

## CHAPTER XXVI

### IN THE TOWER

Night had closed in. The quaint brass lamps and the wood fire shed a dull glow over the tiles and embroideries and centre table in the *salon* where the little party had dined. Marillier and Rachel sat at the table, lingering over the oranges and fresh dates which had formed their dessert. They were alone, Nurse Dalison, pleading a headache, having retired to her own room. The headache was genuine, and not to be wondered at after the fatigue and excitement of the day; but Nurse Dalison had been actuated by diplomatic motives as well, for she felt that now, in their own home, it was right that the pair should be left alone as much as possible. So she had risen from the table, had made her pretty speeches, smiled her faded deprecatory smile, and departed. Before closing the door, however, she turned to ask Rachel whether Christine, the maid, should not have a bed made up in the lower tower room, so as to be at least within call of her mistress; but Rachel laughingly declined the suggestion, saying again that she was not in the least nervous, and that Christine would certainly die of cramp or fright if put into an unused lumber room, and that they might, if they pleased—nodding at the nurse and Marillier—leave their doors ajar into the *salon*, so that should she call for help against ghosts they might be certain of hearing her.

Nurse Dalison gave a little shiver and a laugh, and remarked that she thought even ghosts would find the tower too windy to be pleasant quarters, and would be much more likely to haunt her own room, and that of the Pacha, in which Marillier was sleeping. She was glad that she had a clear conscience and a good digestion, and as she was sure also of Rachel's conscience and digestion, she did not think they need worry themselves over the possibility of ghostly visitants. Indeed, it seemed to her that there was more to dread in the chance of a rising among the Arabs and an assault on the *château*, for, from all she heard, the district was continually in a state of disaffection.

Rachel, deriding the idea, declared that nothing would please her better than to live at the *château* and prove the loyalty of the Arabs around it. She playfully bade Nurse Dalison sleep off her alarms, and with a parting wish that they might have pleasant dreams, the tired lady left them, refusing the coffee and liqueur which at that moment Armand brought in.

Mademoiselle's orders had been attended to, the old man informed his mistress. This was veritable coffee of the country. The cups, which were of enamelled ware in jewelled silver holders, had been bought by the Count for madame, and were of great value, and the spoons he would recommend to mademoiselle's notice for the sake of the precious stones which adorned the handles. Mademoiselle would find, too, that the observatory in the tower had been lighted, and that such hurried attempts as were possible, had been made to render it worthy of mademoiselle's inspection.

Rachel thanked him, and examined the beautiful little egg-shaped cups and the embossed stands with a pathetic interest. Armand, in reply to her questioning, told her they had never been used till this evening, since the day when madame, as he called her, had last drunk from them. He bowed himself out, and the girl and her husband were alone. Rachel drank the thick aromatic concoction in an abstracted manner, saying nothing. She was thinking of her mother and of the dead Pacha. It was difficult to harmonise her own remembrance of the grim Ambassador with the custodian's description of Count Varenzi. What tender care, she reflected, had been given to the choice of this dainty and costly service, a gift to the woman he had loved; and how dearly he must have loved her to have kept up this place during all these years as a sort of shrine,

everything that she had ever touched sacredly preserved in it, though his own sorrow for her loss had been too great to permit him to revisit the house in which she had died. Another man would have sold it and would have forgotten. Who would have believed that Isâdas could be so faithful?

Marillier, leaning back in his chair, sipping the tiny glass of cognac, watched her, half-divining her thoughts. And as he watched her, he felt happier and more secure than he had done since his marriage day. The girl was bending a little forward absently studying the pattern of her coffee spoon. She looked very lovely in the simple grey dress with its frill of soft lace which she had worn the evening she was married. Perhaps it was the greyness and softness of her gown and her slight paleness, or maybe something sweet and subdued in her manner that was so soothing to Marillier's irritated nerves. Up till now his mind had been full of the thoughts which all day had been torturing him. He had been longing for an Opportunity to talk with Rachel, and had yet dreaded it, not knowing what he should say, and fearful lest he might again disturb her serenity and the friendliness so dear and yet so hard to endure. Now, as he looked at her, his dread left him and he felt only the joy of knowing that she was securely bound to him. It was the first time that they had found themselves alone without a chance of interruption since they had started on their journey, except, indeed, when they had sat together upon the deck of the steamer, and then he had seen that she was not yet quite at ease with him, and had purposely gone from her side. But now that uneasiness seemed completely banished, and he had never seen her more apparently free from care.

As she glanced up at him suddenly she smiled a smile full of content. This was one of those days when her heart seemed to go out to him, reminding him of the sweet time of their courtship—that stolen courtship, as he acknowledged to himself that he must call it. Yes, stolen, perhaps, but how inexpressibly precious.

He put his hand out to her across the corner of the table, and she answered the unspoken petition with an impulsive gesture, laying her little left hand in his. The plain gold band shone on her finger—the only present he had ever given her. It was somewhat large, and slipped down over the slender joint. He pushed it caressingly up with his thumb.

'I must get you a guard for this,' he said, 'or you will be losing it. I wonder, my Rachel, which are the stones you like best? Diamonds seem to me too hard and flashing for you. I should like to give you sapphires; they seem to suit you better; the deepest, softest, most perfect sapphires that it is possible to procure. You will let me have my way, dearest, and humour my fancy?'

'I shall love your fancy, Caspar, whatever it may be. Choose for me as you please, but I may tell you that I am fonder of sapphires than of any other stones; and I shall be fonder still of them now that I know you like them best too.'

Her pretty submission and the smile which went with the words were like wine to him. He kissed the hand he held. Then, again fingering the marriage ring, he said,—'Perhaps I had better have this tightened; it is so much too large. I never thought of taking the size of your finger before I bought it. I thought of nothing but my wife to be.'

'Oh,' she cried ruefully, 'I couldn't have it tightened. You would have to take it away, and a married woman should never part with her ring. Besides, it is unlucky to have the ring altered after marriage. Nurse Dalison told me so.'

'Silly child, do you believe in such superstitions?'

She laughed, shaking her head.

'I don't believe in many superstitions. I am not even afraid of ghosts; at least—' she hesitated, and he fancied that her face changed. 'I should never be afraid of anything I could see.'

There was silence for a moment. Both thought that they could read the other's thought. Then she said, laughing once more, 'No, no, Caspar, I don't want to give up my ring, even to you; and even if it were to be only for a few hours. I *am* superstitious, I think, about that. The ring is the pledge of our union, and if I were to let it leave my finger I should feel that I might be opening the way for something to come and separate us.'

He gazed earnestly into her eyes. 'Then you have no regret, Rachel? It would be a sorrow to you if anything were to separate us?'

She gave him a surprised look full of love.

'Oh, Caspar, how can you ask that? Could I have become your wife if I had felt the least fear of regretting it?'

'My wife!' he said, his voice trembling. 'Yes—my wife, now and always.'

She was moved by the emotion in him; and, rising from her chair, came round to where he sat. She placed her arm round his neck and touched his forehead with her lips.

'I know what put that idea into your mind, Caspar, but you must never think such a thing of me.'

He drew the little caressing hand from his neck to his lips.

'My dear, I understand,' he said softly.

She bent again and kissed his forehead. Again there was a short silence, in which he was conscious of nothing but her nearness and the touch of her hand. Suddenly her mood changed. She went back to her seat; her fingers played absently with the Arab spoon she had been admiring, and her thoughts turned once more to the Eastern environment she found so attractive.

'Oh, I want to tell you,' she began. 'You can't think what a delightful discovery I made before coming down to dinner. Did you notice that the winding stair in the tower doesn't end at my room. It gets narrower and steeper and goes up a still higher flight. I don't know yet what is at the top, though I did mount up a little way. I couldn't help beginning to explore it when I saw the stair after I had dressed for dinner; it looked so tempting. But it was dark and dusty, and half way up, something brushed my shoulder—some flying thing—and I was frightened and turned back. Do you think it was a bat?'

'Most likely,' he answered absently, thinking less of her question than of her beauty and winning changefulness.

She laughed like a pleased child.

'If it was a bat, I am glad, though I am terribly afraid of bats. I must tell you about another superstition—don't scoff at my superstitions—that old Caulah told me. Caulah, you know, was my Arab nurse who took me over to the convent from Algiers. The nuns converted her and she became a lay sister, and died when I was about twelve years old. Do you care to hear?'

'Yes,' he answered. 'Tell me about Caulah's superstition.'

'This is what she said—when a bat wheels round an unmarried girl and brushes her shoulder, it means—', Rachel hesitated, and gave another girlish laugh, blushing slightly.

'Well, what does it mean?' he asked. 'Something very silly?'

'Yes, very silly. Caulah told me it meant that the girl would soon be united to the man of her heart.'

'I don't call that a silly superstition,' he said. 'My love I My love! I accept the omen, and am thankful for it.'

Her eyes fell before the ardent look he gave her.

'Dear,' she said, 'I told them to light up the tower. I thought it would be nice if we were to go and explore it. There is so much to explore in this delightful old castle of mine.'

He smiled.

‘What a child you are, my Rachel—such a lighthearted child, a baby with a new toy. It amuses and delights me to see each fresh phase of you. Well, does the château come up to your expectations? You have been in such high spirits all day, looking forward to it, that I was half afraid you might be disappointed. Are you satisfied with the Pacha’s gift?’

‘Oh, more than satisfied!’ she cried. ‘Caspar, do you know,’ she went on shyly, ‘I think that this might be made a charming home. Of course it would need a great deal of repair; but I fancy,’ and she gave him a little merry glance, ‘I really think that we should find immense pleasure in making it habitable, and that we might exist here very comfortably—you and I.’

He sprang up, delighted, and half kneeling by her chair, took her in his arms as any ordinary lover would naturally have done. The pall of tragedy seemed lifted. What a creature of moods she was, this sweet wife of his, and in each mood he loved her better. He was charmed to find that at every step they made in their intercourse there was more for him to discover in her. At first, greatly as she had attracted him, dearly as he had always loved her, he had not realised her many-sidedness. That was because he had almost always, in the old days, found her pensive, sad, and apparently timid. But he had seen how Rachel, face to face with a problem to be solved, a decision to be made, could prove herself strong and self-reliant. He knew now, too, how radiant a being was Rachel, joyous and content.

‘We will explore the whole castle, dearest,’ he said, ‘to-morrow.’

‘To-morrow!’ she repeated; ‘I have been thinking so much of to-morrow. That one day, Caspar, is to be our very own—our first and only day in our new borne. There must not be a single dull or sorrowful hour in it. It is to be a perfectly happy day, and oh! it will be all too short for what I mean to do. I want to go over my mother’s rooms—to try and understand her and the life she led. I want you to know her too. My poor mother!’ Rachel spoke the name as though it had grown sacred to her, and this was the case. Here, in the house where she had died, Rachel O’Hara seemed an ever-present reality to the daughter who until now had had so slight a knowledge of her. After a pause Rachel spoke more brightly.

‘But, Caspar, I don’t want to leave everything till to-morrow. I want you to explore the tower with me to-night. I will show you the winding stair; it goes up outside my room. Do let us start at once. You won’t mind? You are not too tired?’

She pulled his hand like an excited child, and drew him to the door, her eyes dancing.

‘Too tired! *I* am not tired. It is *you* who should be tired.’

‘Oh, I am quite rested and refreshed. I do want to invade the bats’ territory, for in spite of the pretty superstition, Caspar, I must confess that I am much more afraid of them than of ghosts, or rebel Arabs. I shouldn’t sleep comfortably if I thought a bat was flying round and could get into my room.’

‘We will certainly see,’ he answered. ‘I must make sure before you go to rest that you are safe from fright and disturbance. Come then, darling. Show me the way.’

They went like two children hand in hand through the disused lumber-room at the base of the tower and up the stone steps which were lighted by the glow from Rachel’s bedchamber streaming through its open door. Outside the door was a small platform, where beyond a dark little archway, the narrower flight of stairs led to the topmost floor. The ceilings of both the lumber-room and Rachel’s room were very lofty, and this low portal might easily have been overlooked. Rachel loosed his hand as they stood on the platform and went forward a few steps, peering up the gloomy stairway. Marillier lingered a moment, fascinated by the glimpse of that maiden chamber brightly lighted, the white bed, with her dainty dressing-gown upon it, set in

order, and the table glittering with her silver-backed brushes and the toilet bottles her maid had arranged in readiness. Marillier saw a sanctuary from which he was barred. Rachel called to him, her foot upon the stairs, her hand extended to him backward. He took it in his, and they mounted, she still leading him. The place was not quite dark, a feeble light from a lamp above, made a glimmering dusk, and through the loophole windows of the staircase, came the pale glow of a clear starlit night. There were no bats, but Rachel exclaimed as they entered the upper room that she had seen one flying out by a broken window. It was no wonder, they thought, that some panes were broken, for this room, looking up, seemed all window, the openings here being more numerous than below, wider in proportion, and curiously shaped, so that they narrowed considerably where they ended about two feet from the floor. The walls of the tower were immensely thick, making very deep embrasures, and these were filled in beneath several of the windows by a carved bench on which were tattered and mouldy cushions. Except a wooden chair, a very small tripod table, and a large telescope set on a pivot stand in the centre, the room was unfurnished. Over the telescope swung an old brass lamp, now corroded with verdigris, and with a metal shade almost black for want of cleaning. Evidently Armand had not considered it necessary to devote much time to this unused observatory.

There was one feature of this top storey of the tower distinguishing it from the others. It was smaller, for the battlemented summit contracted, leaving a projecting ledge with a parapet, which from the outside gave an appearance of machicolation. From one of the windows—that one in which most of the glass was broken—steps within and without, led to the balcony, which was wide enough for one person to stand upon, though the parapet made but an insecure barrier; it would have been a dangerous position for anyone who had not strong nerves.

Rachel, looking through the uncurtained window, could see the balcony plainly, and shuddered at the giddy chasm it overhung, from the blackness of which there only gleamed milky patches of the foaming torrent that ran along the bed of the gorge. Khâyal's rocky wall reared itself opposite, so close that the girl fancied she might almost, by stretching her arm, have touched the mountain side. She moved round from window to window, and the view changed as she went. From one, she looked down upon the courtyard of the castle, the great gates, and the lights of the town twinkling along the ridge; from another she saw the dim stretch of the Kabyle mountains extending inland, and on the northern side, the terraced garden lay immediately below, and beyond it, the widening Bahira. It was all beautiful, and unlike anything she had ever seen. Rachel thought again of her mother, wondering whether she had used this room, and whether in old days she had often gazed out upon the wonderful panorama upon which her daughter was gazing now. The girl wondered, too, if the telescope had been fixed for her mother's pleasure, or whether some scientific person had had it put up for purpose of study. She remembered that the Pacha used to know a great deal about astronomy, and concluded that he had gained some of his knowledge here. She remarked this to Marillier, who was watching her with yearning eyes, listening to her talk but scarcely answering it. Now she appealed to him to adjust the telescope so that she could look through it, and began to dust the smaller lens with her pocket-handkerchief. He lowered the instrument, and both fingered it, trying with no effect to arrange the focus to her vision. All the time he was acting mechanically, like a man possessed with some fixed idea. His mind was full of that horrible thought of the power of Caspar's spirit and of his own determination to fight and conquer the unnatural thing. He knew that he was on the verge of some supernatural region where anything was possible, and he was resolved to cross every boundary, if need were, in his battle with the invisible—if in this way only, he could free himself from his formless rival, and finally secure Rachel for his own.

Rachel! All was summed up in that word. She was his love, his wife. There ought to be no barrier between them. Yet, though they stood here, husband and wife, together and alone, he was oppressed by a sense of separateness, the consciousness of an intangible wall keeping them apart. As they bent over the telescope her dress touched him, the scent of a spray of orange blossom—Nurse Dalison's suggestive gift—which she wore at her neck, floated up intoxicatingly to his nostrils; a loose strand of her hair was blown by the breeze against his cheek; her fingers, brushing his, thrilled him; the sweetness of her voice maddened him. He trembled in every joint; there were drops of moisture on his brow which the cold night wind, coming through the broken panes, turned to ice, though it failed to lower the fever of his blood or soothe the rapid beat of his pulse. Yet this was not only the feverish throb of man's desire towards the woman of his choice, but the rack of uncertainty even at the moment which should have meant fruition. Moreover, to Marillier, Rachel was at once woman and saint. Though he longed for her with his flesh, he worshipped her also with his soul. But she had assured him that she could never regret the gift of herself into his keeping. When—why, should he not draw her to his breast—his lawful wife? Why not for them full and perfect union?

The stillness and beauty of the night were in accord with his mood, and their isolation in this lonely tower, with no sound to disturb their communings save the faint murmur rising from the native quarter of the town. High above the turmoil of everyday life, there were none to see them save the stars shining through the wide windows from the arc of blue infinity. Marillier was not an imaginative man, but he knew himself no more as the cold scientist of old, to whom romance had been a dead letter. Here, in this dreamland of love, Rachel and he were the only real things, earth at their feet, and open to them that immeasurable space of star-spangled ether. Oh! that they might float away—he and Rachel—far into that profound blue, to some Paradise star, where neither emperor nor other mundane power could divide them—where even the spirit of the dead dared not follow. If he and Rachel were spirits too, and met *that other* upon equal ground, Rachel would have the right to repudiate whichever she wished. She would know, and understand, and choose her mate.

A sudden joy filled Marillier's heart, for he knew that Rachel would choose himself. He knew that she loved him, Marillier, better than she had ever loved Caspar, and that though in the body of Caspar he had wooed her, it was the soul of Marillier which had taught her the meaning of love. He knew that were they three to stand confessed, the veil of flesh removed, Marillier, and not Caspar, would be her choice. By all the laws of true affinity she would be drawn to him, and in undying union they twain would be one. He felt that to this end, he could welcome even death for them both. Beyond it, might there not be greater happiness in store for them than any which this world could offer? For himself he would hail any change that made her irretrievably his. And to poor little Rachel, the sundering of mortal coils would be no great wrench. Life had not been so bounteous to her that she should cling to it. She had gone through much trouble, and he feared that there was more to come—trouble from which he would be powerless to shield her. -It might be well if, instead, they were to pass out of their material environment into a realm where no earthly limitations could affect them.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE COMBATANTS

While these thoughts passed through the mind of Marillier, he was standing behind Rachel as she bent over the telescope. He was gazing, not at her, but out into the night. A thin crescent moon was slowly rising, a virginal moon, suggestive of the girl, which seemed to be resting on the hump of Khâyal. While holding the tube of the telescope, her fingers, straying over it, touched his, and brought him back to the actual. His hand closed on hers, and, with an impulsive movement, carried it back, till it struck his left shoulder. She was drawn against his breast, not only by the strength of his arm, but by a yielding impulse in herself, and as her head fell upon his other shoulder, her face was turned upward to his, beaming with affection and trust. She did not speak, but only smiled, and he knew through every fibre of him that her whole being answered to his. He, too, was silent, watching the lamplight play upon her features and upon her brown hair, which, where the glow touched it, brightened into gold. But it seemed to him that her eyes reflected the starlight which streamed in a silvery bar through the window overlooking the Bahira. The pure radiance of her eyes and the sweetness of her smile brought heaven and earth together. His arm encircled her.

‘Beloved!’ he whispered. ‘Oh! my heart! It has been difficult to convince myself in these last days that you are really mine, pledged to me by your own will and word in a bond which no man can break. Have you realised this, my beloved? Do you rightly understand that you have given your sweet self to me, and that, all unworthy as I am, I may dare to claim my wife?’

She made no answer in words, but he felt the quickened beat of her heart, and a caressing pressure of her fingers where her hand fluttered about his neck. He bent his face to hers, and for a moment or an eternity—love knows not time—he entered Paradise. In very truth the walls of stone surrounding the pair might have melted away, and they two, conscious of nothing but each other, heart to heart, soul within soul, might have slipped out into that vast enfolding blue—the blended spirits a star-point in Infinity.

Rachel was the first to feel earth once more. She drew back with a maidenly movement; her arms, which had clasped him, not falling away, but slackening, her eyes still shining up into his with perfect confidence. He looked down upon her yearningly, yet not unsatisfied, for the after taste of that heavenly interchange gave him a sense of future fulfilment for which he had scarcely dared to hope.

Then suddenly from the vantage ground of Paradise he seemed to see Hell yawning. It was in Rachel’s eyes that he beheld it, for the radiance of them changed slowly into that fear-stricken expression he so well remembered. At first it was merely a startled look, but it deepened gradually into terror, her features stiffening, her lips agape and rigid, the soft hold of her arms tightening convulsively.

He recognised the signs. He knew that the unnameable presence had again invaded his sanctuary. The thought which had tormented him during the drive to Bab-el-Khâyalât flashed back now in a forcible determination to know the worst, to confront and defy his visionary foe. How could he be expected to relinquish Rachel after doing violence to his code of honour on her behalf and sinning against all the laws of righteousness to save her? *Was it to save her*, he suddenly reflected, or to possess her? No matter! This was no time for casuistic argument. One thing alone was certain. Neither to man nor to spirit would he now surrender Rachel.

He called to his aid all the mental energy of which he was capable. The Pacha's words recurred to him; that paradoxical utterance, 'The two supreme Forces . . . one omnipotent, the other subservient to it and yet its master—Love and Will. By the might of those Forces he had compelled to his service the occult power contained in the mandrake root;—that power should not be permitted to fail him. He would put forth his will and compel it again to serve him. This was the crisis, not of his own fate only, but of Rachel's fate as well. This was the hour in which for her sake, he, a mere mortal man, must wrestle with man who was not mortal.

He strained Rachel's now unyielding form wildly to his heart, so roughly that it seemed as though he had hurt her, for a faint cry escaped her lips. He entreated her pardon, yet, as he did so, embraced her still more violently, bending his face and trying to bring her lips to his. But the girl shrank unmistakably, throwing her head back and struggling like a bird with its capturer. Her feeble efforts touched the manliness in him; he loosed his hold, and she might have freed herself, but she in her turn was touched, and notwithstanding her shrinking, she let her arms still cling round him

'Caspar! . . . Oh! . . . Why? . . . Why?' she cried brokenly, in accents of mingled reproach and contrition. 'Caspar, I did not mean . . . You are not angry with me, Caspar?'

'Angry! Oh, beloved, forgive me,' he answered brokenly too, and stricken also by a momentary contrition, though he was aware of the imprisoned brute within him, and hated, while he was partly controlled by it. 'Forgive me,' he stammered again. 'But I love you—I love you—and you deny yourself to me.'

Again she shrank visibly. She, like him, though in a different fashion, was torn by contrary emotions, tenderness and the vague sense of outrage contending. Her look was that of a child frightened by a sudden blow from one it had trusted. The tears gathered, her lips quivered; her voice shook as she tried to speak. Then slowly, as if she wished not to vex him by a rebuff, she unwound her arms and tried to draw herself away. But he would not let her go. Under his eager eyes, her face changed again, the horror in it intensified. She was white as a statue and almost as rigid, until a shiver shook her from head to foot.

The consciousness that he himself was not at this moment influenced by the grave-like chill that had before unnerved him, gave him unwonted courage~ His own exemption made another man of him. No more of those dream-like fancies about dying and floating away to some star in space. The world was what he wanted. Life was what he desired—life and the stir and power and passion of it. These were the things he hungered for—that he meant to seize and enjoy. And life and love were thrilling him now. He was warm—he had a feeling of new and lusty vitality, and an almost devilish sense of triumph. He could reason to himself and plan with extraordinary wile how to deal with Rachel's terror. He would treat it as feminine weakness. He would be kind, but she must see that he was her master; he would show her how foolish it was to suppose that a husband would submit to be kept at arm's length as her hysterical whim dictated. Women always gave in at the imputation of hysteria—that was the line he would take.

He dropped his arms, releasing her, and moving a step from her, remarked,—

'My sweet one, you will permit me to suggest that it is scarcely fair to put a man of flesh and blood through an ordeal which would have sorely tried Saint Anthony.'

At the mocking ring in his voice, the light laugh, the characteristic shake of his shoulders, Rachel shuddered, and her eyes shot at him a startled, apprehensive gleam. Her memory had leaped months and gone back to the day before the Pacha's funeral, when, in such a tone of sugared cynicism, with the same look, the same shrug, Caspar had suggested the postponement of their marriage and had asked her to go with him to Paris. She had only dimly guessed his

meaning then; later she had understood it better; but the change in him following upon the accident, and, as she believed, the shock of Lucien Marillier's death, and which she had attributed to both those causes, drove the suspicion from her mind, so that in her new confidence she had quite forgotten her former doubts. Now the scene in the drawing-room of the Embassy interrupted by Marillier's entrance, came back to her, illuminated by a dreadful light, and she seemed to see again standing before her that former Caspar, the man whom in certain of his moods she had so feared, and no longer the new Caspar, to whom she had so unquestioningly given herself, and who had so completely won her love and her reverence. The feeling of revulsion was almost more than she could bear. Her head drooped; she grew faint and dizzy. His voice sounded far away as he went on, still in the same jarring manner,—

'You are adorable in every mood, my love—always my sweet tropic flower who charms and bewilders and bewitches me. Yet I must own that I find this mood of yours strange, and not altogether to my taste. It savours somewhat of hysteria, sweet one, and you know I do not like hysterical women. I am distressed to see you giving way to that senseless fear which took possession of you after my illness, and has more than once made us both miserable. My own nerves, I confess, were a little to blame; but you see that now I can laugh at such morbid fancies. What is it you are trembling at? Nothing. You remember there *was* nothing; there *is* nothing. Look up. See! We are alone. There is not even a bat to be frightened of.'

His laugh rang shrilly, defiantly, and seemed to be taken up and to echo in the stillness of the tower. But obedient to his command, she raised her eyes and straightened herself, struggling pitifully for composure. She was trembling still. He stretched out his hands to her. 'Come,' he said, 'I promise you that I will be the most humble wooer who ever sighed at the feet of a nun. Come to me and let me soothe away those childish fears.'

She swayed towards him, but, as though repelled by something stronger than herself, fell back, clinging to the stand of the telescope, and shook her head.

'Caspar . . . I . . . I cannot. . . I . . . I . . . ' Her voice ended in a dry quaver more pathetic than a burst of tears. She threw her hands over her face, struggling with each tremor that seized her.

'What is it that you are afraid of?' he said, speaking with a lightness that was forced, for his own determination was weakening, and he had become sensible of that deathly chill creeping upward to his heart. He braced himself in desperate resistance. Was he not fighting for her salvation even more than for his own? He gained strength with the idea of protecting her, and the savage impulse died momentarily down, only to rise again in greater force and cunning. He felt in a sub-conscious way that a battle was waging in his breast, and that his own being held two separate individualities engaged in mortal conflict. And now the scale of victory turned in favour of the base rather than the noble combatant within him. It was again in the bantering self-assured manner of Ruel Bey that he addressed her.

'Foolish child! I assure you that this is some hobgoblin fancy which has lodged in your pretty head. Let me drive it out, as I wanted to, with kisses. Why do you shrink? You believe in me; you trust me. There is nothing to fear. *I* am with you, your lover, your husband.'

'Caspar!' The word, uttered scarcely audibly from behind the screen of her hands, seemed half appeal, half interrogation.

'Yes, Caspar, *your* Caspar, who has never ceased to worship you. Come to me, my love.'

She did not answer, did not stir to meet his entreating arms. Her face was still hidden. He tried to draw down her hands. She resisted feebly, but presently he succeeded, and the brown eyes flashed up at him a glance of terrified questioning. Then with all her strength, she suddenly pulled herself away, making a barricade of the telescope, which swung round beneath her

weight. He saw plainly that there was something in him which roused her alarm and distrust, and he did not know whether it was pain or anger that for a moment choked him. But determined to maintain his attitude, he recovered himself, and asked in a hard, quiet voice,—

‘Don’t you know me, Rachel?’

She stared bewilderedly, and made a faint negative gesture.

‘You *don’t* know me! Rachel, what do you mean?’

He put his hands upon her shoulders, holding her firmly, and he could tell from the way she cowered that his touch struck like ice. He repeated his question more imperatively, and she tried to answer but could not.

‘Rachel!’ he said harshly, ‘this is hysteria, neither more nor less, and as a disease it must be dealt with and conquered. Reason by your own common sense. You must know that this sort of thing cannot go on; it is destroying our married life at the outset. You say you love me—you have given yourself to me, yet you act in this manner. Remember your duty and the vows you have made. You are my wife, bound to me by both the civil and human law. Is my wife always to shrink from her husband as you shrink from me now?’

He stopped. His words and manner were, he could see, taking effect. Again she made that struggle for composure which was so pitiful. She gave him a quickly-averted glance; it was as though she dared not look lest her courage should fail.

‘I must remember my duty,’ she murmured in the tone of a child repeating a lesson, and advancing, put her hands in his.

‘I know that you are my husband, Caspar, and that my vows are binding. And it isn’t—’ she faltered. ‘I love you . . . I thought I loved you . . . dearly . . . dearly. But . . . I am . . . I . . .’ The whisper died.

‘Look at me, Rachel, look at me.’

Again she lifted her eyes. Again he saw the horror kindled in them. Again she tried to withdraw her hands, but he would not let her go.

‘What is it that you see in me which makes you shrink and refuse to look at me?’ he asked masterfully. ‘Tell me, Rachel. What is it in me that frightens you so?’

She was like a bird caught in a snare from which there is no escape. Her eyes roved wildly round the little room, and out into the starlit blue beyond. Something of the same fantastic longing which had been in his mind a little while before, filled her now. Oh, for freedom—flight into space with the loosed soul of the man she loved—the *real* man only discovered lately—simple, high-minded, considerate, gentle; the unexacting lover whose very diffidence had compelled her almost to offer herself; who, during all these weeks since that time of illness, had been her reverential slave, not till now, her tyrant. How unlike in many ways was this later lover to the former Caspar who had won her heart in the early days when she had come, a shy, inexperienced girl, to the Embassy. She remembered points of character in that Caspar—a certain selfishness, worldliness, cynicism, a boldness of caresses which had jarred and would have affronted her but for her natural loyalty. All this she had been slowly realising, though at the time she would not have admitted it to herself what joy it had been to see the change which bodily weakness and the memory of Lucien Marillier had wrought. How, in his new and more timid wooing, this Caspar had become the rival of his former self, binding her to him by a closer bond than had ever before existed. What safety she had felt in his all-embracing tenderness! How she had been moved by his unselfish thought for her—his willingness to imperil, even to sacrifice, his career for her sake! And now where had he gone—this true-hearted, noble husband to whom she had promised wifely duty and love? *This* was not he—this man standing before her,

with the hard, smiling lips, the cruel, amused, yet sensuous eyes. Nor was this quite the old Caspar, but an evil likeness of him in his worst mood intensified—his worst mood without the redeeming qualities with which her fancy had invested him, without the sanctifying halo cast by an ignorant girl's confiding affection. A sickening despair came over Rachel. Dared she look again? Fascinated, as some hapless prey beneath the charm of the snake, she turned her head and lifted those pathetic brown eyes, mutely pleading for grace. And that look cowed the demon. Marillier answered it.

'Darling! It is agony to see that you shrink from me. Oh, Rachel! my saint, my beloved, is it possible that you can be afraid of *me*?'

As he spoke in accents of deep sorrow, it seemed to her that the mask of his features changed, that the burning gaze softened, and that for a few seconds the old tender love looked out once more. Her trust welled up. She would tell him all, and rely upon his kindness which in the recent past had never failed her.

'Yes,' she replied timidly, like a culprit confessing a fault. 'Yes, Caspar, it *is* true that I feel afraid of you.'

'Afraid of *me*!' he repeated, wounded to the quick, but with the gentleness she knew. There was a pause, during which the eyes of each were fixed upon the other. And now Rachel saw again the strange transformation take place, the remorseful expression change into one of almost malevolent arrogance. It was Caspar's ironical laugh which rang from the lips of her lover, and as he bent greedily forward to snatch a kiss, she quailed and retreated sharply, crouching against the wall of the room like a hunted creature at bay.

'I *am* afraid of you,' she cried, the sentences coming jerkily while she put out her hands as if to shield herself. 'I have never known you like this. You make me dread you. It's as though an evil spirit had come into you. Caspar, what does it mean? Tell me why you are so different?'

'*So different!* Dear, *am* I different?'

The frenzy in him had subsided. He looked stricken. A horrible fear had leaped up at her words, and it held the fiend in check. Was this thing true that she had said? In his foreboding of supernatural possibilities, this one had not occurred to him—this, the most terrible, the most likely, as he now felt it to be. She had said that it seemed as though an evil spirit was come into him, and truly he realised that he had not been himself, that he had been dominated by something alien, brutal, capable of actions, at which, in saner mood, he would shudder. And he had the sense of holding those fierce impulses only in leash. At any provocation they might spring up and throttle all that was noble and compassionate in his love for the woman before him. That evil from which he had tried to save her by the sin he had committed, was now lodged in himself and threatening to destroy her. His mind, working on scientific lines, grasped the hideous fact that with the body of Caspar he had taken over the man's physical temperament, and had thus established a link with the houseless spirit, and opened a door by which it might again enter. Desire of Rachel, denied but unquenched, was the attraction earthward of that Wandering One. Purified though that desire had become in himself, Marillier understood that when nearing fruition it might supply the fire needed by the dead man's spirit to re-vitalise itself. Was this the explanation of that grave-cold presence whenever as a lover he, Marillier, approached Rachel? And now that he had conquered all earthly barriers to their union, had the soul of his dead rival taken possession of the body from which it had been unjustly driven, with the malignant intention to deprive him of his stolen happiness; with—oh horrible!—the purpose of vicariously enjoying it? That could not be—that *should* not be. Better to renounce Rachel for ever in this life, better even to kill her than that she should suffer such desecration. He advanced a step, but

seeing the girl blench and quiver at his approach, he went back and remained motionless, his hand resting on the tube of the telescope as the lamplight fell upon him, a grim, central figure in the setting of that lonely tower room with the encirclement of mountains and sky beyond.

As he stood arrested in this attitude, the head a little forward, the frame inclining back, he was himself intensely conscious of the warring of two souls in his breast, the raging fiend which would have sprung forward and clasped the girl, willing or unwilling, in his arms, and the real self of him that yearned to the poor victim with an ineffable pity and tenderness. The man felt that by all the laws of righteousness this real self should gain the victory. But how? In battle, or in renunciation.

The quickened intuition of Marillier's soul told him that his own love, single-pointed and pure as human love can be, must be more powerful in essence than that of Caspar, in which ambition had dominated even passion. And so it proved. The battle was verily to the strong, and the God in man worsted the demon. In that combat of souls the former master of that fleshly tenement was beaten, and for the hour, at least, Marillier, the usurping occupant, held the citadel.

It could only have been during a minute or two that the death struggle lasted, but to Marillier it seemed an eternity. Great drops stood out upon his forehead when the crisis was passed, and the hand which had merely rested upon the telescope when spirits, not bodies, fought, now clung to it for support, as, shaken to the core, the man staggered like one fainting or drunken, and would have fallen but for that prop. Then, grasping the situation, spiritual and material, in one flash, as the drowning man before the final wave overwhelms him, sees in an instant the whole of his past life spread before him, Marillier realised that the only end to his futile striving for the winning of his heart's desire must be—*renouncement*.

He turned away from sight of that girlish form and sweet face which had been his intensest joy and his most poignant pain, and, flinging his arms over the tube of the instrument, dropped his head upon them and sobbed like a child.

Rachel watched him as she still cowered against the wall, terror giving place in her to pity, pity to self-reproach, and self-reproach to the womanlike longing to atone for the sorrow she had caused. She waited, but he gave no sign. Then she went hesitatingly towards him. She thought he would have heard her footfall on the bare floor, but he seemed too absorbed in his grief, for, even when she stood behind him, he did not turn or lift his head. She laid her hand upon his bent shoulder, and it went to her heart to feel the twitching of his body, and to bear the sobs which shook him.

'Caspar!' she said. Her voice was very low, but, only yesterday, she thought, he would have responded to her faintest murmur. Now he might have been deaf. And yet she was relieved to see that he did not turn and take her in his arms, as she had half feared.

'Caspar,' she said again, and, bending more closely over him, drew her hand softly from his shoulder to his neck, 'I cannot bear to see you so unhappy. . . . *Husband—*'

At the whispered word he winced. Memory stabbed him with it, and he made a movement of withdrawal from her touch. Yes, he was her husband, and, notwithstanding, he had no right to the name, no right to kiss the sweet lips which faltered words of puzzlement and fear, and hope and love.

'Oh! forgive me. I did not mean to hurt you. I don't understand why you made me afraid. I could never fear you if you were always as I know you best and love you to be—dear and good and kind. But sometimes there comes a sudden strange look into your face, and your manner changes—and your voice. It chills and frightens me, and I cannot bear it . . . I cannot bear it.'

Caspar, you won't let yourself be like that again? It will come right, won't it, and we shall be happy once more?'

He lifted his head and looked at her, his face very grave, the mouth twitching slightly, the eyes intensely tender, but sad as the eyes of one who has looked on death.

'Yes,' he said quietly, 'it will come right, Rachel.

It *must* come right. I hope, I pray, I believe, that you will be happy again.'

It deepened her remorse that he should say 'you,' not 'we.'

'I am not caring about myself only,' she answered. 'Do you think I don't know how ill you have been? That is the cause of this trouble. I was foolish and unkind not to remember it sooner. You will get better, and by-and-by—I hope very soon—to-night will seem to us like a bad dream.'

'Yes,' he said again in the same quiet tone, 'by-and-by, Rachel, to-night will seem to you like a bad dream.'

Again the exclusion of himself wrung her heart.

'Say you forgive me, Caspar. Tell me that you know I didn't mean to hurt you. I am so miserable at the thought of it. Only say that you forgive me.'

He took her hands in his and answered solemnly,—

'My dear, I know that there has been no thought in your heart about me not wholly true and tender. I deserve your pity—grant it to me. But there is nothing for me to forgive. If there were, I would forgive it absolutely, but there is not, It is I who from the depths of my soul ask pardon of you, my saint—my angel—love.

Deeply moved, she held his hands against her bosom.

'Won't you—won't you kiss me, Caspar?'

He withdrew his hands and gently placed them upon her head as though in benediction; then he bent down and reverentially kissed her forehead.

'May Heaven bless and protect you, my beloved.'

She broke down completely, and with her head upon his shoulder wept the first natural tears she had shed that evening. He soothed her as her mother might have done.

'Dear child, you are tired and overwrought, and I must again be your doctor and prescribe bromide to ensure you a good night's sleep. Come, you are shivering still, and no wonder, for the wind is very cold; and, though we are in Algeria, remember it is winter. Let me take you down to your room and I will send your maid to you. To-morrow morning you will be your bright, happy self again.'

Reassured by his manner, she laughed tremulously, and they went down the stairs together.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### IN THE SANCTUARY

It was Marillier this time who walked first, leading her by the hand down the steep steps. On the landing outside her room he was about to leave her, but at that moment the maid appeared in the lighted doorway, and inquired if her mistress would now retire.

'Presently, Christine—wait for me.'

The maid re-entered, half closing the door.

You will not forget my prescription,' he said.

‘But I have no bromide. Nurse Dalison keeps it, and I should not like to disturb her. Besides she—’ Rachel hesitated. ‘She would not understand.’

‘True,’ he answered, ‘and it would be a pity to disturb her. I will mix the draught myself—I have a medicine chest with me—and will bring it up presently and give it to Christine for you. Don’t be nervous, my child. I know something of drugs, and you may take my word that it will make you sleep peacefully.’

He left her, and she listened to his footstep as it sounded on the stone stair, then went into her chamber and bade Christine hasten with her preparations for the night.

The maid was a sensible and sympathetic girl. She saw that her lady was tired and a little excited, and to Christine this seemed quite natural and attributable to the effect of her surroundings. This strange old château in which, as was already known among the little suite, mademoiselle’s—or ‘madame’s’—mother had died, and the odd life at the Embassy, the engagement to Ruel Bey—the hurried marriage, which, though ostensibly a secret, was none from the personal attendants of the two concerned—the mandate of the Emperor of Abaria—a portentous power in the background which conjured up in Christine’s mind visions of Eastern atrocities, fierce Moslems and the bowstring—all this had been somewhat upsetting to the simple Provençal maid.

‘*Ça me donne sur les nerfs,*’ she had complained pathetically to the valet of Ruel Bey. What wonder then that her mistress’s nerves should be strained almost to breaking.

So she asked no questions beyond the range of her duty, and made no comments except that it was evident that mademoiselle was fatigued and not equal to a serious hair brushing, which could be better done in the morning. So the brown coils were merely unbound, and presently Rachel was nestling in bed, and Christine with a ‘*Bonne nuit, mademoiselle,*’ had departed, no word having been said by Rachel to retain her.

Meanwhile Marillier, in his own room below, had first sent away his man who was waiting there, and then unlocked a small medicine chest he always carried in his travels, though he had been careful not to entrust the key of it to the valet who had been Ruel Bey’s servant, and who might have wondered at so unusual an adjunct to his master’s luggage. It took Marillier a little while to weigh the powders and prepare the draught, for in the confusion of his mental faculties he had need to be specially careful and deliberate in mixing the ingredients. The dose was more complicated than he had led Rachel to suppose, and he made it as strong as might be to guard against any failure in its action.

At last it was ready, and he carried it up the tower stairs to Rachel’s room.

The door was ajar, and he waited in the opening, expecting the maid to come and take the draught. But there was no sound of movement within, and he knocked softly. Rachel’s voice replied,—

‘Won’t you come in and give it to me? Christine has gone.’

The man braced himself and crossed the threshold of that sanctuary which conscience had forbidden him to enter. But it was with no thrill of happy anticipation such as he had dreamed of lately. He walked across the room as a doctor might have done, bidden to the bedside of a patient, and went straight up to the bed, the glass containing the opiate in his hand. Rachel was lying raised upon the pillows, a soft flush upon her cheek, the brown hair a disordered mass around her. She put out her hand for the medicine and he gave it to her, bidding her swallow it slowly, and not mind if it tasted bitter.

She looked at the draught before putting it to her lips. Her agitation had subsided; she was quiet and gravely sweet, the old childlike trust in her eyes as she lifted them to his face.

‘Is this my magic potion?’ she asked with a smile, and drank it as he had directed.

‘It *is* bitter,’ she said between the gulps, ‘not quite like Nurse Dalison’s bromide. But I am sure that you know what is best for me. You do sometimes seem to me half a doctor, Caspar.’

‘Do I? This will make you sleep, dear, perhaps better than the bromide.’ He took the glass and put it on the table beside her where a candle in a quaint brass candlestick was burning.

‘Does this worry you? Shall I put it out?’

‘Yes. There’s a night-light, and there’s the fire.’

He covered the wick with the extinguisher. The room seemed now filled with shadows cast by the dim flame of the night-lamp and the flickering firelight. He was turning to go.

‘Good-night, my dear. You are quite safe now.’

But she put out her hand and took his.

‘Won’t you stay a minute or two? I think I shall go to sleep sooner if you do.’

He was standing by the bedside looking down upon her. His fingers, clasping her hand, strayed with professional instinct to her pulse, and its quick fluttering told him that she still needed calming.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘But you must not talk. I will sit beside you until you go to sleep, if you will close your eyes and compose yourself’

He took a low chair beside the bed, and obedient as a child she turned upon the pillow, her face towards him; and, still holding his hand, closed her eyes. Her confidence brought home to him the truth that her dread had been due, not to his own nature, but to the spirit that warred with it. Could he, as Lucien Marillier, have won her love, this was the heavenly trust his wife would have given him. He had seen an hour since, in the tower, what she would have become as the wife of Caspar Ruel.

He sat by her side in the dimness and stillness of the room, his left hand in hers, his right shading his brow as he gazed upon her tranquil face—tranquil because she again knew herself to be safe in his care. Wild thoughts rose, but were not given rest in his mind. He would not permit himself to think of the place and the hour, of the fact that there was scarcely a soul stirring in the château, and that he was here alone, admitted for the first time into his wife’s chamber—his wife, yet never to be his wife. He dared not dwell upon the unfamiliar charm of the room. He dared only look upon her pure face, which anchored him to his righteous resolution. The atmosphere, which seemed especially her own, soothed his nerves; the sense that he was on holy ground steadied his tumultuous fancies.

Presently he tried to draw his hand from Rachel’s, thinking she was asleep, but instantly her fingers closed round his.

‘Don’t go yet,’ she murmured drowsily. ‘I shall be kept awake if you leave me.’

‘No, my dear,’ he answered. ‘I said that I would stay with you till you were asleep, and I will not leave you until then.’

She lifted his hand, and he felt her lips upon it as she folded it between her own upon her breast. His simple words, the assurance that he would do as he had promised, satisfied her completely, and she settled peacefully into slumber. When her deep regular breathing made him certain of this, he slipped his hand carefully from within hers, and stood for a minute or two beside the bed, taking his last look at her as his wife—a yearning, compassionate look of farewell.

As she lay back, pure and pale, for the flush had died down, the brown eyelashes showing a dusky line upon her cheek, the lips slightly parted, a gleam of white between the red curves, her

hands crossed on the girlish bosom, she might, he thought, have been the model of some pictured saint. He stooped, pressed one kiss upon the coverlet, and softly crept away.

He passed down the stair and through the lower room and the *salon* where they had dined. Here one lamp was burning, making eccentric shadows round the chairs and the carved bosses on the ceiling and door frames. The place was deserted, yet it seemed to his excited fancy full of invisible presences—ghosts of the dead men and women who had lived and loved and suffered within these walls. As he himself moved noiselessly over the thick carpet, he might himself have been one of the ghosts with which his imagination peopled the building. He walked slowly, like a man in a somnambulistic state, yet his brain felt curiously, painfully active. The creaking of a great oak press when he passed it, struck his ear ominously. As he went by the door of Nurse Dalison's room, he could tell by her breathing that she lay wrapped in slumber. The duties of the day over, the somewhat perfunctory sympathy given forth, she might now, he thought, with a touch of humour, permit herself a natural self-absorption and dream her own dreams of happiness and good fortune, unaffected by wraiths of the past or tragedies of the present.

Marillier, on going up with Rachel's potion, had left the door of his room ajar and a light burning on the table. He entered now, carefully closing the door behind him. Advancing to the middle of the room, he stood motionless, his arms lifted and his fingers tightly pressed upon his temples. Here, in the solitude of his chamber, the dream mask fell from him, and he understood the world, life, himself, the grim tangle of his situation as they were in reality. So overpowering was the revelation that at first he could not steady his senses, and the room seemed to be rocking beneath him. He had the feeling of standing deserted upon a battlefield whereon his dearest had fallen, the fight over, and the outside world left desolate for him, to be faced with maimed limbs and a bleeding heart. He thought of the dead Pacha, of whose phantom presence he had seemed to be conscious on the tower stair and in the empty dining-hall, and wished that it might be possible for him to hold converse with Isàdas in this strait for which the old man was partly responsible. Only it was not so much for the Ambassador, the cynical *roué*, that he longed, but for Count Varenzi, the middle-aged man with the young heart, whom Armand had described, and who had buried his romance in Rachel O'Hara's grave.

Varenzi had slept in this very room, had lain in that great funereally-draped bed, had risen from it in his agony of despair to wander forth into the mountains where he had found the mandrake, and had then ceased to be Varenzi. The youth, the humanity, the capacity to love of Varenzi, had been lost, absorbed into that devilish root, and by some extraordinary metamorphosis Isàdas Pacha had flourished in his stead. There was not even a ghost of Varenzi to return to his former dwelling, which seemed in truth to resemble a mausoleum of dead hopes.

And for the Pacha—could his spirit revisit the place which had known his earlier self, his was not the aid which could succour Marillier now. What sympathy could Isàdas have with such emotions as were racking Marillier's soul?

The man's thoughts went back to those talks with the dying Ambassador, which had so impressed him. He seemed to hear again the trenchant tones in their fitful force, as the voice of one speaking from heights, only to be climbed by rugged steps of pain—heights whence the Promised Land of spiritual knowledge might be viewed. The Pacha had not seen that promised land, for his eyes were darkened. Though he had called man a demi-god, he had believed and had realised it himself, that man's opportunities are limited by time, that finality is shown in all things manifested, and that Death is lord of the universe.

But Marillier had learned that there was no such thing as death. There lay the Beyond, unknown, untrodden, but an absolute reality. And in face of this reality, the Pacha's philosophy

remained incomplete. Yet certain words of his rang in his ears, like those of some seer of olden time commissioned to deliver truths which he had himself hardly grasped. . . 'If I had known a few years sooner all that I now know of the forces in Man and Nature, I would have concentrated my vital energy, not upon my desire, but upon the cultivation of will-strength, by which I might have everlastingly secured it. Had I conquered my own weakness, and turned love from my tyrant to my slave . . . I might have drunk of immortality. . . . In subordinating Desire to Will I should have gained both, and the fleshly union would have become the eternal blending of spirit.'

Marillier felt that he had fatally missed the spiritual meaning of the old man's saying. The Pacha had spoken of human opportunities, and had conveyed that opportunity, according to a law of Nature, is always offered to those on the verge of knowledge; offered—but perchance only once. If the opportunity be not rightly used, it may never be permitted to return. The just Arbiter of human destinies had granted him his opportunity. The fact that he had been able to project his will with force sufficient to accomplish a seeming miracle, showed that he had been ripe for the giving. But—How had he acquitted himself? Had he passed unscathed through the temptation. Had selfless motive conquered, or had personal desire proved the strongest?

His conscience answered.

How then to win again that which had been lost? How to gain, in that dim and distant Beyond, the joy he was now compelled to forego? How to act so that the awful responsibility he had taken upon himself should be faithfully discharged—that atonement might be made to the wandering spirit unrighteously banished, and that the woman whose life was in his keeping might be held inviolate, and yet spared the anguish of a double disillusionment?

It was a problem that baffled him. At this moment the man felt there could be no hope for him in the material or the spiritual world. He must run his course alone, unadvised and unassisted. Alone, he must decide his future path, and alone must he traverse its dreary length. There was only one decision; there could be only one road, and the name of its goal had been ringing in his ears since he had left the tower—*renunciation*.

He did not know how he should reach this goal. The battle itself had seemed less difficult, for, though lost, he knew it won. He had, as it were, sacrificed his life that he might gain his soul. The material crown of the conqueror was not the thing he coveted. In defeat lay his hope of lasting victory, and this victory for himself meant safety for Rachel. Whatever came, he must always protect her. He was determined, if it were best for her, to acknowledge her outwardly as his wife. This he would do; he would not play the coward; but to attempt again the ratification of the bond—that he would not. Henceforth, till their lives' end, Rachel should be sacred to him as a cloistered nun; and surely in that sanctity would be his best chance of preserving to her the tender friend, the considerate guardian, who had won her affection, and whom she so sorely needed.

A great temptation assailed him to fling down all disguises and own himself to the world, to the Emperor, to Rachel, as a thief and impostor. He knew that there would be immense relief for him in such casting away of sham, and he felt, too, that this might be a surer way than any other of counteracting the dead Caspar's evil designs. But to this, there came the objection that in so doing he would deprive the woman he loved of her only protector.

Then his thought moved slowly, painfully, along to a conclusion. The world could never know the truth—for one thing, it would be incapable of understanding it. The garment of flesh he had stolen must be worn while he lived, in silence and in shame. Never could he stand honestly confessed before his fellow-men. But Rachel? Need he abide beside her always an impostor—a

husband, yet no husband, with the choice, as years went on, of losing even her confidence through the false position in which he must stand, or else of incurring her hatred, perhaps of goading her to self-destruction by the recurrence of such a scene as that which they had gone through in the tower? Would it not be better, kinder, to tell her all, and let her decide for herself whether or not she would leave him and throw herself upon the protection of her father—though in that case it might be to rush on the fate from which her mother had wished to save her. For who could say what might be the Emperor's will concerning her, or what change in the character of Abdullulah Zobeir years of despotism might have wrought?

So, balancing possibilities dare he tell her? It was not the pain to himself which his confession would cause that troubled him, but the effect on her. Then the warm realisation of her love, not for the man Caspar Ruel, but for the man Lucien Marillier, flooded his being, and brought the sustaining belief that *she* would understand though the world would not, that she would forgive and trust him still, and that therein might lie the solution of that problem of the future which was so perplexing him. And were she to turn from him in scorn and indignation for the wrong he had committed, that, too, would be a solution, and he would bear his punishment. Yes, the conviction was strengthening in his mind to certainty—Rachel ought to know: it was her right to know. The more was it her due because he felt her to be a part of himself, the innermost core of his heart, the half of his soul. This had been borne in upon him when they had stood breast to breast in the little tower room—when he had dreamed of speeding with her to some heavenly star, the two beings blended in blissful unity.

But how could he have imagined that either ethereal or material oneness would have been possible with that unacknowledged deception between them? Falsity! Falsity! He had been false all through. False to his cousin; false to his trust; false to his love; false to himself. The remembrance of that brief touch with the girl's pure soul seemed as a star within him, a tiny reflex of supreme truth shining faintly on the first steps of the path that he must tread. Though it should lead him by thorn-strewn ways that he knew not, and though it should even separate him from Rachel, he would hesitate no longer.

From the instant that Marillier arrived at this decision he felt himself strong for action. All this time he had been standing in the same position, his head bent, his finger-tips pressed tightly upon his temples. Presently he straightened himself, his hands dropped, and his eyes wandered round the room. They fell upon the gold box in its case which he had brought from his house in Harley Street. He had not been thinking of the mandrake; now it seized his mind. He walked up to the box, full of intense revulsion. He would be rid of the accursed thing, whose magic had turned the pure-hearted Varenzi into a cynical voluptuary, and himself into—yes, he must say it—a murderer. He put his hand out with the intention of opening the box so that he might look once more at the root before destroying it. He scarcely knew how he should make away with it. His impulse had been to burn it, tear it in pieces, throw it into the torrent at the foot of the cliff, but, as his hand rested on the case, a new intention formed itself. Renouncement meant little unless it included restitution. For a wrong had been done to the mandrake also, and though he himself had not sinned against the poor embryonic creature in dragging it from its kindred and its native soil, it might be that he was sinning now in not restoring it. He determined that he would replace the root.

It was hardly possible that he could discover the exact spot of ground from which it had been torn, but perhaps on one of the spurs of Khayal he might find some soil in which it would again flourish. He sat down and tried with a great effort of memory to recall the exact words in which Isãdas had described his wanderings and the place where he had plucked the mandrake. Marillier

hoped that he might thus gain some clue which would aid him in performing his pious duty to the insane root.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### THE HAREM WING

It was late the next morning when Rachel awoke, calm, and refreshed by sleep, and with the terrors of the previous evening partially effaced from her mind by the remembrance of her lover's later care for her, which had pleasantly haunted her dreams. A glow of sunshine filled the room, and, as she lay musing, the fresh mountain breeze blew in through an open window and shook the tattered curtains of striped Algerian stuff. Sounds came up faintly from below, among them a strange melodious cry which she had heard at sunset the day before, and which she had been told was the muezzin's call from the distant mosque. By some incongruous association she was reminded of the Angelus at the convent, when she was simple Rachel Isàdas, knowing nothing of what the future might bring her. Thence, her thoughts turned to the man whom she had supposed to be her only relative, apparently so devoid of human sympathies, yet in reality seared by sorrow, a perpetual mourner for the woman he had so madly loved. Her heart softened as she remembered that poor mother of whom she was to learn more to-day than she had ever known. Together, she and Caspar would examine her mother's rooms, finding out what had been the dead woman's tastes and occupations from the relics she had left, and which the Pacha had guarded so jealously, though he himself had been unable to bear the sight of them. Rachel fancied that they might enable her to realise better that she had never been Rachel Isàdas at all, but that she was the daughter of Rachel O'Hara and the Emperor of Abaria. The girl gave a little shudder. She felt thankful that she was married, so that even the Emperor could not take her away from her husband's protection. How truly protecting he had shown himself last night, patiently soothing her silly fears. The chair was beside her bed in which he had sat, and she blushed rosily at sight of it, remembering how peacefully she had gone to sleep at last, with her hand in his. It was almost impossible to believe that she had shrunk at his touch only a little while before. The girl nearly persuaded herself that the impression she retained of that interview in the tower room, was the result of nightmare, so buoyant and healthful was her waking state. Had she then in truth been a little hysterical the night before? She knew that for some time she had felt ill-balanced and emotional. No doubt her over-strained fancy had exaggerated a mere passing mood in him, and, verily, was not the old tower weird enough to account for any kind of nerve-excitation! Certainly she had been foolish, carried beyond herself, quite capable of any absurdity. When she remembered his sobbing fit, how completely he had been upset, and his extreme gentleness and ready forgiveness of her contrariety, she blamed herself bitterly. To-day she would atone for her unkindness as far as she was able. Nothing should spoil their happiness. She would show him that she was resolved to forget that painful scene, and help him to do so too. Meanwhile, she would get up; it must be late. Christine had evidently been at work, for the fire was alight and the bath put ready. Rachel looked at her watch. At that moment the door opened, and Christine appeared with her mistress's breakfast, and there were exclamations and congratulations on mademoiselle's good night and improved looks.

'I must dress quickly, Christine,' Rachel said. 'There is a great deal to do to-day in looking over the castle, and Ruel Bey will be waiting.'

‘Ah! but does not mademoiselle know that Ruel Bey went out early this morning before anyone else was astir. There is a letter on the tray which he left for mademoiselle.’

Rachel’s face changed with surprise and disappointment. She tore open the letter, which was only a short one, written hurriedly.

‘MY DEAREST,—I am obliged to leave you for a few hours on business connected with a bequest to me from the Pacha. The matter is imperative, and may detain me till evening. I grieve that we cannot spend this day together as you planned. Forgive me and try to be happy in your researches. On my return I will tell you everything.

‘YOUR HUSBAND.’

The last word was written as with hesitation, and there was no other signature

Rachel could have cried like a child in her vexation. Strange, she thought, that he had not mentioned this business before. She supposed he had forgotten it, or was it possible that he had not then known of it. It was all very puzzling and unsatisfactory. Well, it could not be helped now, and she must make the best of her day without him. After all, it might be possible to delay their departure the next day long enough for her to show him the result of her explorations.

It was in a downcast mood that she joined Nurse Dalison, who was waiting for her over a big fire in Varenzi’s library, which, with its heavy cedar ceiling and lining of bookshelves, was a less cheerful place than the dining-hall, but, Nurse Dalison said, not quite so draughty. Nurse Dalison related that she had explored a little on her own account, and had found a sunny and fairly weeded bit of terrace and some ancient garden chairs which she had made comfortable with rugs and cushions; also a piece of carpet that Armand had laid on the gravel for her feet. Here she meant to take her embroidery and a novel, and to spend a warm lazy morning while the lovers amused themselves in their own fashion. When Rachel told her tale of disappointment, however, the good woman rose to the occasion, and proposed that they two should make a journey of discovery through the castle, only remarking pathetically that, being slightly rheumatic, she trusted Rachel would not require her to go down into damp dungeons.

While they were talking, old Armand came in, and with the air of a seneschal, delivered his bunch of keys to the new châtelaine. Rachel bade him conduct them round the building, open everything, and leave them in the rooms which had been her mother’s.

The old man obeyed, chattering over past times as he hobbled beside them. He had been a servant in the family of General de Boissy-Verneuil, and could point out the alterations—a door here, a window there, a *loggia* out of keeping with the architecture which had converted the old Moorish fortress-palace into a comparatively suitable modern dwelling. Rachel was more than ever certain that once free to leave Abaria, she would spend a good deal of time at Bab-el-Khayalat.

They passed by disused slaves’ and servants’ quarters; then back through the entrance court and into a central summer court beyond, which was covered by a huge trellis of Banksia roses and bougainvillea—a gigantic arbour where the fountain played no longer, its basin green with moss, and where unpruned shoots of the creepers trailed to the ground. Rachel would have lingered here, but Nurse Dalison shrank, apprehensive of insects and reptiles, and begged that they might go on.

Out of this verdure-roofed court many doors opened, and here another archway opened into the harem garden, accessible now from different parts of the house. This, too, was a tangle of rank box and unclipped foliage of orange branches interlacing, among which hung yellow fruit. The air was almost oppressive from the scent of orange flowers. From the harem enclosure, they

passed by a modern door on to a terrace stretching before an abutting wing of the castle, which Armand told Rachel had been occupied by madame her mother, and contained the room where she had been born. This terrace was in a state of utter dilapidation; part of the parapet had fallen; the stone vases placed at intervals along it, were broken by force of the roots of myrtle shrubs, mostly withered now, that had been planted twenty-five years ago, and the steps and coping stones were covered with lichen.

The garden beyond, which sloped down to the fortress wall, had the appearance of a tropical jungle, for by Count Varenzi's orders the trees or plants in it had not been touched since Rachel O'Hara had last walked among them. Part of it had been planted with roses, and here was a tangle like the rose-wilderness of Zola's romance. On the unhealthy-looking palms great fronds hung down dead and broken, and clusters of dates fell and rolled on the ground, there being no man to gather them. This garden was both a tomb and a nursery of vegetation, with flowers blooming rankly, and noxious weeds rising from the decaying undergrowth and exhaling corruption. Nothing could be imagined more dismal or more fascinating. Rachel thought she would like to come here by herself and find the paths along which her mother had walked; but Nurse Dalison cried out at the danger of miasma, and the girl, plucking some sickly white roses which seemed flowers of death, followed Armand through an entrance door, beside which were tiled benches for slaves, into the modernised harem. Here, still, in the tiny chambers, were raised platforms upon which the eunuchs had once slept. Most of these were ante-chambers that had not been lived in; but presently, with a certain solemnity, Armand opened the door of a larger room, square, once a small inner court, with arches leading into windowed recesses that looked out upon the terrace and garden. Adjoining it was another room, long and narrow, and with the same deep recesses, one of which made the alcove for a bed draped in rose-coloured satin with a coverlet of rare embroidery, while another held a sumptuously-furnished dressing-table with a mirror framed in silver, and silver ewers, boxes, and toilet implements. Over the bed hung a large crucifix, also of silver.

Rachel felt a lump rising in her throat; there was something inexpressibly pathetic in the appearance of habitation, which, in a cursory glance, the chamber still presented. One might at first have fancied that it had only just been quitted by its occupant. A jewel casket was open, some of the covers were off the boxes of pomade and powder, and the stoppers out of the scent bottles. A lace-trimmed *peignoir* was spread upon a chair, an embroidered slipper seemed to have been carelessly dropped, a filmy handkerchief lay upon the ledge of a *prie-dieu* beside a book of devotion. But the perfume and powder had dried up, leaving a faint musty fragrance; the *peignoir* was yellow with age, the little slipper was mouldering, and the gossamer handkerchief might have fallen to pieces at a touch.

Rachel turned away, choked by a sob, and went back into the sitting-room. Here, too, was the look of recent occupation. Armand explained that the rooms were kept dusted and aired as far as was possible without removing or displacing anything. All was as it had been on the day when madame had been taken ill. Rachel asked no questions. She felt that she must discover for herself what manner of woman her mother had been—but not now—not till she was alone. Armand inquired if it were the ladies' pleasure that *déjeuner* should be served at mid-day, to which Nurse Dalison replied in the affirmative, and Armand went away.

Nurse Dalison remarked that it must be nearly twelve o'clock already, and that they would only just have time to look round this dear romantic room. She put up her *pince-nez* and peered at the tiles and embroideries and array of scimitars on the wall, and up at the beautiful ribbed ceiling and round at the furniture and nick-nacks which showed an odd variety of style and

period—French eighteenth century cabinets and *escritoire*, a few pieces of the First Empire, low Turkish tables and divans covered with old embroidery; a finely-chased Arab lamp hanging between the pillars of one archway; a paroquet in modern porcelain swinging in a hoop from another

A piano stood at an angle with one of the windows, and there was a piece of music on the desk. A work-basket had a bit of half-finished work, partly in, partly out. Dust had settled thickly on the cambric and on the reels of cotton which might not be taken from their place. There was a vase of mildewed roses on the writing-table, dry petals strewing the blotting pad, and some flowering plants had died long since in their pots. The Aubusson carpet looked faded and moth eaten, and so did the velvet frames on a table by one of the divans, from which the pictures were almost falling out. These represented an oldish gentleman in flowered waistcoat and white lawn stock, and a lady in a low velvet bodice cut into a point at the breast. Rachel wondered if these could be portraits of her Irish grandfather and grandmother, and whether Rachel O'Hara had carried them with her when she fled from the Imperial palace. She was startled in these thoughts by an exclamation from Nurse Dalison,—

'*Dear Rachel*, do come and look at this photograph. I *can't* help thinking—yes, I am *quite* sure that it must have been Isàdas Pacha when he was a much younger man.'

There could be no doubt of the identity. The photograph was a large half-length, taken in some official uniform, but without the fez in which Rachel had been accustomed to see the Pacha. Marks of time and climate were upon the picture, but it was only slightly blurred. The face was that of a man in the prime of life; the fine features clearly traceable as those of Isàdas, though the well-knit frame had little resemblance to the Ambassador's bowed form, and there were not the deep lines round the eye-sockets, the tired droop of the lids, and the hard, somewhat furtive gleam—which had given their peculiar character to the Pacha's eyes. This man's gaze was steadfast, earnest, full of hope and purpose; the expression of the face was grave, benevolent, strong and kindly; and the firm lips, in spite of their masculine determination, had in their gentle curves something of a woman's tenderness.

'Who could have believed,' murmured Nurse Dalison, 'that the poor old Pacha ever looked like this. But I always maintained—and I know Doctor Marillier agreed with me—that there was a better heart underneath that crusty outside than most people supposed. I can understand now why it used to be said that he could make *any* woman care for him.'

Rachel did not answer; her emotion was too keen for words. She walked to the *escritoire*, where the ink in its bowl was dried to a powdery film, and the pen in its pretty handle of mother-o'-pearl and gold, had become a shapeless mass of rust. There were drawers in the upper part of the *escritoire*, and the girl opened them one by one, glancing at their contents. These did not seem to be of much value. There were no letters. Who should write to the poor prisoner in the harem, or the fugitive who had buried herself among these Kabyle hills? Some sheets of paper on which was writing, pointed and delicate, proved to be gardening notes, reminiscences, maybe, of the Irish home, setting forth the month in which various homely flowers should be sown; flowers common to cottage gardens; and opposite them times in other months, mostly of winter, to which in Algeria the season of planting might presumably correspond. Evidently the poor lady had interested herself in horticulture, and had no doubt found pleasure and occupation in that tangled wilderness outside. She had been interested in astronomy too, it seemed, for on some of the pieces of paper, other notes were scribbled, relating to the rising and setting of planets, and also some rough diagrams of constellations. One or two of these had remarks appended in what Rachel knew had been the Pacha's handwriting.

For the rest, the contents of the drawers were mere feminine trifles, giving indications of a sweet womanly nature, but showing nothing of the tragedy of Rachel O'Hara's life. The girl Rachel had been half hoping, half fearing, that she might come across something connected with her father, a bit of writing, a miniature, a memento of some sort, which would give a clue to her mother's feelings towards the Emperor. But there was nothing, no portrait, no object which could possibly be associated with Abdullulah Zobeir. Apparently Count Varenzi had at this time been the only living interest in the woman's life. Rachel found nothing in the drawers of a private or personal nature, till in the last one, she came upon a thin manuscript book, the first pages of which were covered with her mother's writing. The girl, glancing through them, found that the book was a sort of diary, more of feelings than of events; only a slight record of the doings at Bab-el-Khayalat running through long passages, in which the woman's inner thoughts were revealed. On every page of the diary the name of Varenzi constantly recurred.

Another appeal from Nurse Dalison made Rachel pause and hurriedly thrust the book back into its drawer. Not under these conditions could she read the outpourings of her mother's soul. For that she must be alone.

'Have you found anything interesting, dear Rachel?' asked her companion, and without waiting for a reply went on, 'I have been looking over this bookcase, and have come to the conclusion that your dear mother, or whoever collected the books—perhaps after all it was one of the Boissy-Verneuils—must have been a romantic, cultivated and highly religious woman. One can tell that by the marked bits. I *wish* we were going to stay a little longer, so that I might have an opportunity of reading them—that is if you would *allow* me. Here are some biographies of saints that I've *always* wanted to study, and there is a *delightful* French translation of Hafiz, and several others of those dear Eastern people one knows nothing about. Do you think that we shall come here again on our way back from Abaria?'

'I don't know—I hope we shall,' replied Rachel, dreamily.

Nurse Dalison turned at the sound of her voice.

'Dear Rachel,' she exclaimed, 'I really *don't* think you ought to stay in this cold room any longer. You are quite pale, and I believe you are *shivering*. If you have taken a chill, you ought to eat something as soon as possible, and I am sure it *must* be luncheon-time by now. I am famishing myself, and my rheumatic joints are *aching*. Let us go back to the *salon*.'

Rachel acquiesced without demur, and as the two threaded again the tortuous way they had come, Armand met them, announcing that *dejeuner* was served. The girl was very silent during the meal, and Nurse Dalison tactfully abstained from comment, attributing her depression to concern at her husband's absence.

After lunch Nurse Dalison returned to her room for digestive repose, recommending her friend to follow her example. But Rachel only waited till the nurse, wrapped up warmly, was blinking over a novel, and then went back again to the harem wing and to the perusal of her mother's diary.

## CHAPTER XXX

### HER MOTHER'S DIARY

Rachel sat at the *escritoire* beneath one of the long, narrow windows which she had contrived to open, so that the scent of roses floated in upon her, and there, passed several hours, her head bent, her hand supporting her cheek, absorbed in the close, delicate writing which she had

discovered. The journal must have been begun soon after Rachel O'Hara's arrival at Bab-el-Khayalat. In the first entries in the book there were traces of physical exhaustion and of mental reaction after the effort of will which had sustained her flight, but the dominant note of them was intense gratitude to the man who had rescued her, and wonder, almost awe, at the unselfish devotion that had inspired his aid.

'He says that he asks nothing of me,'—Rachel O'Hara wrote—'nothing but acceptance of his service and permission to love me at the distance which our circumstances compel. . . . His goodness to me, the tender forethought which he has shown in preparations for my comfort here, are beyond all words. .

And then his chivalrous forbearance, his delicate sympathy when the misery of these last two years rises and overwhelms me, and I am as Saul, tormented, and can find no solace except in the old melodies of my childhood which he loves to hear me sing. . . . How can I express the gratitude that I owe him?'

Then after some rhapsodic sentences of thankfulness for her escape from a life she loathed came the following outburst :—'Had God forsaken me when He permitted me to succumb to that overpowering temptation of the lust of the eye and the pride of sovereignty? Fool that I was to imagine that I, a weak, ignorant Irish girl, could overthrow a social system and control such a nature as that of Abdullulah Zobeir! Subtle, sensual, deadly in revenge, from the beginning he was my tyrant, even when he adored me and called himself my slave. Truly, when the doors of the Women's Palace closed upon me I was as a child lured into the den of a monster, fascinated, but wholly helpless. . . . Oh! how well I remember. . . . No, I cannot write of it. The recollection sickens me. . . . That I, Rachel O'Hara, the descendant of pure-blooded, true-hearted Irish kings, should have become a Sultan's odalisque! I wonder if my dead father and mother looking down from the free heavens, saw their imprisoned daughter's shame. . . .

'Yes, I was tempted, but not only by the prospect of power, by the jewels, the pomp, the Eastern luxury, which appealed to one whose life had been all grinding poverty—it was not only for the sake of these things that I fell—Dead Sea fruit as they became. I was attracted by the man himself—his handsome, weary face, his soft voice, and the glamour of his whole personality. Emperor or not, Abdullulah Zobeir has the gift of charm. It is no wonder that he can captivate romantic women and secure the fidelity of brave men. Varenzi has loved him almost as David loved Jonathan. Varenzi would even now, I verily believe, lay down his life in the Emperor's defence. Varenzi has dreamed of Abdullulah as a god-appointed instrument for the regeneration of Abaria—of the whole East; the founder of a new Caliphate; the later Prophet commissioned from on high to be the people's saviour. Wild vision, but the motive, so far—till he first met me—of all Varenzi's actions. Even still, I feel instinctively he has not entirely awakened from his dream. Though he tells me that he has resigned his post on the plea of family affairs requiring his absence in Avaran for many months to come, I see that devotion to Abaria—his adopted country, Catholic though he is—fills his heart, and that he would continue to love and serve the Emperor if he could reconcile patriotism with his love for me. For it is I who stand between him and the allegiance he has sworn; it is I who have destroyed his ambition, brought poison into his faith, and ruined his career. I read this in the sadness of his eyes when he looks at me, in his melancholy absorption in study and in the fits of restlessness which he tries to overcome by hunting lions and panthers in the hills. Would it not be far better were I to die, rather than live to be a drag and a curse upon this noble nature? How could my devotion—if it were within the bounds of possibility that I could love him as he deserves and marry him perhaps, in the future—

how could anything I might give him counterbalance the misfortune I have brought upon this man whose evil fate it is to love me too well?’

On the next page Rachel read:—

‘I have opened my heart to Varenzi. I know now that my well-being is dearer to him than that of Abaria, and that his love for me, barren as it must seem to him, outweighs his devotion to the Emperor. . . . I am shamed by his disinterestedness. . . . Had ever man so great a soul?’

Lower,—

‘Varenzi has been less restless lately. He is occupied about my garden. I have been describing to him the rosery in my Irish home. He has sent for cuttings. . . .

‘A cartload of Parisian novelties has arrived. Who but he would have remembered all the foolish fancies I ever expressed in his hearing? . . . The swinging bird is too comical. . . .

‘He has persuaded me out of my silly terror of being seen and recognised. We have driven to the outskirts of Milianah. . . .’

Here and there in the diary, came pretty natural touches—the description of a great thunderstorm, of a visitation of locusts, of an excursion inland among the Kabyles, with quotations from Varenzi concerning the antiquity of the race, and the traces still to be seen of the worship of Melkarth, the Tyrian Venus. Now, such passages as these showed a less morbid tone in the poor woman’s regretful self-analysis:—

‘Varenzi advises me to read more, to occupy my mind with abstract study, and so keep painful thoughts at bay. He has made me a collection of French books from the library, and has sent to England for some good novels and poetry. His own mind is in itself a library, so varied is his knowledge on every subject. I did not know that he was so learned, nor had I guessed that the religious sentiment in him was so strong. Yesterday he read beautifully from the *Pensées* of Pascal, and afterwards he brought me the *Memoirs of Madame de Kriudener*, the Catholic mystic. . . . To-day we sat on the terrace and I read to him *Pippa passes*. . . . The state of intellectual torpor into which I had fallen is breaking. I begin to feel myself once again a woman possessed of a mind, of resources within herself, capable of reading the great book of Nature if I choose to learn its alphabet. Varenzi is my teacher. He has been instructing me in astronomy; telling me what is known of the planets, and pointing out to me the different constellations. The other day he gave me a delightful surprise in the shape of a large telescope which he ordered from Paris, and has had fixed in the topmost room of the tower, in order that we may study the heavens together on these glorious summer evenings. He has not, I am sure, approved of my spending so much time alone in the tower, though he did not like to invade my solitude without a legitimate pretext. But he has one now in the telescope, which seems, even in the daytime, to require much adjustment of position and lenses.

‘It has flashed into my mind that he is sometimes afraid I may destroy myself. One evening, when we were standing on the parapet—he and I—after a long silence, I turned and saw him watching my face with the keenest anxiety; I felt then that he understood why I liked to be in the tower. For as I stand on the parapet which hangs over the river a thousand feet below, I know myself to be absolutely safe. Were Abdullulah to discover my retreat, there would still be a certain means of escape. . . .’

Following this, the tone of the journal became less retrospective and more devotional. It appeared greatly to distress the poor lady that she was now unable to attend the Catholic chapel in the village, and that the priest who visited her in the performance of his office, was narrow-minded and illiterate, and incapable of understanding the workings of her mind, widened by the influence of Varenzi, who, in Rachel O’Hara’s phrase, ‘saw God in all creeds and beyond them.’

By and by came the lines:—

‘I live altogether downstairs now. Varenzi has given up the stars in order that he may sit with me in the evenings. Sometimes I sing to him; more often he reads while I sew. . . .’

‘Varenzi’s tenderness grows every hour. He is to me father, brother and husband all in one. *Husband*—have I written the word? Heaven pardon me the hope which has lately come into my heart—the same which I know dwells in his—of a fair future in which we shall be always together, the hideous past wiped out and forgotten. For I love him! . . . I must own it to myself—I love him. . . .’

Now the last entry of all:—

‘Varenzi has brought a most interesting Arab doctor to see me whose skill and knowledge he tells me are marvellous, and far beyond those of any European physician he has ever known. They call this man the Medicine Moor. . . .’

\* \* \*

It was dark when Rachel finished the manuscript. She had found it difficult to decipher the last words. During all these hours, she had not moved from her place except to go for half an hour to the *salon* when Nurse Dalison announced tea. She had not asked the nurse to go back with her, but saying she had still papers of her mother’s to go over, had returned alone to the perusal of the journal. Now that it was ended, she put away the book, and rising from the table, flung herself on the divan near which was the Pacha’s portrait, and where, from the heaped-up cushions at one end, she fancied her mother must often have lain.

The strange love story which after so many years had revealed itself stirred her pity deeply for the two chiefly concerned in it, but she felt also a curious compassion for her father, that gloomy, yet fascinating personage, out of the picture, but always the centre of the drama. It seemed to his daughter that he had been the victim of his nationality, temperament and fatal position of sovereignty, which had made him regard all women as instruments to his pleasure and stifled the germ of pure passion which Rachel O’Hara had undoubtedly inspired in him. Rachel recognised a certain similarity between her own nature and experience and those of her mother. It was that Eastern taint in the relations of man with woman which had at times repelled her in the old Caspar; it was the all-protecting tenderness of the new Caspar which had won her whole-souled love. She began to realise that there were two beings in the man she had married—two men who corresponded with those other two men by whom her mother’s destiny had been swayed. Rachel Isâdas had been fascinated by the good looks and charm of Ruel Bey, but had never wholly given her heart away till, in his new character, he had won her trust as well as her love. So also Rachel O’Hara had fallen under the glamour of Abdullulah Zobeir, eventually learning to loathe the lord of the seraglio, and she had at last been taught the true meaning of love by Varenzi’s chivalrous devotion. It had seemed hard at first to reconcile Varenzi of Bab-el-Khayalat with the grim Pacha of the Abarian Embassy, but now it was not so difficult. The pendulum swings and rebounds; iron glows in the furnace, and at the shock of cold water is turned into steel; sunshine fructifies the blossom, frost comes, blackening the fruit.

The pathos of the Pacha’s cynical old age and lonely death returned to Rachel with fresh force. Oh! if only she had known his story sooner; if only she had gone sooner in her mother’s name and had won her way into his affections. But she remembered that would have been impossible, for though her voice was the voice of Rachel O’Hara, her eyes were the eyes of Abdullulah Zobeir.

And now she felt the personal sting of neglect, and bitterness rose within her at the thought of how unwelcome she must have been to the young mother who bore her. This was clear from the omission of any definite mention of impending motherhood in Rachel's O'Hara's diary. There was no suggestion of the natural joy of maternity. Could it be that her mother had died hating her for being the Emperor's child. It was cruel; it was unjust; and she could hardly believe this the fact. The story which Manlier had heard from the Pacha; the emerald ring upon her finger showed that Rachel O'Hara had felt some anxiety as to her daughter's future, and had wished to guard her from that Eastern system under which she had so sorely suffered.

Nurse Dalison's knock sounded at the closed door, and Rachel started up, recalled to the present, her first thought of Caspar and her disappointment apparent at sight of the tall thin figure dressed in a tea-gown ready for dinner. She wondered how she could have forgotten Caspar for so long. And why was he so late? Could any evil have befallen him? Nurse Dalison had no news. Possibly Ruel Bey had gone to Milianah, and might be waiting there for telegrams, for, in diplomatic life, cipher telegrams were the explanation of everything out of the ordinary course of things. Nobody could tell what news he might have found at Milianah; they had seen no newspapers and had received no letters since leaving Algiers. A war might have broken out, or a crowned head might have died for all they could tell. Rachel might be certain, however, that nothing unfortunate could happen to Ruel Bey. His was a charmed life, and he had been born to good fortune.

So Nurse Dalison prattled on, soothing the deserted bride, whom she led back to the warmth and brightness of the *salon*, and thence to the tower bedroom, where a bright fire burned, and Christine was waiting to dress her mistress for dinner.

The meal was put off for a little while, then, there being no sign of Ruel Bey, Rachel at last ordered it to be served, and a portion kept back till he should arrive.

The two women went through their cheerless repast, Rachel pale, abstracted, looking in her white dress as though she had come out of another world. This was indeed the case, for, in spite of her anxiety about her husband, she could not rid herself of the impression her mother's diary had made. She was silent, listening eagerly to every sound that came from the courtyard outside. Nurse Dalison made a brave effort at conversation, but it was with little effect, and even she relapsed into gloom. They had just finished dinner when Marillier staggered in; staggered, in the literal meaning of the word, for he was too exhausted to stand upright. So pale and weary did he look as he fell into a chair, that Rachel ran to him greatly alarmed. Had he had an accident? Had he again hurt his head? She was sure something was amiss. Would he not tell her, and let them send to the town to see if there were a doctor? He stayed her with a motion of his hand.

'No, my dear, there has been no accident. I am quite well; only tired, and wanting food.'

Rachel bade Armand bring dinner back immediately. He must eat it as he was, she said, and she would wait upon him. Nurse Dalison poured out a tumblerful of red wine, and made him drink it and eat a biscuit; then, with her usual tact, went into the library, leaving husband and wife alone.

His strength revived with the wine, and she brought him presently to the table, and, dismissing Armand, waited upon him herself, as she had said, watching the colour come back into his cheeks, and refraining from questions till he had eaten and drunk. She said, at length, when he seemed able to answer her,—

'You have something to tell me, Caspar?'

He bent his head in acquiescence.

‘Yes, I have something to tell you—a great deal to tell you, Rachel. You will need all your strength to bear it.’

‘I knew,’ she answered, ‘that something serious was troubling you. But don’t think me weak, Caspar. I am strong enough to bear whatever you have to say.’

He was looking at her with eyes that scarcely seemed to see her. She leaned forward, gently stretching out her hand to him across the table, as she had done on the evening before.

‘You will remember that, will you not?’ she persisted. ‘Tell me all you have to say without any fear. Perhaps I may be able to help you. At least I can share your trouble.’

He got up then and drew back, until the chair he had sat in was between them.

‘That is just the thing,’ he said slowly, ‘you cannot share this trouble, and I must tell you why.’

Rachel blanched, but answered bravely,—

‘I can’t agree with you, Caspar. Come what may, we shall share the trouble. But tell me everything.’

He looked round the room with the air of a man driven against a wall. He knew that the moment had come; he had believed himself strong, but at the last, his courage was failing him. Yet he knew that this was because physical weakness again overcame him. He steadied himself by the back of the chair, and, clearing his throat, for his voice was husky, he began to speak. At that moment, however, old Armand entered. He had come to remove the things from the table. Should he wait longer, he asked his mistress deferentially? Had monsieur finished?

‘Yes, monsieur has finished—but—’

Rachel stopped. She did not want their privacy invaded, nor did she wish to call the servants’ attention to special need for guarding it. Her thoughts moved quickly. Nurse Dalison was in the library. Should she take him to her mother’s sitting-room? No; Rachel shrank from bringing grief and perplexities of to-day into that sanctuary of bygone love and sorrow. There remained only the tower room where they would not again be interrupted. She took her resolve.

‘Is the lamp lighted in the observatory, Armand?’ she inquired.

The old man told her that he had just lighted it.

‘Come, Caspar,’ she said to her husband, ‘we will go upstairs. I want to see the stars again.’

‘Mademoiselle will see something of rough weather from the tower to-night,’ said Armand. ‘The wind is getting up, and mademoiselle may have heard that when Khayal is grey like a ghost at sunset, it means that there will be a storm. Perhaps mademoiselle did not observe that Khayal was livid as the corpse of a mountain this evening. It is a saying in these parts,’ and the old man nodded impressively. ‘But mademoiselle need not be alarmed,’ he added. ‘The thunderstorm will be nothing to tremble at. It is a prodigy when that happens in winter. There will not be many stars, but the wind is driving the clouds and the moon has just risen.’

Rachel hardly heard what he said, nor did Marillier. She had turned to the door, and he followed her blindly as she led the way through the corridor to the lower room of the tower. Then he realised where she was taking him.

‘Rachel!’ he exclaimed in a choked voice; ‘not up there! You cannot go up there again.’

‘Yes, *there*,’ she replied. They had reached the foot of the stairs, and she turned and faced him standing a step above him.

‘You think that I will not go up to the observatory, my Caspar, because of last night,’ she went on. ‘That is exactly the reason why I wish to go—to prove to you that where *you* are concerned I am determined to fear nothing; to make you understand that no power, living or dead, can alter my love, or separate me from you. Come; Caspar.’

Living or dead! Why had she said those words. His heart quailed; the utterance seemed fateful. And she had spoken in all ignorance. She was thinking of the living Emperor, the dead Pacha—those two powers the only ones she fancied able to come between her and the man she loved.

‘Come, Caspar,’ she repeated.

He made no further opposition; in truth he had not the strength to do so. He felt a strange weakness and lack of vitality, and it was with difficulty, and only by holding on to the stone moulding on either side of the wall, that he pulled himself up the steep staircase.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### IN A STRANGE COUNTRY

When some sixteen hours earlier Marillier started on his search for the mandrake’s land, the young moon, so suggestive to him of Rachel’s pure loveliness, had sunk behind the distant range of the Djurdjuras, and stormy clouds obscuring the stars made the night a heavy blackness. It seemed to him that the darkness overhanging the world was in accordance with the gloom which had fallen upon his own life. The moon had sunk and Rachel was lost to him.

He stole out of the castle by a side door that he had observed leading to the garden from the outer court, avoiding the principal entrance, where he knew that he must be checked by manifold bars and bolts. A lamp which had been left lighted in one of the corridors shed a glimmering ray across the square enclosure which, full as it seemed to Marillier of shadows and whispering sounds, gave him again an impression of ghostly occupancy.

The leaves rustled in the harem garden, and the scent of orange blossom was borne in to his nostrils, mingling with the fainter odours of the creepers overhead. Trailing shoots of the bougainvillea swayed in the night breeze, and a branch of Banksia roses struck him, the clusters of blossom making a scented rain upon his face. As the delicate petals brushed his cheek their softness and fragrance again reminded him of Rachel, and brought back the intoxicating memory of her kisses. But he would not let his courage be overcome by such fancies, and bracing himself anew, he passed out into the night.

Thrusting his arms before him to feel his way among the walls and pillars of the open courts, he at length reached the garden, and after carefully stepping from terrace to terrace, dropped down the low wall at the bottom and found himself upon the ramparts. Here, too, he was obliged to tread cautiously, and cling to the garden wall, for the paved ledge took curves and angles, and in places was broken away, and he knew that death lay in the black chasm which yawned below. A rift in the clouds showed him the tower dimly rising to his left, a dark shapeless mass immediately above him, which he succeeded in skirting. Further on towards the town, the rampart line projected in a wide semi-circle and then dropped down. A flight of steps led up from it to the platform near the castle gates, where they had seen Arabs drinking coffee; while the fortifications descending, and apparently making a double line, curved again inward, and he was brought to a stop by what he supposed to be the face of the precipice. He could feel that here the parapet was again broken, or had purposely been left incomplete. He had a vague recollection of having noticed, while driving, a steep zigzag drawn on the cliff, and guessed that this might be the point from which some path led down to the bed of the gorge.

Now he found himself for the time confronted by an insuperable difficulty. He had brought with him a compass, and, written on his mind, it seemed to him indelibly, were the words in which the Pacha had described his memorable excursion. But compass or directions availed him

nothing in this gloom. He looked down into impenetrable blackness. Far below, through the silence of the night, he could hear the torrent roaring and rumbling at the foot of Khayal. Before him, a denser darkness than that at his feet, rose the grim walls of the mountain itself, seeming in his fancy like some gigantic mythologic monster, endowed with supernatural intelligence, and set to guard the mandrake land, that mysterious region to which he must penetrate before he could replace the root that had wrought him so much ill. And yet, notwithstanding all the evil, he thought, had it not brought him a taste of Paradise which, till his dying hour, could never be forgotten.

At first, the hopelessness of his quest dismayed him. He felt that it would be impossible to cross that gorge, to scale that mountain side. And even supposing that he could do so, what awaited him? A trackless waste of forest and rock where it would be futile to attempt finding the spot in which the family of mandrakes had their habitation. For he knew it to be one of the human characteristics of the root not to grow alone, or in scattered clumps, but to establish a colony in one especial place, leaving the rest of the district barren of its kind. Marillier stood hesitating whether to proceed with the search or to abandon it. One false step forward, and he himself would be plunged into those Immensities of which the Pacha had spoken, and though he did not fear death, for Rachel's sake he dared not risk it.

So he stood uncertain. Again there came a gleam of starlight. Away to the left he could faintly discern the white road rounding the gorge, along which they had driven that afternoon. That road, were he to follow it, would ultimately lead him nearer to Mount Khayal, for it was usually chosen by tourists, mountaineers, and hunters of big game as the easiest point from which to begin the ascent. But would that help him? The road was long. It had seemed interminable that afternoon when they had traversed it, buoyed up by anticipation, cheered by each other's company, and looking forward pleasantly to their destination. How much longer it would seem now in the darkness. And he doubted whether it would not take him further away still from the goal he wished to gain.

Marillier cursed his impulsiveness in not having waited for the dawn to take his bearings with such exactitude as might be possible. Then, at anyrate, he would have had some light to guide him. He might have set forth at sunrise and still possibly have got back in time to go over part of the castle with Rachel. But first it had seemed to him that the act of restitution must be performed without delay, and he had feared to let himself pause lest he should be tempted to relinquish the expedition, fraught with difficulty, and half hopeless as it was. Perhaps this lurking dread in his mind made him unwilling to retrace his steps in order to await the light of morning. Rather, he would await it here.

He sat down on the edge of the rampart beneath Khâyal's great hump that loomed just in front of him, alone, with only the roar of the torrent below him to break the silence. The lamps in the little native town had been put out; there were no lights to be seen on the minarets of the mosque, but he could perceive like flickering glow-worms the tiny oil lamps burning on the graves of the faithful in the Moslem cemetery which stretched down the hillside. Only a few stars shone clearly overhead in a broad blue track where the clouds had parted—Sirius and Orion and the soft pure glow of Venus near her setting. By this pale illumination he could see the leather case which contained the golden casket of the mandrake that he had brought with him, and had placed at his side on the broken stones of the parapet. It seemed to him that in this box he had been carrying a live thing, or, at least, a creature which had once been living and should now receive burial. He shrank from the case as he would have shrunk from a coffin which held the remains of a dead enemy, sitting beside it through the hours that followed as a watcher might sit by a corpse.

His body was bent forward, his limbs drooping flaccidly, his elbows resting upon his knees, his head upon his hands. The silence of the night soothed his tortured spirit; he felt in those desolate hours that he could have borne no other sound than that of the distant torrent. It was as though his soul were wandering through abysses deep and dark as the gorge below, its only light the beacon blaze of the star of renunciation within his breast, the effulgence that arose from slain desire.

When at length the first silver streak of dawn gleamed behind Mount Khâyal, he raised his head thankfully. Not only was that faint radiance the herald of day, but the herald also of his soul's emergence from murk as of Hades.

As the pale luminosity expanded, Khâyal, Mount of Ghosts, reared against it, appeared more monstrous still, and more unearthly. In that solemn hush of daybreak, Nature held herself in readiness to greet her lord. Now in the far East there shone a soft streak of golden light; the edges of the broken clouds caught its glow, one by one, in faint lines and patches that deepened and spread, till all the purple masses became a wonderful bluish pink like flames bursting through billows of smoke. Floating cloudlets above Khâyal were etherealised and metamorphosed into air-spirits acclaiming the sun. Then the Ghost Mountain gave her welcome, the pink flush on her dark front spreading down the upper precipice and along the pine forest to her rocky base.

There arose a soft murmuring in the air, faint chirpings and twitterings and stirrings as the birds awoke to swell the greeting, and the fiercer creatures of the forest slipped silently away to their lairs. No sign of human life came yet from the native town, or the castle on the hillside. Nature only broke the solitude, a solitude in which the man, alone of his kind, felt at once his own significance and his own greatness; solitude in which it seemed to him that Khâyal, custodian of Nature's secrets, was no longer a grim sentinel, barring approach to the forbidden home of the mandrakes, her helpless embryonic children, but a pleader that the half-human creature the mysterious link between man and vegetable, might be restored to its own place and its appointed order in the scheme of evolution.

Khâyal no longer forbade; she beckoned; she bade Marillier come. High behind her, the rose-gold clouds parted, and a shaft tipped with flame sped down and cast a halo round her. Fiery lights sprang up on all the eastern horizon, and before them, the paling stars crept tremblingly away. From far-off worlds beyond that golden veil, the sun rode forth.

Marillier waited until the mountainside was illuminated by the orb's splendour. He had yearned in the darkness for that gleam of warmth and glory. Now, it encouraged him to begin his difficult and painful descent into the gorge.

As he had suspected, the zigzag path started from this curve of the ramparts, and led tortuously down the cliff. He followed it warily, placing his feet with great precision, and clinging with one hand at first to projections upon the precipice and to creepers growing in its fissures; then, where the ground sloped a little, to great scarred boulders that might have been hurled there in some pre-historic convulsion, so strangely were they shaped and so unexpected their position. The descent was long and no easy matter, impeded as he was by the case holding the mandrake, and he regretted his want of forethought in not having provided himself with a strap by which he might have slung it across his shoulders.

Nearer the bottom of the gorge, where soil had gathered and was overhung by sheltering rocks, vegetation was rank, and the air was heavy with its exhalations. Deep in the shadows among thick leaves of a pale green, bloomed lurid-looking flowers, a splash of bright orange or vivid crimson showing out as he approached. Curious rock lilies they seemed, uncannily striped, with weird heads resembling certain orchids he remembered having seen in English hot-houses. They

nodded and seemed to gibe at him as the wind stirred them. A sudden gust swept down the gorge and whistled past him as he went on. Had it been in his face it might have given him fresh life, but coming from above and whirling by with a shriek and an eddying in the air, he could fancy that the wild spirits of morning were driving him on and laughing at his slowness.

On, on, into the bowels of the earth it seemed, so high rose the walls of rock on either side of him. Enormous boulders, cloven and slanting apart so that in places he could pass through them, and charred by the action of volcanic fires, choked the bed of the ravine. Pools of stagnant water had gathered in the hollows where the stream had overflowed and subsided, and the ground oozed beneath his tread. Noxious plants grew in clumps in the moist places—plants he had never seen before, with succulent stems and pale mottled leaves from which an ill-smelling slime exuded. Grey mist crept up round him—thick miasmatic vapour not yet dispelled by the sun's rays here in this deep valley, but which was beginning to rise in light wreaths upon the mountainside. It filled his nostrils and impeded his breathing, and to it he attributed the weariness of body that weighted him, and with which he had to fight continually as he proceeded.

The zigzag terminated in a rough bridge of boulders across the bottom of the gorge and was carried on upon the other side, where, as it climbed up the rocky height to the zone of forest which girdled the mountain, it looked more perilous than even that by which he had come. Marillier longed more than ever for a strap with which to bind his box upon his back, or even for a stout staff to support his steps, but he had neither.

The stones forming the bridge lay loosely at irregular intervals across the bed of the stream—great stepping-stones, over some of which the torrent dashed. Marillier wondered whether Nature or the hand of man had laid them. Doubtless, they had been swept down over a cascade higher up the gorge which made the roaring he had heard on the ramparts, and which now deafened him to every other sound. A difficult transit it would have been to an unencumbered man; as it was, to Marillier it appeared well-nigh impracticable. But he did not hesitate. The wanderings of his younger days had accustomed him to rough places. Sitting down for a moment at the edge of the stream, he took off his shoes and tied them by their laces round his neck. His socks he thrust into one of his coat pockets, and then turning up his trousers at the bottom, he started upon his dangerous passage. A slip of the foot and he might have been carried down by the current into one of the eddying whirlpools which formed at every bend of the stream. He found the task, however, easier than he had anticipated. Perhaps it was his determination to cross the gorge at any cost which buoyed him up and enabled him to poise himself successfully on one stone after another, clinging with his bare feet where it would have been impossible for an ordinarily shod man to find a footing. How he got over, he could not afterwards imagine. He did not pause either to think or to balance himself a second longer than was necessary. It took but a short time, and soon he was standing upon the farther side immediately beneath the wall of great Khayal. Here he sat down on a patch of the driest ground he could find and put on his socks and shoes. Then he began the upward climb.

Arduous indeed he found it. The rocky base of the mountain on this side was even steeper than the cliff he had descended, and it seemed to him much higher. Here, too, a goat track led giddily in tortuous lines up the face of the precipice. He had seen from his observation of the mountain on the previous day that above the precipice and extending to the foot of the hump, which again seemed formed of almost naked rock, a vast pine forest spread, intersected by ravines and with rocky excrescences jutting out here and there, making light grey patches among the dark green. Marillier knew not what danger of wild beasts might lurk in the forest; but to this he had paid no heed, beyond taking the caution of placing a loaded revolver in his breast pocket.

From indications in the Pacha's story he understood that it would not be necessary to climb the mountains to any height. The Pacha had spoken, he remembered, of rounding the middle of Khâyal and of her crest behind him as he faced the mandrake land. It was probable that the Pacha had followed this same goat track; for now, after a few hundred yards of steeper and more breathless climbing, Marillier found the ground sloping gradually and less encumbered with rocks. He passed along a fringe of evergreen oaks, interspersed with pines through a tangle of lentiscus and low-growing shrubs, then into the gloom of the forest, where the great cedar boughs met and closed over his head, making a cool and murmurous dusk.

He saw that this forest resembled the well-known one of Teniet-el-Ahd, with part of which he was familiar, only it appeared to him, as he penetrated further, that it was wilder and more beautiful. He examined his compass and took his bearings, making a south-easterly direction, which he believed, according to the Pacha's account, to be the correct one. He knew that a mighty gorge cleft Khayal from below her hump to the plain of the Bahira, a gigantic fissure making a dark, triangular blot on her side as though the mountain had been cleft half asunder in some tremendous subterranean convulsion. This chasm must, he knew, bar his progress, and he trusted, by taking an upward line, to round the head of it, and thus reach the mandrake region, from other points inaccessible. He wandered on through the vast forests, silent except for the occasional cry of some mountain bird and the melancholy sighing of wind among the pine branches overhead. Though the sun only came in flickering beams through the roof, of foliage, the air was intensely close, and the breeze which he could hear playing overhead could not pierce the thick canopy to bring him coolness and refreshment. Once or twice he stopped to drink from a nil trickling among rocks, but of food he had had none since dinner the previous evening, and, indeed, had no desire to eat. He could not tell the time, or how long he had been walking, for on looking at his watch, he found that it must have been injured in a fall he had had when descending the gorge, for it had stopped with the hour hand at the figure eight.

He was weary, but not with the natural healthy fatigue that follows physical effort. His heart beat languidly, and notwithstanding the closeness of the atmosphere, his body was hardly warm. The mandrake box weighed heavily on his arm, and there came into his mind the thought that perhaps by his voluntary restitution of the root, he was giving back to it that life which had at first been absorbed by Isâdas, and then, with ownership of the fetich, transferred to himself. It might be so, he could not tell; but he would not allow himself to dwell on any thoughts save the one object upon which he was engaged. Adjusting the load a little more easily, he struggled on.

At last he became aware that the barrier was reached, and that to accomplish his end he must skirt the dividing chasm, climbing more directly upward. The dead limb of a cedar tree dropping on the ground in front of him, arrested his steps, and he found himself on the verge of an abyss which, looking down, seemed unfathomable, for his eye could not pierce the depths of greenery, so dark as to be almost black, which filled up the great cleft. He thought he could hear the sound of water deep down—no tumultuous cataract, but a stealthily-flowing stream. The cedar trees on the margin of this ravine were larger than most of the cedar trees he had ever seen. Great bare arms stretched laterally from huge bulbous trunks, and some of them, like many others in the forest, were withered at the top where locusts had ravaged or lightning blasted. He mounted along the line of giants, which he could easily distinguish by their slanting position and exposed limbs stretching over the darkness of the gorge.

The sun, as far as he could tell, was now at his back, and his compass told him he was climbing northward. By-and-by he knew that he must have gained the head of the ravine, for he had to strike out eastward again, over a stony *col* projecting from the forest, which he had great

difficulty in surmounting, so bare and slippery was its surface. Now his pulse beat quick with anticipation. He remembered that the Pacha had spoken of a volcanic knoll, and here was a hillock of heaped-up boulders, lichenous and blackened as by fire—a huge natural cairn that might have been built by Titans before history began. As Marillier turned it, he stood still, dizzy with astonishment, for he knew that his quest was ended.

Was it the magic of the mandrake he carried that had guided him hither? Here in truth there spread before him that desolate landscape the Pacha had described; the same undulating hillside thinly grown with blasted pines, their tops withered, their twisted arms with forked extremities stretched westward, as if imploring the sun. As he gazed round, no longer shut in by gorge and forest, he seemed to himself a speck on Khâyal's rugged bosom, her great grey head rearing itself close above him, a protruding crag and two black hollows on either side giving a grotesque similitude of human features. He understood now why she was called the Ghost Mountain. But as he looked, her face ceased to be grey and ghostlike, for the sun, coming forth from a thick cloud, shone full upon her, and Khâyal, bathed in golden light, seemed to flush and breathe under the kiss of her hot wooer.

Marillier too felt himself at the moment warmed and revived. He scanned the scene eagerly, comparing each point with the Pacha's story. He recognised the stone pines, the grey-brown furrows, the crumbling soil, the earth-bubbles on its surface, the clumps of fleshy-leaved plants. Could these be leaves of mandrake roots? If so, there were many to choose from, and how should he discover that especial one—the female root with the infants in her arms, from whose side his own mandrake had been torn.

He rapidly consulted his memory. The Pacha had spoken of a bank, and of a skeleton tree against which he had leaned when his feet, hanging over the bank, had struck the mandrake and evoked a cry from the wounded root. Marillier again keenly surveyed the land. The trees did not grow so thickly but that it would be easy to single out one particularly weird and bare among them. The undulations were many; yet anything that could be called a bank was not at first readily discernible. He took a few steps forward, his eye roving round the area in which the mandrakes grew. Yes, there to the left and somewhat below him, the ground sloped down, then running level for a yard or two, dropped sharply, forming a distinct bank. Two or three clumps of the thick broad leaves grew at its base, and just upon the verge of it, lifting its pale limbs to the sky, there, rose the ghost of a tree. Long ago its green cone had withered and rotted away; long ago its sap must have run dry and every flicker of life have been extinguished within it.

Marillier hastened down the slope. The distance was greater than it appeared, and he was a minute or two reaching the bank. The sun went again behind a cloud, leaving the scene one of solemn silence and shadow. The trees were motionless, and seemed to be standing expectant. Marillier felt himself to be in a strange country where some inexplicable sympathy seemed to unite all these creatures of the vegetable world, and now compelled their attention to what he was about to do. He stood beneath the skeleton pine, looking at the slanting ground below it where the clumps of mandrakes grew. Then he stepped down amongst them, careful to avoid crushing any of the leaves, while he chose beside a withered plant a spot where it seemed to him most likely that his mandrake had originally grown. He thought of what the Pacha had said about the widowed mate bearing rudimentary infants at her breast, and though he could not know that this was the root which had been left behind, the sight of it prompted his choice of a grave for his own.

Placing the leather case beside him on the ground, he began shovelling out the earth with his hands in order to make a hole. The soil was dry, and he found the work difficult. Looking up, he

saw a small stunted bough hanging from the stem of the dead tree above him, and breaking it off, began to dig with this awkward implement, holding it in his right hand, and scooping away the earth with his left. Presently the bit of wood he was working with, struck against something that offered it a more decided resistance, and he realised that he must be coming upon the withered root of the adjacent plant. He redoubled his efforts, widening his little trench, and gently scraping away the earth which surrounded the root. And now he found that the Pacha's story was borne out in every detail. Extraordinary as was the chance, he had certainly fallen upon the exact spot out of which the mandrake had been taken, and the spouse from which it had been torn.

In a minute or two the shrunken form of the poor little female lay exposed to view. Her babes had long ago shrivelled on her breast, and she herself was a mere mummified similitude of what she had once been. Marillier felt a curious pity as he bent over the thing. He forgot that she was, as his scientific reasoning would formerly have assured him, a mere vegetable production—one of Nature's freaks—but was ready to believe that the embryonic form bore within it a germ of life holding promise of future fulfilment. On the other hand, when he thought of the various legends gathered round the insane root, he almost accounted to himself for its grotesquely human resemblance on the theory that here were the remains of an almost moribund type which had proved an evolutionary failure. Was it possible that the attributes of the mandrake were the working out of some primaval curse hurled down upon the sinful children of an earlier creation? Marillier had already convinced himself that there are stranger things on earth, as in space, than those which science has classified.

The female mandrake appeared quite dead, showing when he touched it not the least sign of sensibility. Leaving it in the ground, he now proceeded to unpack the box which contained his own. The lid flew open easily when he touched the topaz that covered the spring, and there, under the silken wrapper which was slightly displaced, he could trace the outline of the limbs. He did not shrink; he had no more cause for fear. The magic of the mandrake was no longer needed, and in this act of restoration, lay his immunity from further danger of its spell. There was no horror in his mind as he drew away the wrapper—no curiosity, only an awed certainty. As he had expected, the creature was palpitating, its skin soft and filled out, and its tiny arms, instead of lying by its side, as he had last seen them, were crossed upon its breast as if it had been struggling in its coffin. When Marillier put his hand upon it, the mandrake writhed—of that there could be no question. Yet still he did not shrink. He lifted it out of the box, and laid it in its silken wrapper at the edge of the hole he had dug. The thing seemed to turn its head; he was sure that it was trying to draw itself a little nearer to the hole, wherein stood, three parts exposed, the root that had been its mate. Marillier raised it again, and taking out with one hand a few clods of earth that had fallen down the sides of the hole, with the other he carefully set the root upright in what he felt certain had been its place. He pulled the silken covering gently away from behind it, and hardly had the soil touched the little shape than it turned its head again, and made a feeble movement with its small arms towards its spouse, as though in a futile attempt at an embrace. Marillier felt only the deepest compunction as he gazed on the reunited pair—the living and the dead. The male mandrake had apparently not yet become conscious of the death of his spouse, but as Marillier shovelled back the earth round them, there came from the grave a strange and terrible sound—the wail of the living mandrake bereaved, and conscious for the first time of its bereavement.

Though Marillier had heard and read of the shriek of the mandrake, his nerves were not prepared for this unearthly scream. He shook so that it was a difficult matter to fill the hole with earth, but at last it was done, and he smoothed the mound with his hands, muffling the cries

which grew fainter and at last ceased. Then he rose to his feet, still shaking like a man stricken by palsy, and with a horrible sense of having buried a living being beside a corpse. As he supported himself against the skeleton tree its boughs rattled like a gibbet in the wind. A sudden gust had risen, and a growl of thunder burst from the heavy clouds that were massing in the west. The roar, portentous in his ear, though distance deadened it, was caught up and echoed shrilly by the blast which swept over the slopes, bending the crests of the pines and snapping off dead twigs as it hurried shrieking and whirling away across the Bahira.

In that wild sweep, so sudden and unexpected, the swaying trees pointed their giant arms towards Khâyal, seeming to wave Marillier back whence he had come. He remembered the Pacha's words. Truly it appeared that no wanderer was permitted to linger in this haunted region. There was no need for him to delay, however, for his task was finished, and he was thankful to retrace his steps knowing that he had done all he could, but feeling ominously that somewhere and somehow payment would be demanded by higher powers for the wrong man had inflicted upon Nature's deformed offspring.

The wind whistled madly. It was easy to imagine that this desolate region, not frequented by mankind, was the playground of unbenign spirits, and he fancied, as the Pacha had done, that elfish beings scoffed among the pines upon the plain. He hastened as well as his weakness would allow towards the rocky knoll and over the slippery ridge, longing to gain the shelter of Khâyal, on whom the dusky veil of evening was already descending. When he re-entered the gloom beneath the cedars, a nearer peal of thunder reverberated overhead, as though even the heavens were uttering maledictions over the despoilment of the helpless creatures of the earth.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### GOD'S JAVELIN

It was a wild night, as old Armand had said—a strange, uncertain night. The wind, sweeping across from the mountains in sudden squalls, shrieked round the tower, and subsided into feeble moans, which at intervals died away, leaving in the air a brooding hush.

As Marillier and Rachel mounted the topmost stair a strong gust blew through one of the unglazed windows in the upper room, striking their faces, then, caught in the circle of the tower, it whirled round the little room, making eerie noises as though it were a live thing imprisoned there. The lamp in the observatory was swinging to and fro, its flame flaring and casting moving shadows beneath the tube and framework of the telescope. Through a window on one side, the moon could be seen shining in a small clear space of the heavens, veiled at times by flying scud, and with inky clouds beneath it, spreading westward. Amid the clouds forked lightning played occasionally. A little to the moon's right, rose Khâyal's black mass—a denser blot on the darkness of the night. From the bed of the gorge, the voice of the torrent rose angrily. After the shriek which hailed them as they mounted, the wind fell suddenly, and gradually the lamp ceased swaying, and the shadow of the telescope became stationary. The bare room, with its gaping apertures where the windows were set, struck Rachel as cold and cheerless; but to-night she was fully mistress of herself and determined not to be affected by her surroundings. She went in and stood waiting as he followed her with laboured steps. His weakness and agitation were apparent, and filled her with anxiety, but she felt that further comment would be ill-placed. She saw that the communication he had to make would be difficult and painful, and that she must sustain him by her own strength. Advancing across the room, she sat down on a carved bench in the

embrasure of one of the windows. The strain of the situation made itself keenly felt, but her apprehension was on his account rather than on her own. Fear, as she had known it the evening before, was gone from her entirely.

She spoke to him as he stood leaning against the telescope—a man weighed down, not by cowardice, but by bodily infirmity. He was staring at her, the head thrust forward; the chin protruding; the shoulders slightly hunched, in something of Marillier's old manner when pondering a knotty question; the chest bent in; the hands thrust into his pockets. By his attitude Rachel was involuntarily reminded of Lucien Marillier, and wondered why the thought of him should come to her as she looked at Ruel Bey.

'I am ready, Caspar,' she said, steadying her tone which still had a ring of anxiety. 'I am ready to hear what you have to tell me. I beg you, tell me *all*. I am strong enough to bear it. Hide nothing from me.'

He began, 'I—I—Rachel!' His voice was husky, and he cleared his throat—an old trick of Marillier's before delivering sentence on a patient. 'Rachel!' he began again, 'if I tell you everything you will think me mad.'

'It does not matter what I think you,' she answered. 'You are my husband, and it is my right as your wife to know what is troubling you.'

His staring eyes remained fixed upon her. The glare of the lamp above, showed her the trembling of his mouth as he tried to speak. It was womanish in him, but it touched her to the quick. She lifted her hands in a little rapid gesture and held them out to him, but did not leave her seat.

'I repeat that I am your wife, and that this is my right,' she said. 'But oh! Caspar, I don't want to talk of rights. You said that there is something I must know. Will you not tell it to me?'

'Yes,' he answered, 'I must. That is what I am here to do.' He spoke slowly and hesitatingly, as though he were anxious to impress upon himself the force of his own words.

'Won't you come and sit beside me?' she pleaded. 'There is room,' and she moved a little. He shook his head, and again gave his husky cough, as, still in the same position—his head dropped forward, his chin on his chest, his eyes falling slowly from her face to the tip of her dainty shoe—he began his story.

Where and how he began it, neither knew, for the first sentences were so broken and involved as to be almost unintelligible, but he gained power as he proceeded, and Rachel would not interrupt him with questions. She listened, making no sound nor movement, save to clutch the edge of the bench on either side of her. As, bit by bit, the meaning of his strange tale became clear, the soft fingertips pressed more hardly into the unyielding wood till their skin was bruised and sore. She was not conscious of it; she felt nothing, saw nothing but the man before her—the man whom she had thought she knew, but whom she now understood for the first time, and who seemed to her at once so strange and yet so familiar. Every word which came from the pallid lips was borne out by the man's manner, by the very bend of his figure, and by certain peculiarities of speech which she had observed before and had attributed to the relationship between the cousins, but which she could no longer account for in this way, for they now stood out with startling distinctness and individuality. So she listened, not at first comprehending its drift, to his account of the Pacha's wanderings and finding of the mandrake, referring to the scene she had herself witnessed when the Ambassador gave him the casket containing the fetich. He spoke of the lying-in-state; of his unintentional overhearing of Ruel Bey's proposal, which had so fired him with indignation; of the Pacha's funeral; the scene at the cemetery gates, and the accident to the first secretary. He described his sense of the dead hand interposing and the commission to

himself to save her from treachery and dishonour, and painted his feelings at sight of his cousin lying unconscious before him, He told of the drive to Harley Street; the examination in the consulting-room, his diagnosis of the case—all in a dull, concise way, as though he were giving evidence about a matter which did not closely concern him. Next he related briefly how he had been left alone by Heathcote with the insensible man, and had then been assailed by fierce temptation; and here came a note of emotion into the hollow voice which recounted the extraordinary events that followed.

As he did so, Rachel seemed to see the operating-room with its shaded lights, the still form on the couch, the passion-racked man beside it, and a little way off, in its golden box, the arbiter of their fate—the mandrake. She drew her breath sharply as he described the foggy atmosphere when he had thrown up the window to ease his own tumultuous breathings. Her eyes never left his downcast eyelids. He was telling her of his impulsive opening of the box; of how he had walked back to the operating-room with the mandrake stirring on his breast; of his sudden realisation that the Pacha's prophecy was fulfilled, and that he was face to face with the hour, the desire, and the opportunity. He told her of that fiery effort of will, and the love that gave it power; of the blankness that came afterwards; of the awakening; the sight of Marillier's prostrate form on the ground with the mandrake beside it; the image of Caspar Ruel in the mirror.

Rachel did not utter a word. The story carried her imagination along, and enchained her attention. She did not know whether or not she credited the tale, whether the magic of the mandrake were a fact, the metamorphosis a reality; but as she looked at the man before her, the man who was not Caspar Ruel, nor Lucien Marillier, but a mysterious blending of both, she could not doubt that there was truth in his statement.

He narrated quickly the return of Heathcote, and his own impulse to go at once to the Embassy on account of his anxiety to spare Rachel shock and pain; and as he spoke, the girl's heart gave an answering throb. He had always been her loyal friend and lover—always, from then till now. The scene between them in the firelight rushed back upon her. She heard his kind voice, she felt his protecting arm, she was moved anew by his reverential tenderness; she saw him again kneeling beside her—not the old half-cynical, half-patronising Caspar, but a new wooer, passionate but humble, laying for the first time sacred fire upon her heart's altar—that Holy of Holies into which Caspar Ruel had never penetrated.

'The rest you know,' he said, and then came a few gruff sentences. He would not waste speech upon his diplomatic difficulties, his sense of having brought himself into a position that he was wholly incompetent to fill. Nevertheless Rachel must understand something of this, so he touched lightly upon his perplexities and the assistance rendered him by Ahmed Bey. He made little comment upon his illness, only alluding to his sensations during their first meeting when he became convalescent, and the knowledge then forced upon him of that ghostly third separating them. Perhaps, he said, it might have been better had he at once accepted the warning, but he could regret nothing that had ensured him her love.

His voice broke at last; for a moment he could not speak. He drew his hands from his pockets and half extended them towards Rachel, looking for the first time since he began his narration fully into her eyes.

'I want you to understand this. I want you to know that though I was ready to pay any price to gain you I could not have taken you at any cost to yourself. If I had not seen that you loved me, Rachel—me, myself; if I had not believed that I could protect you best as your husband, I would not have allowed you to bind yourself to me. But things being as they were, how could I be sorry for what has brought me in any sense nearer to you.'

She would have put out her hands to meet his, but there was no time for her to do so; he drew his arms back at once, and folding them on his breast, stood aloof, his head erect, squaring his shoulders in a way that had been commonly noticeable in Doctor Marillier.

‘So we were married,’ he said, ‘and since that time circumstances, not lack of love in me, have held us apart.’ His voice was firmer now, and he spoke with quiet sadness of the power which had made itself felt upon their marriage day, and ultimately driven him from his bride.

He passed over the journey till their arrival at the castle and the scene in that same room which had so unnerved them both.

‘I was not myself,’ he exclaimed. ‘You know—you must know, that it was not I—*not Lucien Marillier*—who filled you with fear. *This* is Lucien Marillier, or the best part of him.’ He raised his arms and let them fall again upon his breast. ‘*That* was someone else. My dear!’—his voice rang strongly with the old burr that she remembered—‘do you know who spoke to you then through these lips?’

In a flash the answer was written on her brain.

‘*It was Caspar,*’ she whispered.

‘Yes, it was Caspar—the soul I had robbed and wronged. Do you know *how* he came? I desired you, my wife, with all a man’s passion, and that desire was the door by which Caspar’s expelled spirit entered in and controlled the body I had stolen. I understood the mystery when my reason was able to work once more. You had shown me the truth. I knew that by the laws I had violated, I was condemned.’ His eyes fell again to the ground; he kept his arms folded, and his whole appearance betokened firm resolve. But it was in the very depth of humility that he stood at last confessed before her. She answered gently,—‘And so you thought that because of the misfortune which has come upon us you ought to separate yourself altogether from me. You intended that we should part.’

She spoke, not in a questioning tone, but as if she were stating a fact of which she was perfectly aware. She had risen and moved towards him, her eyes, grave and sweet, lighting up the solemnity of her face. He drew back, straightening himself against the stand of the telescope.

‘Do you understand what I have been telling you?’ he asked. ‘Perhaps, my dear, you don’t believe my story. I said that you would think me mad.’

‘Yes, I believe it,’ she replied. ‘Have I not seen for myself? If you are mad, then I too am mad.’

‘But—but,’ he stammered. ‘What do you mean, Rachel?’

‘Are we not husband and wife?’ she said. ‘Can anything break that bond?’

‘But you married me in ignorance, believing me to be your old lover. It was Caspar to whom you gave yourself.’

‘And it is Lucien whom I have learned to love,’ she said, flinging away restraint. ‘Can you not see that? I thought once that I cared for Caspar. I know myself better now. Take me to your heart, Lucien—my true love, my husband.’

Though he had hoped that she would receive his confession thus, he could hardly now convince himself that he heard aright. Yet there was no mistaking the integrity of her purpose, no possibility of doubting her love. She was offering herself to him again, not in ignorance, but in full knowledge.

‘Lucien!’ she repeated, dwelling caressingly on the unaccustomed syllables, and he, enraptured at hearing his own name thus spoken by her lips, caught her to his breast, holding her there as though he could never let her go. But it was no second foretaste of Paradise that he now experienced. They had both gone down into the deeps of suffering; the waves of spiritual anguish

had well-nigh overwhelmed them, and even now, he felt a deathly clutch dragging him down. He put her from him with great tenderness, staggering as he leaned against the telescope. She saw that he looked white and ill again, and was full of concern.

‘It is nothing, child,’ he said. ‘I don’t know what is the matter with me. I feel strangely weak; it is certain that I am not well; but no doubt this is exhaustion after my long walk. Do not trouble about that. I have more to tell you—all about to-day.’

‘Sit down beside me,’ she said, drawing him to the bench. ‘You will not refuse me now, Lucien?’

Her sweet understanding was just what he needed, it gave him confidence. His worshipping look was one of utter thankfulness. He sat down on the bench, and, as rapidly as he was able—for his breath came heavily—he told her of his adventure that day. While he talked, there was a vivid flash of lightning, and after some seconds, a growl of distant thunder. The wind, which had been quite still, now rose and set the lamp swaying and flickering again. She was too deeply interested in his story, too distressed also at his evident weakness and difficulty in getting speech, to notice the gathering of the storm.

‘And now,’ he concluded, ‘I have told you everything. I am free from the accursed power of the mandrake—free, too, I hope, from the assaults of the dead. And you, too, my love, are free: Caspar Ruel cannot claim the wife who disavows him. Only give me this assurance, now that you know all. Have you any personal regret for the man who might have been your husband but for my rash and wicked act?’

‘He might have died in any case,’ she said in a low voice.

‘True. That is possible; but, I think, not probable. I hoped at the time to save him; I believed that I could do so. Honestly, Rachel, when I performed that operation I had no thought of him as my successful rival. Professional instinct prompted what seemed the only means of saving his life. If those means had failed, you would have lost your lover, but I should not have been to blame. I might then have wooed you—if I had dared.’

‘If you had dared!’ she repeated. ‘You might not have dared. And how could I bear my life, having lost Caspar, and not having found Lucien?’

‘Perhaps I am not accountable for Caspar’s death,’ he said, in so faint a voice that she had to bend nearer to catch the words. ‘Perhaps I am less guilty than I have believed; but supposing it is not so—supposing that I am in very truth a usurper with the brand of Cain upon me, tell me, Rachel, does my love yet stand to you in the stead of his?’

She saw that his heart ached for her asseveration. She knelt down on the ground beside him, as he sat huddled on the bench in the angle of the window embrasure, and took both his hands in hers, lifting up her face, while with the solemnity of a nun taking her vow, she answered him.

‘Hear me. I knew Caspar, my lover, as he used to be, and I always felt a little afraid of him; I always distrusted him. That is why my love was a pain and not a joy. I knew Lucien as my friend; I have known Lucien as my lover—true and loyal in each relation. I repeat, it is Lucien whom I love. It is Lucien’s heart and soul to which my heart and soul respond. I ask of Heaven no future in which Lucien may not share; for where Lucien leads I will follow, and it is with Lucien that I would unite myself, here and through all eternity.’

Her feverish fingers holding his, which had become clammy, received a feeble pressure. She clasped both his hands in one of hers, and with the other, drew down his face while she lifted her warm lips to his cold ones, crowning her self-surrender. In that moment’s fervour, his life flamed up one last brief flicker before it left the now totally exhausted frame, and by that sacred kiss Rachel’s vow was registered in records that are eternal.

As their lips met, a flash of lightning illuminated the dark spaces of the windows, and a louder and nearer thunderclap shook the tower's foundations. The tempest was approaching; the wind crashed with the force of breakers against the solid walls of the castle. A fiercer gust rushed in and caught the swinging lamp, making the shadows dance madly. Almost simultaneously with the life that leaped and sank, the flame of the lamp flared up and was extinguished.

The room became a dense darkness, a darkness deeper than that of the night outside. It was a terrifying darkness, and with it an awful sense of loneliness fell upon Rachel. She did not know yet that Lucien was dead; she was only sensible of the weight of his body against hers, but fear seized her. The hands she held, dropped rigidly when she took hers away, and the form she tried to raise and put back into a sitting posture was inert. She put her ear down to his heart and knew that it had ceased beating. Now the truth burst upon her, and she drew back with a cry that pierced the darkness and rose above the wind's wail. As she did so, the body slipped and would have fallen heavily on the ground, had she not put out her arms, with difficulty sustaining it, and at last contriving to lay it gently down.

Her next thought was that perhaps he had only fainted, and she had the impulse to rush down and get brandy. She went to the head of the stairs, stood irresolutely a moment, and turned. Something told her that it was too late; there was nothing to be done. He was dead.

But dead or living, he was still her husband—Lucien, not Caspar—the man she loved, and to whom she had made her vows for life and in death also. She walked stumblingly back to where he lay in the darkness, and kneeling beside him, pillowed his head upon her arm. She felt his hands; they were stiff and cold. She listened once more to his heart; there was not the faintest flutter. She kissed him, but the lips she touched, were as marble. Yet, she said to herself again, though he were dead he was still hers; no one now could come between them.

Then a dreadful thought troubled her. She took his head from her arm and laid it upon the ground; and, drawing back from him, remained crouched, her hands between her knees, staring out into the darkness that enveloped her. If he were dead—this—*this thing* before her was not Lucien any longer; it was the body of Caspar. Lucien's body had been buried long ago. Lucien's soul had inhabited this house of flesh only by right of violent seizure, by force of will, by—yes, she was certain of it—the magic of the mandrake. And now the spell of the mandrake was broken, the root was buried in its old place, and the power had returned to its source. Therefore Lucien might no longer retain this earthly tabernacle of which he had taken unlawful possession.

Another flash of lightning played vividly upon the ashen face, and the still form seemed to confirm her wild suspicion. There was no trace of Lucien here. That form and face—the faint smile which, in her excited fancy, seemed to curve the lips, were Caspar's. Even at this moment Caspar's spirit might be struggling to re-enter the body of which it had been deprived. Caspar might come back. Caspar might claim not only that which was lying there, but all else that had been his. *He might claim his wife.*

Panic seized the unhappy girl. She sprang to her feet with a mad longing to fly—to escape, she cared not how, she cared not where. As the lightning gleamed intermittently, her eyes went round the tower room, the stone walls, the dark windows, the stormy blackness beyond. She pressed her hand upon her forehead in the effort to think collectedly. If Lucien were here he would save her. From the first day of their meeting till now, he had never failed her. She called his name

'Lucien! . . . Oh! help me! . . . Lucien! . . . I am alone. . . . I am afraid.'

And there came a response to her frenzied appeal. She became conscious of a gentle presence soothing and sustaining her. Her eyes strained into the darkness.

'Lucien!' she whispered.

There was no reply in words. The wind had lulled again. There was the stillness that comes just before a tempest breaks overhead; but out of that silence a voice seemed to speak to her heart, bidding her have faith, and not to fear.

She answered the voice, speaking aloud with childlike simplicity.

'I will do whatever you bid me, Lucien. . . . I am not afraid now I know that you are here. . . . I am sure that you would never go far from me. Guide me, Lucien. . . .'

She stopped; then spoke again hesitatingly, as one who longs, yet dreads, to make a suggestion.

'*Can't you take me with you?*' she said very slowly, and hardly above a whisper. 'You wouldn't want to go without me, Lucien. . . . It . . . it . . . wouldn't be painful. . . I . . . I could. . .'

She stopped again. Her conscience, her Catholic upbringing, told her that self-destruction was a crime.

'I must not,' she said aloud in answer to her own thought. 'You would not like it. You always said it was your duty to save life. I must not—it would be wicked. But . . . oh! show me the way, Lucien. Do not leave me alone.'

She had moved nearer one of the windows. The dead body lay on the floor behind her. She would not look at it again. She had said that she was not afraid. She was determined not to let herself be afraid, but she could not fight against her horror of that dead thing, and she felt a greater horror lest it should be living.

She looked out through the window from which a step led up to the stone ledge outside. The glass door had all been broken away. In the stillness she could hear herself breathe. It was darker than ever. The whole heavens seemed to be covered with a black pall. Suddenly in the dim aperture she fancied that she saw a vaporous shape—the square form, the grey face of Lucien Marillier as she had first known him. She sprang forward. The form seemed to raise a beckoning hand; the grey face smiled.

'Lucien!' she cried. A glimmer of lightning showed her the parapet and the yawning gulf below; showed her too, the Ghost Mountain looming, but only for an instant. The black curtain fell, impenetrable again. But in that gleam the road to rest of which her mother had dreamed flashed before Rachel. There, Rachel O'Hara had known she could take refuge from Abdullulah Zobeir; there also, might the girl Rachel seek safety from Caspar Ruel. But once more she recoiled.

'Lucien,' she repeated, 'oh! not *that*. You could not have meant *that*, for you know that it would be deadly sin.'

The grey figure seemed to withdraw itself into the night. But surely its hand was beckoning still.

Her foot was on the window-sill. The childlike voice still pleaded.

'Oh! Lucien, must I—? I want to come, but must it be that way? . . . Lead me, Lucien—I trust you. . . . You always said that I must trust you. . . . Lucien, you wouldn't let me do wrong? . . .'

She stepped upon the parapet. A wild, wordless prayer rose from her breast—'If it might be the Hand of God, and not—'

And the prayer was heard. A great light shone upon Khâyal, and God's javelin descended and struck the white form which stood with arms upraised to welcome the stroke.

There was a faint rushing sound in the air, and the storm burst.