyes, her mouth trembled. 'I am only a weak woman, Caspar, and I shall be wholly in his power.'

Marillier caught the little nervous hands in a grip which almost hurt them.

'Not wholly, since I shall be beside you, since I love you and you have told me that you love me in return. Our love gives me a right over you which even the Emperor will find it difficult to gainsay.'

'Make it impossible for the Emperor to gainsay that right,' she exclaimed impetuously, in a manner unlike that of the usually diffident and reserved Rachel. 'Ratify your claim upon me, Caspar. Confirm your right. I ask this of you. In the conditions I require it of you. Redeem your pledge to me, and put it beyond the Emperor's power or the will of any man to stand between us.'

He looked down into her eyes, which met his unabashed, steadfast, and glowing with that purpose of which now some faint glimmering began to dawn upon him. Yet still he could not believe that love had inspired such strength of will in the Rachel he had known.

'Beloved, what do you mean? Tell me. I dare not accept your words as my own desire would bid me. Am I too presumptuous? Rachel, tell me.'

‘Yes, I will tell you. I must forget that what I am going to say may seem unfitting from a girl. I will remember only that I love you, and that I could not bear to lose you. Then, Caspar, there is but one way in which I can go with you to Abaria—one detail in the arrangements of which you have not thought, but without which’—Rachel turned away her head, blushing like a rose, but speaking calmly—‘one detail without which the preparations for my comfort and safety cannot be complete.’

And that?’ he said eagerly.

She glanced up.

‘Can’t you understand? Why do you force me to speak words that you should say? Caspar, I cannot go with you to Abaria unless you take me as your wife.’

‘As my wife! Oh, beloved, this is happiness and honour greater than I could have dreamed!’

He caught her in his arms, and she now willingly yielded herself to his embrace. He could hardly realise that he had heard her aright, that this was the motive which had been influencing her from the moment in which he had told her the truth about her birth. He looked rapturously into her face. Was this his Rachel, his winsome, girlish love—so tender, but so reticent—this woman with the shining eyes, who called upon him to make good his plighted troth?

She released herself, and he stood rapt and listening, as, in low clear tones, the next sentences she uttered showed him how, in the midst of her shock and astonishment, and in all the hurry of decision which had been forced upon them, she had grasped the liabilities of the situation and formulated her plans. There should be a civil marriage immediately; the religious ceremony, the idea of which she could not relinquish, should be celebrated later. She reddened and clung to him, but her eyes were clear as a child’s. She knew that they were both about to embark upon an enterprise full of danger, she told him, and it was their right, their duty to forearm themselves. So forearmed she would permit herself to trust as he did, as Isàdas had done, in the Emperor’s personal integrity. And then she told him what he already knew—the story of the emerald. Holding that pledge and passport, and believing her-self protected by English law, she would go fearlessly into her father’s presence and claim the fulfilment of his oath to her dead mother. As Caspar’s wife would she do this, but only as Caspar’s wife would she venture upon the perilous journey.

Womanlike, she read his thoughts, and would not allow his scruples scope to shape themselves, and as she talked, hardly waiting for comment, his own mind, took the colour of hers, and he believed with her that Carriage lay the surest means of ensuring their joint safety. Her influence spurred him on, though some voice within him whispered that were he to palter with this conviction, it would lose its force and he would be swaying helplessly between love and honour. Yet, he argued, he had not schemed this thing; Fate had inspired her. Why should he hesitate since her happiness was so clearly involved. He could consider nothing else. Honour itself was bounded by his love for her. He would not weigh the issues of this step since she preferred any risk to that of separation from him. She was no blindfolded child now, acting in the dark; she knew the truth, and she had chosen without shadow of wavering. There was nothing for him but to accept her decision. Thus he lent himself to her summing up of practical considerations, amazed at the common sense she showed and her grasp of technical difficulties which somehow she succeeded in smoothing away. He wondered where she had obtained her knowledge of the manner in which the marriage of foreigners in England may be celebrated. He did not know that his cousin had occasionally discussed it with her when he was in the mood—a rare and reckless one—to rank love above liberty and political advancement.

So when Marillier left her, it was upon the understanding that he should go to a registrar and arrange for the marriage to take place that very evening at the Embassy, with Ahmed Hey and Nurse Dalison to act as witnesses. Rachel was certain of Nurse Dalison's compliance; she had found ample opportunities of gauging the character of that worldly-wise but highly romantic woman. She knew that nothing would appeal to Nurse Dalison more than this hastily planned wedding of which she would fully recognise the expediency on a superficial knowledge of the circumstances. Her sense of propriety would certainly suggest arguments in its favour, and all unconscious as Rachel intended her to be of the true bond between Abdullulah Zobeir, Emperor of Abaria, and the late Ambassador's so-called niece, she would feel that the intended honours for both, implied in the mandate, were sufficient guarantee of their sovereign's approval. Besides, Rachel knew that Nurse Dalison would delight in a visit to the picturesque Abarian court under such exceptionally favourable conditions.

She was right in her conjectures. Nurse Dalison was overwhelmed with pleasure at the double announcement. She had visions of the Order of the Leopard and Lotus decorating her own breast, and her practical mind seized upon the idea of profitably pursuing her profession in the Abarian capital, and after a year or two devoted to amassing a fortune in the most delightful of climates, might well, she thought, count upon honourable leisure in her own country where she would live encircled with an Oriental halo, and no doubt embellished by many Oriental jewels. Thus, at the Embassy that afternoon, all was bustle and confusion. Rachel sorted her papers and put away in safety her few most cherished girlish possessions, while her maid packed her clothes and Nurse Dalison hurried about her own preparations. Akbar had gone; Baptiste the courier made out routes and connections and despatched many telegrams, and Marillier transacted his own business, mostly at the house in Harley Street—his own by right of inheritance, no longer his own in the old familiar sense of home. It was strange, indeed tragic, to reflect that from this very house the mortal shell of Lucien Marillier had been carried a few weeks ago to its last resting-place in Kensal Green Cemetery, while the soul of Lucien Marillier had housed itself in Caspar Ruel's body. Strange, grotesque, incredible as the fairy tales of childhood might seem to the sober imagination of middle age—yet true, blissfully true. It was difficult to adjust the new personality to the old surroundings. He had the feeling of acting in a dream when he found himself in the consulting-room giving instructions to Mr Camperdowne the lawyer—instructions made as brief as possible in the fear of self-committal. He seemed in a dream too when alone, a little later, he beheld himself reflected as Caspar Ruel, fine of feature, magnificent of proportion, in the same mirror that not long ago had given back the stern grey face, the square ungainly form of Lucien Marillier. Yet this very vision of himself as he now was, broke the dream illusion, for he knew himself no longer as the outwardly cold man of science devoured by hopeless love for a woman who had promised herself to his more brilliant rival—but that very rival, splendid, triumphant, the desire of his soul fulfilled, and in a few hours' time to be united indissolubly to the woman he adored.

With this consciousness upon him of a reality transcending his rosiest dreams, Marillier carefully secured the documents Isâdas had given him to deliver into the Emperor's hands, and also possessed himself of the gold box containing the mandrake. He would not open the box; an instinct of dread which he did not care to define held him back from so doing. He was in truth overpowered by something of the same superstition in regard to the root, as had dominated the Pacha. Without absolutely phrasing it, he was yet deeply imbued with the idea that to the mandrake he owed his present happiness, that through the mandrake's occult virtues, Rachel's love had been secured and the possession of her assured to him.

As Marillier dwelt on this thought, in spite of his reluctance to look at the fetich and ascertain for himself how much of life and power remained in it, a sense of superphysical elation filled him. It seemed to him that he was treading upon air, that he was in the enjoyment of all power not only spiritual but material also; for he seemed to know that his desires being in a certain measure material, the superhuman force that filled him, gave him the means of commanding their consummation.

It was still in this state of abnormal exaltation that, his preparations being completed, he ate a solitary and hurried meal at Harley Street, with the Pacha's letter to the Emperor in his breast pocket. Then he placed the gold box containing the mandrake in a leather case which he had procured for it, and carried it with him to the Embassy—the only one of his personal effects which he felt must be entrusted to no other keeping.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE INVISIBLE PRESENCE

In the large drawing-room—that room which contained the Emperor's portrait—Marillier and Ahmed Hey awaited the arrival of the Registrar. An intense excitement possessed Marillier. In truth, during these few hours, the man's whole nature seemed to—have changed, and he was neither the old Lucien nor the new Caspar, but a curious combination of both, braced and girt with his hope and his passion and the wild sense of elation that filled him. He walked rapidly up and down the long room, almost unable to curb his eagerness, one moment stopping to finger tenderly a piece of work Rachel had left lying about or a bowl of flowers he knew she had arranged, the next, laughing boisterously and making youthful jokes with Ahmed, who, versatile though he knew mood. Ahmed put it down, however, to the natural Caspar to be, had never seen his comrade in this intoxication of a man about to wed the woman of his heart, and responded with genial banter, always alive to the desirability of ingratiating himself with one whose friendship might serve him in good stead. Ahmed Bey was more fussily important than usual, but Marillier, who might at any other time have felt irritated by his manner, smiled leniently upon the little man's pomposity, so lifted did he feel above the mundane trifles that yesterday would have annoyed him. He was really grateful to Ahmed for his sympathy and the trouble he had taken in making arrangements for the journey, and the two chatted cheerily till the door opened to the butler's announcement of the Registrar.

This gentleman was commonplace, yet with something of dignity in his manner. His arrival sobered Marillier. The solemnity of the whole situation came over him, and he said little, leaving his colleague to answer the Registrar's bland remarks upon the weather, the prospect of the journey—which had been given as a reason for this hurried marriage—some commercial aspects of England's relations with Abaria, and such like conventional topics. Ahmed Hey had himself arranged a table at what he considered a convenient angle, and had set out ink and pens; and now the Registrar's great book was opened and placed upon it. Marillier quietly watched these proceedings, scarcely seeming to be affected by them. The table happened to have been set in front of the Emperor's portrait; thus, when the Registrar took his seat with his back to the picture, it became evident that those about to be married must stand as it were before Abdullulah Zobeir, whose pictured face gazing down upon the scene, seemed to Marillier, in the brief glance he cast at it, to have taken on an inscrutable and disagreeably cynical smile. Marillier observed the position of the table but would not alter it, though the portrait gave him the uncomfortable

sense of an undesired witness to the ceremony. He feared that personality and dreaded its power, but he was determined at any cost to carry through his project, defying results, and therefore resolutely put from him all qualms. Presently the double door at the end of the room opened again and Rachel came in with Nurse Dalison. Ahmed Hey, in his character of witness and best man, went forward ceremoniously to meet her, and Rachel, surprisingly self-possessed, greeted him with a little friendly smile, and placed her hand upon his proffered arm, allowing him to escort her up the room.

The Registrar stood awkwardly staring. Never had he seen an image of such sweet dignity, of such girlish grace and beauty. She wore a grey gown of soft crape with some old Mechlin lace about her shoulders, and carried a bouquet of white roses, which gave a bridal touch to her appearance. Nurse Dalison had thought of this, and the roses were her gift to the bride. Marillier advancing, took his place beside Rachel, gravely as though they had been meeting in church. He gave one swift look at her face, a look which she answered with eyes full of love and trust, while the hand he clasped, returned his pressure closely. Then, almost before either had time to realise that the moment had come, they were replying to the questions of the Registrar, and the few simple words which united them were spoken.

The formal declarations made, there remained only the signatures. As Marillier took up the pen and bent over the book it seemed to him that something brushed against him, and he felt a soft but chilly breath pass over his hands. He fancied that the leaves of the book fluttered, and there came to him, with a stab, the memory of that invisible presence which had before obtruded itself between him and his love. But he would not let himself be deterred by any thought of a supernatural bar. A few strokes of the pen, and no power, dead or living, might intervene to separate him from Rachel. He could even imagine that this was she herself pressing to his side, and turned, half hoping that it was her dress that had brushed him, her breath that played upon his cheek and hand. But she had not moved. She stood a yard or more distant, a tender smile illumining her features, wholly insensible to anything but human influences. She was thanking Nurse Dalison, who softly murmured good wishes, with a calm happiness touching and beautiful. Marillier bent again over the book; his hand shook and he could not see where to sign. The Registrar indicated the place with his blunt forefinger; he had some experience of emotional bridegrooms.

‘Caspar Ruel—*Chargé d’Affaires*—’ and there followed the official setting forth of his position in the service of his Majesty the Emperor of Abaria, his parentage, nationality, and the rest. There the name stood out in blurred but bold outlines, rather different from Ruel Hey’s customary signature, but sufficiently like it to be recognised. Marillier had a sense of having forged the name, and he laid down the pen with a sigh of relief. At that moment, he distinctly felt as if the icy presence withdrew itself. But again, as he saw Rachel stoop with the pen in her slight firm fingers, he seemed to feel the chill cloud rise between them, and she, too, looking up, gave a startled glance as though conscious of something antagonistic and terrifying. But she wrote her name unflinchingly, and the witnesses added their signatures. It was now Marillier’s turn to receive congratulations. Ahmed Hey and Nurse Dalison plied him with pleasant speeches, and he listened and laughed and answered, grateful for the relief which came to him with the effort he had to make in doing so, and in the healthy nearness of these two friends who, it was evident, were not aware of the vague terror that haunted him. The little scene was ended in what appeared an incredibly short space of time. The Registrar departed with his big book, and Ahmed Hey and Nurse Dalison obligingly withdrew in his wake, leaving the newly-wedded pair alone.

Then Rachel in her husband's arms, glanced up for the first time at the portrait of her father, and she, too, fancied that she saw a cynical smile curving the full red lips.

With a little cry she buried her face in Marillier's shoulder, and he, tenderly holding her to his breast, begged her to tell him what ailed her, but all the time he knew full well, for in a flash that passed from her to him he was able to read her thought.

'The Emperor!' she stammered. 'Cruel—cruel—I cannot bear to look. Oh, Caspar, do you not see that strange, dreadful smile?'

'Dear one, you are overwrought—and no wonder, after such a long, trying day. Don't look at the picture if it makes you nervous.'

'But can't you see?' she said, lifting her eyes as though some fascination drew them.

'I will not look,' he answered with forced lightness.

'It will be time enough to tremble at the Emperor when the real man faces us. We need not quake before his likeness.'

'Yes, that is true,' she said. 'Till then, we need have no fears, and we will think only of each other. But I can't stay here, Caspar. The picture may be only a picture, yet the eyes seem to strike into my soul.'

'Let us go away then, and leave the picture to itself.'

'I will take you to my own little sitting-room,' she said brightly. 'I don't think you have ever seen it.'

Holding his hand in pleased childlike fashion, she led him through the second drawing-room and along him through the corridor, past the great mirrored ballroom to a small cheerful parlour which the Pacha had given her for her own use. It was a girl's room; she had been allowed to choose the chintz hangings and low armchairs and little bits of modern furniture which contrasted with the heavy gilt console between the windows and the early Victorian carpet and cabinets. The place was in disorder, for Christine, Rachel's maid, had been packing there, but it looked very homelike nevertheless. A big fire cast a red glow, and brought out the scent of violets and of a sheaf of mimosa. Rachel drew a chair forward to the fire.

'Sit there, and let me come to your feet—that's what I like best. Let us talk—I love talking in the firelight.'

There was a high fender-stool before the fire, but she chose a little fantastic seat made to resemble a toadstool and brought it close to the big armchair. He seated himself as she had desired, and leaned back against the cushions, his eyes wandering round the pretty room, full of her maidenly properties and the flowers she loved, then settling upon the slight form in its nunlike grey, crouching by his side, the brown head on a level with his elbow, the sweet face turned slightly, the slim fingers playing with the white roses in her lap. He let his gaze rest upon the beloved shape, happiness beaming from his eyes; he was filled with content by the very sight of Rachel, not his girl-love who had seemed to him a little while ago unattainable, but his wife in the sanctuary of their hearth. The wild elation had subsided, giving place to this blissful quietude which he felt to be an earnest of deeper joy. No matter what to-morrow might bring forth, or any to-morrow near or distant, to-night was their own. To-night made them one.

Yet as he put out his hand and stroked the brown head at his knee and the little caressing fingers which caught and clung to his, that former indefinable horror rose and enveloped him, holding him once more in its deadly toils. And not himself only, but Rachel as well. Upon her, too, the fear fell. He knew it even before he felt her shiver. She started, trembled, and raising her face, looked at him, alarm widening her eyes. He forgot his own dread in anxiety on her account, and braced himself to self-control, for he knew that he must face this ghostly assailant and cow it

by the strength of his courage for her. But how fight the invisible—that which could only be felt—that at whose nature he could not, dared not, guess? *What* was this nameless, formless Thing which intruded itself upon the sanctity even of moments like this—which came between him and the new-made wife he would fain have taken to his breast? What was this terror which neither of them could comprehend? He told himself that, in the first instance, it had been the creation of his own brain and nerves enfeebled by illness. Rachel's fear must have grown from his, from the sight of how it had affected him on that first occasion of their meeting after his illness. Had it not been for his own lack of self-command she would probably never have become acquainted with his impalpable visitant. Now he must show himself of firmer mind. He must not acknowledge, even to himself, that this was aught but fancy. Besides, the feeling was absurd; his reason told him that it would wear off with returning health, change of scene, and, above all, happiness. He would not permit himself to be affected by it.

Accordingly he sat up, and deliberately putting out his arms, drew Rachel towards him, with a movement in which there was less of passion than of calm determination. In the shelter of his embrace, in the haven which was her right, she should find security. But he had scarcely pressed her to his heart when the girl disengaged herself and shrank back, trembling violently, and gazing in a strange manner into space.

'Rachel! What is it?' he exclaimed. 'What do you see?'—She still gazed fixedly for a moment or two, then her eyes dropped.

'Nothing,' she answered dully. 'I wish that I could see something. I cannot; I can only feel. But . . . but . . . Caspar, there *is* something there. Someone—*something* came into this room with us.'

He was silent. At her words, he again felt the pressure of the icy hand he knew. Presently he spoke in a hard voice, making an effort to reassure her.

'Nonsense, child! You closed the door yourself. Why do you shrink from me?' He tried to take her hand, but she shivered anew and shook her head. 'Come close to me,' he entreated; 'close, close, and let me warm and comfort you.'

'I cannot,' she cried with an hysterical sob. 'Oh, Caspar, I wish I could. There is something preventing me. It's as though a form stood between us, and I can't reach you. I try in vain. I can't even feel you.'

Her sob deepened with a sound of despair.

'You can't *feel* me?' he asked harshly, clutching her hands in a grip like that of a vice. 'Don't you feel me now?'

She shook her head, drawing herself further away; then pulling her hands from his, she sank sobbing, her head bowed over her knees.

He sprang up with an oath. Marillier was unaccustomed to use rough language, but helpless affright on her account, and resentment at this violation of their privacy, goaded him to blind fury.

'My God!' he cried, 'this is too horrible. What does it mean? Rachel—wife—look at me—speak to me.'

As he rose to his feet the cold shadow seemed to fall away from before him, but when he stooped over her he again felt it between them. Once more he sprang up, rearing himself defiantly, another oath trembling on his lips, and barely checked because he was afraid of terrifying her still further. Her sobs seemed to tear his heart; he did not know how to soothe her.

'Darling—don't cry. Believe me, there is nothing which can harm you. You are tired, overstrained, and I am to blame for it. I am, perhaps, not quite myself. We have both had an agitating day, and neither of us is in a specially well-strung condition. Our moods react upon

each other. You must have a good night's rest, and then you will laugh at this fancy. What else could it be? Look round. There is no one here.'

She obeyed him, and, lifting her head, gazed about, her eyes shifting uneasily, her nostrils distended like those of a frightened animal. She had ceased sobbing, but her trembling would not be stilled, and she shuddered afresh when he came closer to her, beseeching his forgiveness with a pathetic smile, yet shrinking the more. He turned away baffled, suffering intensely.

'I will leave you, my dear,' he said, the words choking him. 'It is best that I should go. Ask Nurse Dalison to give you a little bromide; that will make you sleep. Don't distress yourself; you will be all right in the morning, and then I shall come and see you. Remember, you must get sleep, because of your journey.'

'Yes,' she replied meekly, looking up at him as he stood a few feet from her, supporting himself by the back of the chair from which he had risen. The immediate horror had died out of her face, but she still looked frightened and was very pale.

'You are going, Caspar?' There was a note of relief in her voice which hurt him, but he answered calmly.

'I think, my dear,' he said, 'that we've neither of us got over the nerve upset of that horrid accident. I was not fit to see you the first time you came to me after it, and I believe that then I started this gruesome notion. The wisest thing I can do is to dose myself too, and sleep it off. You will see that when I come to you in the morning, we shall both be fresh and strong, and courageous enough to encounter either emperors or ghosts.'

His speech broke, and the laugh he tried to give ended in a quaver. He had not anticipated such a close to their marriage day, and as he thought of her brave giving of herself to him—an assurance of her love that he could not doubt—his disappointment was almost more than he could bear. He looked imploringly at her. Had she made a movement towards him, he would have tried to lock her in his arms again, but the shrinking in her was evident; a shrinking he felt to be not from him, but from the whole situation, from the terror she so clearly realised and could not understand. She put her hand upon the high fender-stool, and raised herself slowly and with difficulty; he dared not offer to help her. When she had risen, they stood face to face, the chair between them—the chair which to both seemed filled by an unearthly intruder. For a minute they were silent, spellbound. Then he roused himself.

'Remember—you must have rest,' he repeated. 'Get to bed soon—it's the best thing for you.'

'Yes,' she said submissively, her mouth twitching, her eyes upon his face, but with no light of love in them; his suggestion of leaving her was obviously not unwelcome. He paused and waited, but he knew it was in vain. How could she wish him to stay only to keep him at arm's length? And there could be no closing of heart to heart, of lips to lips, since they were not alone. Invisible eyes were upon them.

'Ring the bell,' he said shakily. 'You are nearest to it. Ask Nurse Dalison to come to you. She had better look after you to-night. I—I will go.'

Then, as the girl turned, thankfully it seemed to him, to press the electric button behind her, he walked back across the room to the door, a man with his desire frustrated even in the hour of fulfilment, that sweet desire beating like a live thing in his breast, but maimed, imprisoned, helpless.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE BLUE LAND

It was the country of the Kabyles—the Blue Land, as a French writer has called it.

A road wound round Djebel-el-Khâyal, which, being interpreted, is the Ghost Mountain, and which stands sentinel, as it were, at the entrance to those almost inaccessible fastnesses, where, in the past, the wild tribes struggled for so long, and held their independence against foreign invaders, and where indeed, at this very time, the fierce and fanatical Arabs of the Beni-Asser and other tribes are always in a condition of more or less smouldering revolt.

The distant sea of mountains rolled in great waves to the horizon, and there, in the clear light of that late January day, shone the pale crests of a snow-covered range like some far-off shore bounding an immense inland lake, while, in the foreground, sweeping lines of near hills were drawn against that misty sea, their furrowed sides, dark with pines, falling into the broad plain of the Bahira, that stretched like the estuary of a river to the coast.

Spring was spreading its earliest flush. The almond trees were abloom by the roadside about the white-washed Moorish houses with their thick straight walls and eyelet windows; the mimosa hung forth sheets of gold; the tender vine shoots on the sunny slopes, gave out a pleasant smell; the asphodels here and there, opened starry blossoms; on the hillsides, the pines had pale brownish-green spikes and tassels, and the bare trees were putting forth buds.

Curious sandy mounds rose on either side of this bit of road. Sometimes they were bald, with bubble-like protuberances in the crumbly earth, sometimes overgrown with lentiscus, which, in places, had a russet tinge like autumn foliage; sometimes, round these mounds, plants of the wild onion threw out tufts of flabby leaves and lifted tiny pillars of blue buds.

There came a turn in the winding road which always mounted steadily, and Khayal's great scarred hump seemed to rear itself like a barrier in front of a little *cortège* that was travelling at walking pace—three carriages drawn by lean Arab horses, and driven by Arab drivers. These carriages and their occupants represented the following and appanage suitable to Mademoiselle Isâdas's rank, which the Emperor had desired should be provided for her journey to Abaria, In the first carriage, Rachel and Nurse Dalison sat on the front seat, accompanied by Marillier, who faced them; in the second were Baptiste the courier, Rachel's maid, and the valet of Ruel Bey; the third held luggage and two Arab servants engaged in Algiers.

The country grew wilder and the road more uneven. '*Eheu! . . . Chiffa! . . . Empske! . . .*' cried the driver, flicking his bony beasts and shaking their rope harness; and down the carriage rattled where the road dipped and zigzagged, coming almost into collision with a pair of stately Bedouins who were riding slowly from the opposite direction. Now they passed a small procession of Kabyles, a family evidently moving house, their furniture strapped on mules, and two or three children striding beside the women, who wore striped haiks and huge barbaric-looking pins and necklaces. These smiled and gesticulated pleasantly at the foreigners with a freedom of manner different from that of the veiled women of the coast.

There was a stir of scirocco, and the wind blew almond blossoms almost into Rachel's lap as they passed through a tiny village where was a restaurant and one or two orange gardens. The scent of orange flowers mingled with the aromatic fragrance of limes and lentiscus and Mediterranean heath; the wind soughed and sighed dreamily; light clouds were drifting and throwing changeful shadows upon Khayal, making the ravines look blacker and more mysterious, and dappling the great grey plain of the Bahira. How beautiful it was, how

intoxicating, this blue land, thought Rachel, laughing aloud with a childlike pleasure in the scene, in the thought that she was breathing her native air, that she was revisiting the country in which she had been born. But an expression of melancholy crossed her face, dimming its gladness just as a passing cloud darkened the sun-shine on Khâyal. This was that land to which her mother had fled in pain and despair. Rachel O'Hara's dying eyes had gazed upon that blue sea of mountains, as her own eyes were gazing now. Beneath the shadow of Khayal lay her mother's grave, and here the Gate of Ghosts had in truth opened for that poor victim of an Eastern monarch's passion. It was odd that not till now had Rachel looked upon her mother as a definite fact in her existence. She had thought little of her before, had scarcely cared to speculate upon her fate, but since they had set foot in Algeria, the memory had been ever present with the girl, and she had been beset by a strong desire to see the old Moorish castle in which Rachel O'Hara had died, the house which was now her own.

Circumstance had favoured the fulfilment of her wish, though when she had mentioned it on board the steamer to Marillier he had shown a gentle opposition, pointing out to her that the Emperor's command made it incumbent upon them to present themselves with as little delay as possible at the court of Abaria. She had not at the time questioned his argument; shyness held her back, and a certain constraint seemed to have crept up between them. Whilst travelling, he made no attempt to break it, and there had naturally been few opportunities when they were on the railway for so doing. But when they arrived in Algiers it was found that the steamer in which they were to have continued their way along the coast was temporarily disabled, and that they had the choice of making a long and difficult land journey or of waiting four days till the boat was ready to put to sea. Marillier seemed half inclined for the land journey; in truth, he dreaded inaction, and, moreover, had an odd feeling that he must, as far as he was able, obey the Emperor's orders to the letter. It seemed to him, reasoning he owned somewhat fantastically, that having violated the unwritten code of honour by his marriage, he was bound to discharge literally every other obligation in regard to Rachel laid upon him by her father. There were moments, too, when he was struck by the disagreeable notion that he was being unconsciously influenced by the invisible intruder who had come between them upon their marriage night. However that might be, it was certain that something had held him back from making any further claim upon his wife, at least for the present, and with a pang he perceived that while wondering at his attitude, it was nevertheless a relief to her. Was it possible that she dreaded those four days in Algiers where they must be thrown more upon each other's company, and wished for the distraction of movement. He had nothing to say when she again brought forward her wish to see the place where her mother had died. The request was a perfectly natural one, and there was reason in her plea that as it was uncertain what the Emperor would decide in regard to their future life, they would be foolish in losing this chance of seeing a home legally hers, and in which she might later be compelled to live. She had ascertained that Bab-el-Khâyalât was a day's railway journey and a five or six hours' drive from Algiers, and that it would be quite practicable for them to spend a day and two nights at the château, and return in time to pick up their steamer. Thus she overruled his vague scruples, for which indeed, he had but slender ground. Baptiste set the telegraph wires in motion, and so it came about that they were now among the Kabyle mountains within a little distance of their destination.

There was pleased expectancy upon Rachel's face, and she showed a girlish interest in the unfamiliar sights and sounds around her. The beauty of the scenery charmed her. The picturesque Arabs and Kabyles appealed to her imagination; the dress and manners of the people amused her; she was delighted to chatter French once more to the simple country folk at the inns and

farmhouses at which they occasionally stopped. New scenes and the excitement of travelling had swept away the horror of her marriage night; she had not forgotten that strange supernatural dread which she had been forced to share with Lucien; in fact, each time she looked at her husband's worn face and noted his preoccupied air, she was reminded of it and compelled to realise the intangible barrier between them, but she was ready now to attribute the whole occurrence to overstrained nerves and to the brain injury he had undergone, from which she felt sure he had not yet recovered. Even that evening after he had left her, in all her own pain and perplexity, she had set herself so to look upon the matter, and Nurse Dalison's sympathetic and diplomatic counsel had strengthened the belief. Certainly Nurse Dalison had thought it strange that the newly-married pair should cut short their first interview after the marriage in a manner which Rachel's half-hysterical explanations showed her to be out of the ordinary course of things; but when the bridegroom's directions in regard to the administering of bromide and the necessity of procuring sleep for the overwrought girl had been given, she had accepted the situation as sufficiently explainable, only wondering at the forethought and consideration, which reminded her of Doctor Marillier, but for which she would hardly have given Ruel Bey credit.

Nurse Dalison saw at once that the girl was physically overdone, and decided that it was no strange matter that she should have been delivered into her care. Both nurse and woman in her were flattered by the trust, and she acquitted herself with discretion, bidding Rachel look happily forward to a deferred honeymoon amid the palms and orange groves of Abaria. Nurse Dalison herself was full of pleased anticipation, and all through the journey had been in a condition of mild effervescence. It was quite in accordance with her views upon the situation, that the hurriedly-united pair should delay their matrimonial confidences till under the shadow of the Emperor's protection. That would be what Nurse Dalison called 'nice.' She had no other word in which to express her feelings. It was much 'nicer' that she should continue for the present faithfully to discharge the duties of chaperon, and she was confirmed in these orthodox sentiments by the demeanour of the newly-married pair. Clearly, neither of them desired otherwise.

Nurse Dalison echoed Rachel's amused little exclamations and comments upon the scenes through which they were passing; she had a red *Murray* in her lap; ever since their departure from England she had been reading it diligently, and was an encyclopedia, from the tourist's point of view, in regard to Algeria and all known parts of Abaria.

Marillier, sitting opposite the two women, said little; he frankly professed ignorance of such information as Murray's guide-book supplied, and silently encouraged Nurse Dalison to pour it forth liberally, welcoming the cover it gave to his own reflections. His mind, like Rachel's, was on the stretch, and full of a strange expectancy. In him, this took the form of foreboding, and he too looked forward, but with conflicting emotions, to the time they were to spend in the place where Rachel O'Hara had died, and the Pacha's tragedy had been enacted; where too, the mandrake had been torn from its kindred and from the soil which had nurtured it. Instinctively, his hand moved to the leather case on the seat beside him, which he never allowed to pass into other hands than his own. Nurse Dalison noticed the gesture.

'I have been *wondering*, Ruel Bey,' she said in her italicised fashion of speech, 'what important despatches you are carrying in that box. They must be *very* important, for—you will be amused—Baptiste complained to me pathetically the other day, when you were leaving the boat with Rachel on one arm and all the wraps and the precious box as well on the other, that there was not much *éclat* in travelling with a suite since monsieur insisted on making of himself a beast of burden.'

Nurse Dalison's thin little laugh was echoed by Marillier, but he said nothing. Rachel's hand stole timidly towards him and rested for a moment on his knee.

'*Mon ami*, the box and its contents do indeed seem to weigh heavily. I cannot rouse you to any interest in this wonderful country. Or is it that you have travelled through it so often that it has lost its charm.'

Marillier, thrilled by her touch, imprisoned the fluttering hand, but instantly released it, and Rachel drew back again into her corner of the carriage.

'Yet although the country has lost all its novelty for you because you know it so well,' she went on, with a pretty pettishness, 'you can't tell me anything about the Roman remains near Bab-el-Khâyalât, and which we must certainly try and see to-morrow.'

'Roman remains,' he echoed absently. 'I had not heard of them.'

'But, my Caspar, I have heard you talk of this Kabyle country—though then I did not know that I should ever be the possessor of a Moorish castle in it. I have heard you speak of the Roman ruins.'

'Many of the Moorish fortresses have been built of Roman stones,' he said a little impatiently. 'I am not an archæologist, my dear.'

'At least,' she said, disappointed, 'I thought you would have been interested in knowing that the tower of Château Khayal is supposed to have been inhabited more or less in its original condition since the time of Genseric, who, the guide-book says, only partly destroyed it. Think of living in a building which Genseric tried to destroy! I should like to sleep there to-night, Caspar, if it is in any way possible.'

He smiled upon her, rousing himself to sympathy with her mood.

'But I *am* interested, deeply interested,' he said; and if it can be managed, and I haven't the least doubt that Baptiste will be equal to the occasion, you shall have your wish and sleep in Genseric's tower unless the rats and the bats have put it out of the question.'

'I wish I had thought of it before,' said Rachel, with a laugh. 'Baptiste says that "Mademoiselle honoured of the Emperor has only to name her desires and they shall be fulfilled." Now if I had told Baptiste, he would certainly have telegraphed, and I notice that whenever Baptiste telegraphs the impossible is accomplished.'

'Perhaps there's no telegraph station at Bab-el-Khâyalât,' remarked Nurse Dalison, who was always practical. 'Now I think of it, he telegraphed to Milianah. I heard him saying that a messenger would be sent over. Yet I fancy that I read in the guide-book that Bab-el-Khayalat was a military post. We shall soon see,' and she turned over the leaves of her *Murray*. Rachel bent over her and read out scraps of information.

'The modern town. . . built on the Roman site. . . formerly barracks for infantry and cavalry. . . sometime since, disused. (Then I suppose there's no telegraph.) Ancient bastioned wall . . . A remarkable fortress now a private residence . . . tower of great antiquity . . . built upon an abutment of the wall, and commanding a fine view of Mount Khâyal and the Gorge of the Bahira. Legend and superstition have woven strange romances about this tower, which is well worth a visit, though it was furnished in modern fashion and turned into a summer residence by its first European occupant, General de Boissy Verneuil, to whom it was given in 1857 by the French government as a reward for his services in the subjugation of Kabylia. The château was sold later by General de Boissy Verneuil's heirs to an Avaranese gentleman in whose possession it remains, but by whom it has been left practically uninhabited. Admission, however, is almost impossible to obtain, as the present owner refuses entrance to tourists.'

‘You see,’ exclaimed Rachel, triumphantly, ‘it is furnished in modern fashion. Then it must be habitable. I wonder who furnished it. I wonder—’ she paused, and a wistful look came into her face. ‘Tell me the date of the book,’ she said. She was wondering if the last occupant of the tower had been her dead mother. She fell into reverie. Marillier divined her thought though he did not question her. The presence of Nurse Dalison restrained him, but Nurse Dalison was soon lost again in the red book and the other two were left to their reflections.

During the whole journey Marillier’s mind had been chaotic, tumultuous. Hope, regret, fear, and wild defiance of the unexplainable influence which kept him from the full fruition of his love, blended confusedly within him—defiance predominating; but the time for battle was not yet. When it came, he was determined to wrestle for his love with the ghostly claimant who would take her from him, but, for the present, he felt he must be patient and wait, saying nothing, doing nothing which could augment Rachel’s uneasiness. He saw that it still lingered, though he knew that she was trying to persuade herself that the whole thing was illusion due to over-fatigue. Since the day it had taken place, she had not mentioned the marriage. He thought that perhaps she did not consider theirs a real marriage yet, and would not do so until the Church had blessed it. That was natural in a girl of such religious tendencies, brought up in the manner Rachel had been, and he liked it in her, but all the same, he longed to convince her of the reality of their union. She was very sweet to him, but the gentle friendliness of her manner made him understand more than any coldness could have done, that she held him at a distance, and he felt bitterly that she was glad to keep Nurse Dalison with them, and to ignore the fact of being his wedded wife. Yet she loved him as she had always done—of that he was convinced, and at times he surprised a look upon her face—a tender, beseeching look, as though she were mutely asking his forgiveness—which went to his heart. That she should feel so towards him touched and saddened him. It was in vain that he told himself that this was but the reaction he might have expected after her frank offering of herself upon their marriage day. Oh, for a few moments of straight response from her soul to his, of the human self-surrender of wife to husband, the heart-oneness which was their right and should be their joy! He knew it would be his but for that ghostly intruder, and it was then that the spirit of defiance stirred in his breast. During the first part of the journey, he had resolutely put all thought of the spirit-presence from him, feeling, in the condition of his brain, how impossible it was for him to analyse it. But by degrees, some of the mental fog cleared, and he could look back upon that night with calmness though with total lack of understanding. The sea breezes, in their passage across the Mediterranean, had swept his mind and cleared it somewhat of ghastly fantasies. He felt stronger, healthier, more his ordinary self—that self to which he was not yet accustomed, the strange combination of Caspar and Lucien—Lucien, always the more powerful nature of the two, preponderating. His sense of wild elation had gone, and also the uncanny terror which had followed it. He could to some small extent—alas! a very small one—bring his scientific training to bear upon the problem; he felt himself more like the judicial Marillier of old—the man who could see his duty, and go where it bade him. Duty was leading him to Abaria—on that point he made no question. So far he could see. Beyond was darkness.

He had had time to think more collectedly during the stretch of railway from Algiers, and now in this day’s drive, he took out his trouble and looked at it. No longer did it press upon his brain, deadening everything else; he could hold it out a little way from him and give it more dispassionate consideration. What was to be done if that ghost—he did not know what else to call it—invariably came between him and his wife? Were this to continue, the situation would become impossible. He tried to look upon it from the medical standpoint; to advise himself as he

would have advised a patient similarly situated, who had brought him such a story. He turned over in his mind his past experience as a doctor, and recalled cases that had come under his notice, nearly or remotely resembling his own. But to no avail; he had never heard nor read of one like it. He could find no solution of the difficulty either in his own knowledge or in that which he had gleaned from others—not even in anything that the Pacha, that man of wisdom, had told him. He was obliged to own to himself that were such a story brought to him as a physician, he must, according to ordinary canons, regard it as hallucination. Yet his own experience, and not his own only, but Rachel's evidence as well, convinced him that this thing was no hallucination. And, if not, then what was it? What in fact, he questioned, constitutes a ghost, if it be not the creation of a disordered brain? Do spirits in very truth, as some believe, come and go as they list among men by means of and for reasons of their own? The Pacha had talked of Wandering Ones doomed to everlasting banishment from material pleasures for which they still craved—could it be one of these? Was it possible that some exiled soul, snatching at opportunity, had found power to control them? It was a horrible thought. *Who* thus presumed to force the barrier of his presence between them, and by what right? Who amongst the dead dared claim tie or affinity with either Rachel or himself sufficient to compel them at his command, even to the wrecking of their peace and joy?

Swift as lightning, the answer leaped to his brain, *Caspar!* Only Caspar could find it possible—only Caspar would do it. Numbered amongst the dead; banished to that shadowland, but it might be, still in full consciousness, and doubtless yearning for living delights, Caspar had come to enforce his claim.

CHAPTER XXV

COUNT VARENZI

As this conviction seized Marillier, he struck his clenched hand upon his knee and a groan escaped him. Caspar was his opponent—Caspar his enemy. Caspar might still contend with him for the woman they both loved. In spite of its seeming contradiction with the known laws of Nature, this solution of the mystery appeared to Marillier a naked and appalling truth. He no longer told himself, as he would have done in days gone by, that there could be no certainty about such supermundane speculation. This, to him, was no wild conjecture, but an inspirational flash, which beat upon his reason and showed him clearly that he stood upon the borders of that world beyond matter, into which the Pacha had so longed to penetrate.

When at length he had entered it, the Pacha's dead hand had been extended from its confines, as he had said it would be, to protect the lonely girl he had been forced to leave. Marillier did not doubt this, and though he had occasionally wondered whether Isàdas, from his invisible vantage ground, had known and disapproved of that hasty marriage, he felt it would not be the Pacha's wish to separate them. In his own odd way the old man had cared for his doctor, and had desired only the girl's happiness. Even supposing he could have prevented their union, he would have been more likely to await results calmly and leave them to work out their own destiny. No, it was not the Pacha who had intervened between them—Marillier was convinced of that. It could be only Caspar. The revelation kindled fresh fire in his breast—fresh determination. He would fight with Caspar still; fight and conquer by the aid of those supreme forces of which the Pacha had spoken—Love and Will. They should arm him against this malignant influence, the more dreadful because of its unknown powers.

In awe, Marillier asked himself how much of Caspar had died, how much remained to wreak vengeance upon his supplanter, and how far would that vengeance extend? It was his own body—the body of Lucien Marillier—which crumbled in the grave at Kensal Green, but the spirit which had been released was not his own, and Marillier realised the deathless ness of spirit. Houseless, homeless, bereft, this spirit might well return to claim its human rights and its living habitation. For the fine frame that he had stolen, Marillier cared little in itself; his position, social and official, the honours he so unwillingly bore, he would have relinquished gladly—he had usurped them only as the means to an end—but for Rachel he would contend with the living or the dead. He had wooed her under false colours, but her heart was, he knew, inalienably his, and not Caspar's. By the might of their mutual love and the strength of his will, he could make her entirely his own. Now that he recognised his opponent, the way seemed easier, the goal nearer. A sigh, as of relief, broke from him, his hand unclenched, and he became again conscious of his surroundings. Rachel, who had been disturbed by his exclamation, was looking at him anxiously with questioning eyes. She had not liked to break in upon his abstraction with an ill-timed remark, for she saw plainly that his mind was filled with painful thoughts. As the cloud partially cleared from his brow she met his look with a troubled smile, wondering how she could divert his attention. Just then the driver called out excitedly some words in Arabic, and bent back from his box gesticulating with his whip. 'Bab-el-Khâyalât,' he cried, 'Bab-el-Khâyalât'

'Oh, look!' exclaimed Rachel. 'Caspar, that must be the town and the tower of the château. Oh, Caspar, you can never have seen anything half so beautiful.' In her eagerness she had risen, dragging Nurse Dalison from the seat, and both women, clinging to the back of it, were straining out over the ravine which the carriage was skirting. A sharp bend brought them in full view of one of the finest landscapes that even Marillier had ever beheld.

The central peak of Mount Khayal, a spur of which they had been rounding, reared itself close to their left—a gigantic rock cloven into mighty precipices, furrowed with great fissures, rising naked out of the dark pine forest below, desolate and gloomy beyond words; and, as it reflected the red light of a lowering sun, glowing with lurid and almost sinister splendour. The pine forest broke abruptly near the mountain base, and another great precipice dropped sheer into the ravine, which, from the point of view of the occupants of the carriage, seemed fathomless, but they could hear the roar of a torrent and could see a milky band winding down the valley to join the river which watered the plain of the Bahira.

The torrent came into sight, dashing in foamy eddies over the rocks of the ravine, where the spur terminated sharply as though a knife had cleft it uncertainly, leaving a little way below the summit, a natural ledge utilised for fortifications. Below again was a sheer drop of bare rock, making a precipice several hundred feet high, and from the base of this, sloped mounds of *débris* covered with undergrowth, where big grey boulders seemed to be tumbling into the gorge. Beyond the spur, south and west to the horizon, spread the upheaved sea of mountains, their further peaks snow-covered, showing gorgeous opal hues against the sky. Between these distant peaks and the grey cloudy plain of the Bahira, humps and peaks uprose like foaming waves, shaping themselves in the strangest and most fantastic forms, which here and there, had a grotesque human semblance. No doubt it was this feature of the scenery that had suggested the Arab name of the place—Bab-el-Khâyalât, the Gate of Ghosts.

On the extreme point of the spur, crowning the precipice and commanding gorge and plain, stood what had formerly been an impregnable fortress. The bastions and buttresses and a mighty round tower, with square battlements, which had beneath them a machicolated parapet, stood out boldly against the sky. A very eyrie it looked, perched upon that abutting crag, and

unapproachable except from the rear—the saddle-back ridge of the isthmus-like spur. Even here, the castle was guarded, for the irregular wall that encircled it dipped in the middle of the ridge, where clearly, a deep fosse had been dug. It did not seem surprising that the Numidian tribes had never been brought into strict allegiance to the empire of Rome, or that having in later ages enrolled themselves under the banner of the Prophet, the Berbers, entrenched in such strongholds as these, should in more modern times have defied Christian invasion.

The tower placed at one corner of the building which—as far as could be judged from a distance, seemed a curious blending of times and styles—stood on a slight projection of the crag, and almost overhung the ramparts and the torrent hundreds of feet below. It faced the Mount of Ghosts, and in every other direction, the view from its battlemented summit must have been superbly panoramic. As the road turned, it could be seen from the carriage that the rocky height sloped gradually on the side furthest from the tower, and was laid out in terraces and garden to the level of the rampart wall. Vivid patches of green flecked grey walls and bastions, and a brilliant sheet of yellow showed the position of a tiny orange grove, while here and there, were splashes of deep mauve, the colour of the bougainvillea blossoms; and growing slantwise, bent in that exposed place by the force of the wind, were a clump of venerable palms.

As the travellers drew nearer, and the twists of the zigzag gave a view of the castle from different points of observation, the rampart walk could be discerned stretching round the edge of the cliff, rounding it and breaking off abruptly at the steepest fall of the ground. It was accessible from the more modern town, half French half Mahometan, which spread beyond the entrenchment along the top of the ridge. The town was a picturesque place of its sort, but it had the decayed and dreary appearance of a settlement once fairly flourishing, now no longer of importance. This was accounted for by its having been a military post, deserted when warlike operations ceased. On the outskirts, the empty barracks were falling to pieces, soldiers being no longer needed since the tribes had settled into peaceful submission to European rule, and the Berber chiefs had, metaphorically speaking, changed their swords into reaping hooks. For, though the Kabyle mountains still harboured a fierce spirit of revolt, it was evident that round the town at anyrate, the population was more agricultural than predatory, notwithstanding that the poor soil lent itself unwillingly to the cultivation of vines and olive trees.

The carriages rolled along an avenue of unlopped planes, their bare leprous-looking branches interlacing overhead. The minaret of a mosque showed among them, and presently, the travellers passed by its outer court, wherein was a fountain shaded by two gnarled orange trees. The fruit hung upon them in golden balls, and there were flowers also, which scented the air faintly. Beyond was the tomb of a Marabout, ornamented with gay flags and Prophet's banners of green and gold. The white-draped, hooded Arabs and veiled women prostrate before it, turned at the rattle of the carriages, and suspended their devotions to take a look at the unwonted arrivals, but a group of more stately persons in turbans and burnouses, who were drinking coffee on a projecting part of the old wall, scarcely paused in their talk to notice the newcomers, and turned only the imperturbable Eastern gaze upon Rachel and Nurse Dalison, when their attention was attracted by the ejaculations of pleased surprise at the picturesqueness of the scene which both women involuntarily uttered.

The *cortège* halted before a pair of great gates set between massive walls of yellowish grey stone. At the corners of the wall, were rounded turrets, with loopholes, whence the approach of a marauding band might be seen afar for an immense distance. One of these turrets abutted on a square platform with low parapet, from which a few steps led to the ramparts. These ramparts, supported by great bulwarks and bastions of crumbling stone, seemed, as has been said, to extend

round the end of the promontory upon which the castle was built. Facing the platform, and connected with it by a narrow roadway, was a small hotel restaurant, the link between ancient fortress and modern town. The platform was evidently used as an open-air drinking place supplied by the hotel, for Arab waiters were passing to and fro along the little causeway, carrying Moorish trays, with brass jugs of thick steaming coffee, and little odd embossed egg-shaped cups.

Marillier, looking along the ramparts which appeared to overhang the gorge and the river, remembered the Pacha's account of his despairing vigils after the death of Rachel's mother, and the strange story of the finding of the mandrake that he had heard a few months back in the Abarian Embassy in London; the story which had then seemed to him distant and visionary as an Eastern fairy tale, but which now returned to him startlingly near and absolutely real. He found himself gazing curiously out upon the wooded spurs which projected below, and appeared to support the great hump of Djebel-el-Khâyal, and wondering upon which of these slopes the insane root had been gathered.

Now, as one of the Arab servants pulled the rusty bell wire, and set ghostly echoes reverberating, a toothless dame—an old French peasant woman in short blue skirt and flapping hat, just visible in the darkness of the doorway—left her distaff and spindle, and clanked her wooden clogs down the stone-paved way. She drew the bolts, and with difficulty and by aid of the Arabs, swung back the heavy gates, curtseying as the carriages passed through, and muttering in unintelligible patois some words of welcome.

Rachel, all radiant, smiled and nodded. She felt like a girl-queen entering for the first time her newly-inherited dominion. The gates clanged to behind them. They were in a large, mediæval looking court, with a stone fountain and tall plane tree in the centre, and narrow windows looking down into it on two sides—the windows of what might once have been soldiers' quarters. The third side was filled by a higher, more imposing building, irregular in architecture, one end square, and though undoubtedly ancient, of more recent date than the huge round tower at the other end, which was built of great square blocks of a yellowish-grey stone, crumbling with age, yet of such solid masonry as to have defied during centuries, the ravages of time and weather. The tower had three stories, with a sort of balcony projecting below the battlemented top, and the immense thickness of its walls could be judged from the window openings, which, curiously, instead of narrowing, widened towards the summit.

The whole château was a strange mixture of the ancient Roman, Moorish and mediæval. The tower, at all events the body of it, went back to Pagan days, but there had been added on to it a Moorish palace, and presently the travellers found themselves in a tiled court where a fountain plashed and a gallery jutted out supported on arabesque arches and slim pillars. Just outside the court was a slaves' gallery with tiled seats, and through an open archway within, a glimpse could be caught of what might once have been the harem garden, a dim walled-in square with gravelled walks roofed by the foliage of old orange trees.

The custodian, a venerable man in green livery, with long white hair and a quavering voice, ushered them through the outer Court, bowing all the time and walking backwards before Rachel, for Baptiste had already taken care to explain that this young lady, honoured by the Emperor of Abaria, was not only proprietress of the château, but, by special command, was on her way to the Abarian court, that she might be decorated with a distinguished order by the Imperial hands.

The custodian, who told them his name was Armand, looked duly impressed but somewhat bewildered. Encouraged by Rachel, however, he soon chattered volubly after the manner of an old

retainer. For over twenty-five years, he said, he had been custodian of the château—he, and his wife who was now dead, and his son and daughter; and not once during that time since the day his master had left it had the state rooms been opened for the accommodation of a visitor. Picture then the surprise, the consternation, which had fallen upon them with the appearance of the messenger from Milianah, with the telegram bidding him prepare for the arrival of mademoiselle and her suite. How were they to provide comforts and repasts such as mademoiselle no doubt was accustomed to? He had been informed that mademoiselle was escorted by an honourable officer in the service of the Emperor. He craved the pardon of monsieur, and threw himself upon the clemency of mademoiselle and of his Excellency for the excuse of shortcomings. They had done their best in the haste that was necessary to make suitable preparations. The beds were aired, fires had been lighted since yesterday morning all over the château. Mademoiselle would find everything clean, well cared for, and each room exactly as it had been left at the departure of the Count and the death of the sweet madame, his kinswoman. Ah I but it had been a sad business! He—Armand—though twenty-five years were passed, remembered as if it had been yesterday, the beautiful lady who had died, and the grief of monsieur the Count. And the little baby—did mademoiselle know whether the child had lived and flourished, and would mademoiselle condescend to inform him concerning his master's health? For so many years no news had come to Armand, and for him, monsieur the Count had ceased to exist. It was true the payments were generous, and by them he knew that he was not forgotten, but they were always made through a notary, and the instructions were ever the same—nothing to be disturbed—the rooms of the poor madame to be kept as she had left them, and, above all, no strangers to be admitted. Armand, as mademoiselle would see, had faithfully obeyed the orders, cherishing the hope that his master would one day return. Truly, he had become greatly attached to the Count during the months of his stay at the château, though that was so many years ago. It was a great soul, a noble and sympathetic heart, which had cared for the happiness of others, and especially for those who had done kindness to her he loved. Ah! there were people still in Bab-el-Khâyalât better off through the goodness of monsieur the Count. There were the children of the woman who had nursed madame and who owed their farm to him. And there was the maid of madame—dead now—she too had received a large dowry; and in truth there was no one who had ever done a kindness to madame or to the Count himself, whom this man with the great heart had not rewarded. It would be a joy, not to Armand only, but to those others too, if mademoiselle could give good news of monsieur the Count.

Rachel had been listening eagerly, scarcely speaking during the latter part of the old man's talk. He had brought them into a room with deep recesses, which were lined with Persian and Damascus tiles, and furnished with divans upholstered in faded embroidery. There were rugs upon the floor; a wood fire blazed upon the hearth, before which chairs were drawn, and the table in the middle was set. The room looked homelike, and Rachel had a dazed feeling that the twenty-five years must be a dream, and that only yesterday it was inhabited.

'The Count,' she repeated to Marillier. 'I don't understand. Who does he mean?'

'He is speaking of Count Varenzi, whom we have known as Isâdas Pacha,' replied Marillier, gravely.

'But,' cried Rachel, 'can it be *Excellence* of whom he tells such stories? *Excellence* never seemed to care about anyone.'

'He loved your mother,' said Marillier. 'When she was taken from him he changed altogether. There were two persons in the man we knew—Varenzi of the great heart was one; Isâdas, the cynical Ambassador, was the other.'

Rachel turned away to hide a rush of tears. The memory of Isàdas in his softer moods came back to her; Isàdas, touched by the Irish melodies her mother had sung; Isàdas, as he had shown himself upon that last night of his life.

‘I knew that he was not really what he seemed,’ she said gently, as soon as she could speak. ‘He would have been kind and tender even to me if I had been more like my mother, and less my father’s child.’

Nurse Dalison who, with her usual tact, had turned away and occupied herself in studying the tiles over the fireplace, now addressed a few words to the old man in her excellent French, but he answered at random, his eyes fixed on Rachel. ‘If mademoiselle only knew how often he had thought of Count Varenzi,’ he went on, desiring to assure himself of his master’s well being. He feared that there must be something amiss. Probably monsieur was acquainted with the Count and knew in what country he had lived during all these years, and why he had never revisited Algeria. Had he then sold the château, since mademoiselle was now its proprietress?’

‘My friend,’ said Marillier, kindly, ‘I am sorry to tell you that you can never see your master again in Algeria. He died in England about six weeks ago. The château he bequeathed to this lady who may perhaps return here later, after her visit to Abaria, and for that reason wished to see it on her way to see the Emperor.’

‘My master dead!’ exclaimed the old man in genuine dismay. ‘But why in England, monsieur? I remember having heard him say to madame that of all countries in the world he would like least to live in England.’

‘Count Varenzi, as he was to you, held the post of Abarian Ambassador to the English court,’ explained Marillier. ‘We, who knew him in England, knew him as Isàdas Pacha.’

‘I have heard that name,’ answered the old man. ‘I have read in the journals of Isàdas Pacha—I never guessed that it was my master. But I understand—yes, I can comprehend. There was naught in the world for my master when madame died. He wished to bury the past, to take another country and another name.’

‘That is no doubt true,’ said Marillier. ‘Count Varenzi went back to the service of the Emperor of Abaria, which he had left for a short time, and became another man. Perhaps it is well you did not know him as Isàdas Pacha, for he must have greatly changed. Yet he was a man much honoured, and died full of years and dignities.’

The old custodian made an expressive movement.

‘Ay! twenty-five years ago the Count was no longer young, and I sometimes wondered even then that the fire of hope and love should burn so brightly in his heart. But there was the child, Excellency—the girl-baby whom my master took away—I have heard nothing of her since. Did the child die also, or did she live to be a daughter to the Count, and console him for the loss of her mother?’ He stopped and looked intently at Rachel. Her identity with that girl-baby had a moment ago occurred to him.

‘Blind fool that I am!’ he exclaimed. ‘How is it possible that I did not at once recognise the smile—the heavenly smile of madame which, notwithstanding the years, has remained imprinted on my memory? Yes, there is a resemblance, and yet it is not so very striking. Mademoiselle will pardon my stupidity. I am the very humble servant of my lady who has come to claim her inheritance.’

The tears shone still in Rachel’s eyes, though her lips were smiling. Deeply touched, she put out her hand, and the old man kissed it as some feudal dependant might have kissed the hand of his liege. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘I am grateful to you for remembering my mother, and for caring so much. Although, as this gentleman told you, your master seemed different afterwards

from what you have described him to be when he was Count Varenzi, still I am certain his heart never really changed, and to the last day of his life he thought of my mother and loved her. By-and-by,' she went on hurriedly, 'I should like you to show me her rooms and everything that belonged to her.'

The old man explained that, not knowing for whom he had been bidden to make ready, and mindful of Count Varenzi's orders, he had not thought of preparing those special rooms. Not that they had been neglected. Fires were regularly lighted, and the bits of furniture dusted and hangings brushed and kept in repair as far as was possible, but his master's command had been that nothing should be taken down or disturbed, and so even the very flowers that madame had arranged the day before her death were crumbling into powder in their vases. The Count had himself locked the two rooms, her *salon* and the chamber in which she had died, and had given the keys to him—Armand—with injunctions that no one but he and his wife should enter them; he had faithfully obeyed that injunction. Now the keys must be delivered to mademoiselle. Meanwhile, it might please mademoiselle to inspect the ordinary apartments. This was the *salon*, and yonder—pointing to a further room lined with bookcases and with a large writing-table near the fireplace—was the library in which Count Varenzi had usually sat. The bedroom intended for mademoiselle opened into it, and beyond was a small chamber where the Count's valet had slept. On the other side of the large *salon*, were the rooms which had been arranged for the rest of the party.

He led them round. A cheerful little chamber was assigned to Nurse Dalison, and one barer and less comfortable to Marillier. Rachel demurred at sight of it. Surely something better might be provided. The windows were curtainless, the outlook was sunless, the walls seemed damp. Monsieur was still an invalid, and the room was hardly suitable for one recovering from illness. Marillier laughed, and declared the accommodation was good enough—far more luxurious than he had expected to find it. Nevertheless, her solicitude on his behalf was delightful to him, and her pretty assumption of authority pleased him greatly. Rachel insisted that another room must be got ready. It was important in this gentleman's state of health, she said, that he should have warm sunshine, and, above all, no draughts. The old custodian looked embarrassed and made wordy apologies. He was desolated, but what could he do? Sleeping resources, in spite of the size of the château, were limited. There was but one other guest-room in the inhabited part of the building, and that was in the tower. It was not a bad room, but for a quarter of a century no one had slept in it, and then only for the sake of coolness; it could not be recommended for a winter chamber or for an invalid. The bed certainly was aired; there could be no danger of damp. As for sunshine, truly the sun had free entrance from three sides of the heavens; there was as much as might be at this season, but from all four quarters of the sky the wind came in also, and mademoiselle might conceive that the snowy blast from the Djurdjura mountain would penetrate every crevice of the windows which went all round the tower and gave a view to which nothing in Algeria could compare. But for draughts and the requirements of an invalid, mademoiselle might judge for herself, and he shrugged eloquently.

Yes, mademoiselle would judge for herself Rachel laughed; she had an idea—so, with a quick glance, she informed Nurse Dalison and Marillier. They would see. Did Nurse Dalison think she might venture to make the tottering old man guide them up the tower staircase? Was there ever anything out of a romance so picturesque and fascinating as this dear faithful custodian? Nurse Dalison agreed. The old man appealed to her imagination; he was *quite* in the picture. She had gathered up a few art phrases in the course of her professional experience. Yes, he was *perfectly* harmonious with his setting; a different creature would have spoiled the composition. Of course,

he was able to mount the stairs, *far* better than herself, as she must confess to the headache of over-fatigue which *invariably* attacked her after a day in the open air. But she couldn't resist the tower; they would go and look at it, only she sincerely *hoped* that there was nothing rash in Rachel's idea.

Rachel laughed again. They were in the room which had been allotted her, and which was large, well-carpeted and handsomely furnished, with a bed like a catafalque, heavily draped in deep crimson, and reminding her of the great bier in the ballroom of the Abarian Embassy, upon which the dead Pacha had lain in state. When told that this was the room Count Varenzi had occupied, she shuddered.

'I will not sleep here,' she said to Marillier. 'It is too gloomy. You shall take this room, *mon ami*, and I will go to the tower. That is my idea. It is not so very venturesome, is it? You see, Fate evidently intends to gratify my silly fancies. Didn't I say that I longed to sleep in the tower which is older than Genseric? Now, if Fate had not arranged matters, how is it likely that I should have found a room in it quite habitable, and where the bed has been aired in readiness?'

'Fate must have looked a long way ahead,' remarked Nurse Dalison, drily, 'for the room seems to have been arranged before you were *born*. I don't *quite* like your idea, Rachel; it's not a very wise one, but we'll come and have a look at the tower, and probably *that* will convince you better than *I* can.'

Nurse Dalison was obliged to own, however, that the tower room, though curtainless and exposed to all the winds that blew, was not uninviting. The furniture was comparatively modern, and the bed looked extremely comfortable. One might have conjectured that a woman had arranged it, there were so many suggestions of feminine taste. Rachel remarked this, and a deeper, if somewhat mournful, interest was imparted to the place by the custodian's reply.

The Count had arranged this room for madame, and she had slept in it for a short time during the great summer heat. That had been soon after her arrival at the chateau, when she had been still equal to mounting the steep staircase. Latterly, this had been impossible, and she had died in the bedroom below; but at the beginning, madame had liked to spend whole days in the tower, and in the long summer evenings, she and the Count used to amuse themselves studying the stars from the upper storey, where a telescope had been fixed and still remained in position.

There was no question now in Rachel's mind. She took off her hat and laid it down with an air of having definitely chosen her resting-place. She requested that her luggage might be brought her, and her maid sent up, and met with wilful raillery all the remonstrances which Nurse Dalison put forth.

'Lonely! I am never lonely when I have sky and mountains near me. Besides, the staircase leads almost directly into the *salon*, and if I felt frightened and cried out, you'd all hear me as distinctly as though I were calling through a speaking tube, and could rush up in a few moments and protect me, if there were any need, from bats and beetles, though I don't see any sign of either. Now you know I love draughts, and I never could have the windows open as I liked in England because of the fog. There's no fog here. And I adore the sound of the wind. It reminds me of my little turret at the convent. To be able once again to look straight up into the sky and see the stars will be a joy that I have longed for, ever since I left France. Now, my dear friend,' as Nurse Dalison continued to make objections, reasonable and unreasonable, 'just fancy your asking if there's a lightning conductor! Does one have thunderstorms in Algeria in January?' she demanded, in French, of the custodian.

He shook his head doubtfully. It was not usual, but in this mountainous region anything of the sort was possible. He remembered that the great thunderstorm, in which the Commandant's

house was struck and the Commandant's son killed, had taken place in the beginning of February. Only last winter there had been a waterspout, and a thunderbolt had fallen and was now on view in the Musée at Milianah. Armand had heard, too, of an Arab prophet who declared that the destruction of the Commandant's house and son had been due to the vengeance of God—the God of Mahomet, of course—who was angry at the conquest of Kabylia and the subjection of his people. There were others—men of science—who attributed the frequent thunderstorms to certain properties of the mountains—the ironstone on the Djurdjuras which attracted lightning. But mademoiselle need have no alarm. It was not within the memory of man that lightning had struck the tower; and one of the legends concerning it maintained that the tower was guarded by those spirits which haunted Djebel-el-Khâyal, and after whom the gorge was called the Gate of Ghosts.