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Mr. Mirakel

by

E Phillips Oppenheim

PART I

CHAPTER I

Mademoiselle was seated at the extreme end of an ornate but crudely fashioned wooden bench very near the corner of the seafront at Cintra. Monsieur had been seated in thoughtful silence a dozen feet away for some time. There came a moment, however, when he rose slowly to his feet and, with a little bow and his hat in his hand, addressed her. It was the first time that the silence had been broken between them. Perhaps that was as well, for they were strangers.

"Mademoiselle," he began.

Mademoiselle half rose to her feet with an indignant little flutter of her skirt and an angry frown. "Mademoiselle will pardon me," he continued, speaking English, but with an accent which pronounced his southern nationality.

"Mademoiselle," she interrupted coldly, "will not be in the humour to pardon anything in the nature of an impertinence."

"That reduces me almost to despair," the young man lamented. "What is there that I can do? Would it be considered too great an impertinence if I were to point out to Mademoiselle that some two or three minutes ago she dropped her purse out of her bag, since when its contents have been slowly filtering their way into the sand? If they become buried," he continued, looking fixedly at a point very near the toe of his companion's elegant shoe, "and if Mademoiselle does not collect her belongings in a few moments, they will sink into the sand."

Of course, Monsieur had won the silent battle, as she had begun to look upon it, of the last ten minutes. She looked disconsolately down. It was as her neighbour had pointed out. Her small gold purse lay between the chinks of the seat rest, upside-down. There were coins glittering through its interstices, and a little bundle of notes was in a precarious position.

"So that was what you were so uneasy about?" she asked in a slightly milder tone.

"It was," he assented.

"I owe you my apologies and my thanks," she said with very reserved graciousness. "Please allow me to pick these up for myself. I would not dream of troubling you, Monsieur—indeed, I beg of you."

She waved him away and continued to pick up a very considerable sum reckoned in Portuguese money, replacing it carefully, the notes in her bag, the coins in her purse. She shook them down and rose to her feet.

"I thank you very much, Monsieur," she said.

He bowed without a word and waited for her intimated retreat. At the last moment, however, she hesitated. He remained standing, not at all an unpleasant picture of a young man who had been engaged in a purely courteous action.

"I think," she said, "I should offer you an apology. I came out from the Casino feeling the heat very much, in search of fresh air, and solitude."

"Mademoiselle," he assured her with a pleasant smile, "nothing in the world would have induced me to disturb you but for the fact that I feared you might lose your money more quickly and even more inevitably than inside the building."

"One is not always the loser," she answered, returning his smile. "I myself gain frequently."

"Mademoiselle has the *chance*."

"I wish to offer you my thanks, sir. To whom shall I address them?"

He bowed slightly.

"To Roderigo di Cordovina, Mademoiselle. It is with so much of my name only that I will burden you.

"There is much more?" she enquired with slightly upraised eyebrows.

"Mademoiselle," he answered, "I possess a long list of thoughtless ancestors who, without divining the encumbrance they would be to me, left behind them names of many syllables which even I have learnt to handle with difficulty. Not for anything in the world would I encumber a young lady of such attractions with their memory."

She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. He was quite content to be studied, for with his olive complexion, his deep brown eyes and his very pleasant smile, he was by no means repulsive to look at. Mademoiselle, too, had charm, although for the part of the world in which she found herself she was of somewhat neutral colouring. She nodded thoughtfully.

"You are very good at this sort of thing," she observed.

"Yes?" he asked interrogatively.

"At the bandying of words."

"A forerunner, I trust, of a better acquaintance."

She laughed outright, a healthy Anglo-Saxon girl's laugh, showing flashing white teeth, and a distinct dimple which betrayed a great inclination to take part in the festivities.

"I would beg for some more of your name," she confided, "but you see—your attention is required elsewhere."

She indicated the very correctly attired young messenger in livery who was waiting in the background with a note in his hand, which he at once handed over to the young man. The latter bowed his thanks to the young lady, received the note, tore open the envelope and glanced through its contents. They appeared to afford him a certain amount of satisfaction.

"You will tell the Captain," he directed, handing across to the messenger what seemed to be a magnificent *pourboire*, "that I have received the note and that I shall be there."

The young lady hesitated as she turned away.

"Your news, I trust, is good?" she enquired.

"It would be good," he assured her, "but it is spoilt by your departure."

She shook her head.

"No more," she decided. "You are too glib for me, Monsieur. Thank you for showing me my purse."

"And may I be permitted to hope, perhaps," he added with a little bow, "that we meet again?"

Mademoiselle's expression was by no means forbidding, but she made no reply. She walked towards the Casino and disappeared.

The young man of many names read over his note again, turned towards the line of waiting automobiles, and lifted his finger. In a few minutes he was on his way to Lisbon.

CHAPTER II

Somewhere about the grim hour of half-past two the following morning, there was a certain amount of commotion in the huge barnlike structure which serves as the departure shed of the Imperial Airways planes in Lisbon. There had been a change in the weather outside; the wind had dropped, the rain had almost ceased. A shrill whistle was heard echoing through that gloomy building from one of the quays. A tall young man in naval uniform hurried down the steps from the pilot's quarters. He carried a few passports in his hand. A little crowd of people was seated round the departure shed, some of them nervously hanging on to their baggage, others drinking tea or coffee which they were able to procure from the stall, a few watching with tired eyes and listening for the signal which so seldom came. The pilot looked round him, shook his head at nearly everyone who approached, handed over their passports to two or three Americans, and also with a little bow and marked signs of respect handed one to the young man of many names who had been seated on the bench at Cintra on the previous afternoon.

"Shall we get away, pilot?" the latter asked.

"Nothing that I can see to prevent it, sir," was the quiet reply. "The wind has gone down and the tide is on the turn already. We sent your baggage down half an hour ago."

The young man nodded his thanks and lit a cigarette. He was on the point of taking his departure when he felt a touch upon his arm and a familiar voice in his ear. It was a familiar voice, yet he could not remember for the moment where he had heard it before. The slim, tall figure in a warm travelling coat and an impenetrable veil who was addressing him was surely a stranger.

"*Monsieur le Marquis*," she repeated pleadingly.

He suddenly realized the identity of the young woman who stood by his side. Her manner was very much changed, though, since the morning. Her eyes were full of anxiety and the colour had left her cheeks.

"Mademoiselle!" he exclaimed, hat in hand.

"You have been given your passport, you leave by this boat?"

"Yes, I believe so," he answered. "The pilot has just told me to get on board. The note that I had at Cintra was from him."

"Monsieur," she went on, and her voice also seemed to have changed altogether since the morning, "you have priority, of course? You have influence here?"

"Very little," he answered. "Some, perhaps."

"Could you procure for me permission to cross by this flying boat?" she asked eagerly. "I have my ticket, but no priority. Everything is paid for, my baggage is on the seat there. It would be a great and wonderful benefit for me if I could leave Lisbon tonight."

He looked at her in some embarrassment.

"My dear young lady," he remonstrated, "I am afraid that you are asking something which is very difficult. These people have already made out their list, there are nearly always men and women who have been waiting here for many nights. I do not think that the authorities would consent to any alteration in their arrangements."

"You do not know me," she went on. "It is a great humiliation that I should have to plead like this. I ask the greatest favour of my life from a stranger. Yet believe me, I am not exaggerating when I tell you that if I remain, it is to face great inconvenience if not danger."

"That sounds rather serious, Mademoiselle," he observed gravely.

"I use the word advisedly," she assured him. "I am in danger here. I wish I could make you understand how wonderful it would be for me to feel the sea beneath my feet, to be passing away from this passion-riven Continent, to safety in England."

He looked at her curiously.

"England is not supposed to be the safest place in the world just now," he reminded her.

"Safety!" she said wearily. "It is a matter of the soul, not of the body. Monsieur le Marquis, we may never meet again, but if you do this for me I shall think of you with deep gratitude for the rest of my life. You will be doing a marvellous kindness to a stranger, but you will be doing it for one who will never forget."

He shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"One moment," he begged.

He moved across to the pilot, drew him on one side, and for a few moments talked rapidly. The pilot at first shook his head; then he listened more intently and his manner changed. He hesitated for a few minutes and finally, covering it with a loose sheet of paper, he handed over a passport.

"To tell you the truth, Marquis," he said, "I think that the young lady is quite right in wanting to get out of this country. Will you have the kindness to hand her this passport? Forget that I gave it to you, if you can. It is in your hands—after that, I know nothing. If there is trouble it will figure as the mistake of a clerk. Forget that you have done this, as I shall forget."

The Marquis shook him by the hand. For some reason or other he felt curiously elated at the success of his mission. The pilot made a hasty retreat and disappeared up the steps into his office.

Roderigo di Cordovina drew the anxiously waiting girl a little on one side, concealing the passport, which had been the object of many jealous glances.

"Mademoiselle," he announced, "I have done as you asked. There is your passport. I do not know your name. Until we have passed out of the country it would be just as well perhaps if you do not tell it to me. The handling of passports just now is a curiously indirect and difficult thing. I have made myself responsible for the young man who has granted the favour. I trust you that it will not be abused. For myself, I take any risks there may be cheerfully, even the risk of your being a dangerous criminal!" he added with a smile. "But if the young man should lose his post through this indiscretion, I should be deeply concerned."

Perhaps it was as well for the girl that there was a screaming whistle from the end of the quay just at that moment which reverberated through the huge waiting room. Light truckloads of luggage were wheeled out on to the wooden quay. Everyone was pushing and scrambling to get down to the boat. The two were separated in the crowd. A manservant addressed the young man and showed him the way.

* * *

From the depths of his comfortable seat in the salon, Roderigo di Cordovina pushed on one side the mass of light novels and newspapers he had collected for the journey, and devoted himself for some time to speculation as to the reasons for the sudden change in this young woman, by whom he frankly admitted that he was very much interested. The change in her bearing and deportment, from the few minutes he had spent with her in Cintra to this unexpected meeting in the departure shed of the Airways, was astonishing in its completeness and almost sinister suggestions. She had shown not the slightest signs of encouraging him in any way at Cintra; she had even discouraged the quite harmless overtures towards a certain amount of friendliness which he had made on the *plage*. During that brief period she had impressed him as being self-reliant, dignified and distinguished. A few hours later in the Airways shed, in the cold and gloom of that miserable morning, she was a changed being. Something seemed to have happened which had brought fear into her life. At Cintra she was self-possessed and full of poise. In those few moments at Lisbon, especially during her almost frantic appeal to him, she was an entirely changed person. She had not even volunteered her name in acknowledgment of the service he had undoubtedly rendered her. She had drawn the cover even tighter over her passport, to aid in concealing her identity from him.

He summoned the steward as he passed and ordered a drink.

"I suppose you have a different division of the boat for ladies?" he asked.

"Not entirely, sir," the man replied. "But they have a very pleasant little drawing-room the other side of the lounge."

"Did you notice a young lady who came on alone just before or just after me?" Roderigo enquired. "She was wearing a long coat and carrying a small dressing case and handbag."

"I think I know the young lady you mean, sir. She had a berth made up directly she arrived and she has been lying down ever since."

The traveller hesitated for a moment and struggled with the temptation to ask the question which the other's ready tongue suggested. Fortunately for his self-respect the steward anticipated him.

"I do not know her name, sir," he went on. "I do not think she is on the list for this morning at all. The pilot must have passed her at the last moment. There is a place for a label on her dressing case, but it is empty."

"She seems all right, I hope."

"Can't say, sir. She disappeared in the ladies' quarters, and I did hear the young woman who looks after them there say that she threw herself down on the couch and she hasn't opened her eyes or spoken since."

The young man nodded and waved the steward away. Then he stretched himself out comfortably, piled up his cushions, drank his whisky-and-soda—a drink to which at that time in the morning he was a little unaccustomed—and slept until he heard the rattle of coffee cups. He made a hasty toilet, drank some coffee, and enjoyed some delightfully furtive peeps at Poole Harbour on a sunny morning. For the first time he allowed himself to think of his mysterious fellow passenger. He drew a card from his case and scribbled a line on the back of it.

"I do hope you have had a pleasant rest and are glad to arrive in England."

He signed it with his initials and called the steward.

"Could you get that card sent to the young lady we were speaking of?" he asked.

"Of course I could, sir. She is just having some coffee," he replied.

Their progress down the harbour was unexpectedly rapid. They arrived at their destination half an hour later.

Roderigo lined up to disembark. He touched the steward on the arm as he slipped him his *pourboire*.

"You found the young lady and gave her the card?" he enquired.

"She had it within two minutes of your giving it to me, sir. I am very much obliged to you, I am sure, sir. Thank you."

"She seemed all right this morning?"

"Perfectly, sir. I did hear her say that she was not hurrying off."

Roderigo after that delayed no more. He was through the customs in a quarter of an hour. A few minutes later he was seated in the train to London. He had not had another glimpse of his provocative acquaintance.

CHAPTER III

Roderigo di Cordovina spent the first week or ten days of his stay in London very much in the usual style of the young foreigner of birth and breeding. He commenced by removing himself from the large hotel in which he had engaged rooms and selected a small suite in a block of flats not far from Berkeley Square. Afterwards he devoted the mornings to visiting tailors, hosiers, bootmakers, and other establishments patronized by the fashionable youth of Europe. His afternoons were devoted to visits of ceremony. He left cards upon a few personal friends and connections of his family, upon the various Legations and Embassies still existing, and finally gave his attention to introductions to London clubs with which he had been entrusted by various members of his somewhat large circle of friends. On the tenth day after his arrival he found himself amidst the pillared ways of a club somewhere in the West End of London, gazing listlessly at a few pictures, all of which, being a young man of considerable taste and culture, he found terrible. In due course, he presented himself to the Secretary, who was seated in solitary state in his office engaged in an apathetic study of the *Times*. The Secretary had once occupied the chair of Archaeology at a well-known university; but now was temporarily invalidated out of his position, and a thoroughly bad-tempered man. He surveyed Roderigo's card through horn-rimmed eyeglasses, transferred his regard to his visitor personally with a great deal of silent disapproval in his manner, and motioned him to a chair.

"I am afraid, Marquis," he warned him, "that there is very little we can do just now to render your stay in London agreeable."

"I could scarcely hope for anything of the sort under the somewhat unfortunate circumstances," was the understanding reply.

The visitor's voice was so pleasant and his manners so easy and distinguished that the other made an attempt at civility.

"For anything that we can do, however, we are at your disposal," he said. "We are short-staffed, our chef has deserted us, our wine committee have failed in their duties and our cellar is nearly empty. We have discontinued the habit of letting bedrooms, and I am afraid that the majority of our members who are left here and whom you may still come across will scarcely be men with whom you will find much in common."

Roderigo waved his hand.

"At a time like this," he admitted, "I expected nothing. Having a card addressed to a club of such distinction, however, I felt it agreeable to present myself for a few moments."

"You are very welcome, of course," the Secretary assured him. "Your name shall be properly entered in the book."

"Mine is an unhappy-looking country just now," the Marquis confided. "Lisbon has become simply a dumping place for spies, tourists, diplomats looking for a job, and armament contractors. It is filled with

crowds of very busy men who have just arrived from somewhere or who are just going somewhere else, and who wish to confide the nature of their business to every listener within hearing. It is simply intolerable. My own estates are filled with uninvited and unwanted evacués from what is after all a foreign country. You perceive, sir, that I am not a philanthropist."

The Secretary stroked his chin.

"The idea was beginning to dawn upon me," he admitted.

"I am paying a short visit here," the other explained, "entirely on impulse. It occurred to me that your country might be in a sense interesting at this time when, magnificently assured as is his reputation for a phlegmatic disposition, the Briton is finding himself a little—shall I say 'pushed,' 'awakened'? The same impulse may drive me, if the opportunity occurs, to wander even farther afield across the Atlantic."

"You will find it exceedingly difficult," the Secretary warned him drily. "The Atlantic to-day is made over to mankind with a purpose. You, I gather, scarcely come under that heading."

Roderigo was dubious.

"I have a purpose," he protested, "but it is simply to rediscover myself in all this new tumult."

"What has it got to do with you?" the Secretary asked a little bluntly.

The eyebrows of his visitor were slightly raised.

"I am perhaps properly reproved," the latter admitted. "It has nothing to do with me. My remark was sheer egoism. There is no reason why I should rediscover myself. I am just as well hopelessly lost like millions of others here in this island and all over the Continent. I thank you for your courtesy, sir. I shall spend a short time, if I may, inspecting your library."

He left the room with a little bow. The Secretary glared after him. Both were suffering from a mutual and perfectly reasonable dislike of the other's outlook.

"What the hell use is a Portuguese Marquis to the Parthenon Club?" was the Secretary's reaction.

"Why ever do they need a savage to keep strangers out of a club like this?" Roderigo muttered to himself as he went out and commenced a long and vain quest for a bar. He finally confided the nature of the quest upon which he was engaged to an elderly waiter of sad but benevolent aspect, who resembled more than anything else a high dignitary of the Church.

"If you wish for a cup of tea, sir, I can send it to you in either of the rooms on the left there, or in the lounge," the visitor was told.

"But I do not wish for a cup of tea," was the rueful reply. "I should like a drink of a more refreshing character."

"Alcohol is seldom served in the Club before the official hours, sir," the man ventured. "May I ask whether you are a visitor?"

"Your club," Roderigo confided, "is affiliated with one of which I have been a member since I left the University of Lisbon."

"I have always understood, sir," the man observed, "that habits on the Continent are very different from ours. We shall do our best to accommodate you, of course."

"I will have a whisky-and-soda in here," Roderigo decided, sinking into a well-worn but capacious easy chair. "And look here, my friend," he added, "would you mind telling me why you have such an expression of surprise upon your face?"

"I beg your pardon, sir, I am sure," the man replied. "I was surprised, I must confess, to hear a gentleman who has—forgive me, sir—every appearance of being a foreigner, speak English so perfectly."

"You flatter me," Roderigo observed, reaching out for a newspaper. "But for the unfortunate fact that in a moment of madness I volunteered for that Spanish insurrectionary war and commanded a troop of cavalry during the process of their becoming mechanized, I might have been at the present moment Professor of English at our principal university. I unfortunately lost some portion of my boyish health and an inch or two off my leg in that campaign."

The major-domo, for so he was always called at the Club, backed away and routed out an inferior domestic to procure and serve the whisky-and-soda. He was not a person with a great sense of humour and he had an entirely ill-founded idea that this unusual visitor was secretly amusing himself at his expense. Roderigo, however, was doing nothing of the sort. He was feeling very much depressed and already half convinced that this excursion of his to England had never been a necessity and was altogether a mad affair. He decided when he had drunk a portion of his whisky-and-soda and lit one of his endless cigarettes that he would try something more frivolous in the way of entertainment to pass the remainder of the day. He selected from a roll of cards which had arrived by that morning's post, and which he had tied together and thrust into his overcoat pocket, an invitation to a cocktail party to be given by the Portuguese Ambassador at his own Embassy. As the latter, the Baron Fernando di Gomez by name, was a widower and depended upon a niece from the family of the di Cordovinas to act as hostess for him, Roderigo, who knew the young lady very well indeed, decided that in Manderley House he would stand a better chance of escaping from his depression. Whether he did a wise thing when he bade adieu to the gloomy shadows of the Parthenon Club and departed for the Portuguese Embassy was a subject upon which he speculated many times during the next few months. It was in any case a memorable decision.

Roderigo drove up to Manderley House about half an hour later, handed his stick and gloves to an attendant footman, greeted the major-domo of the household, who was an old acquaintance, with a pleasant smile, and was led into the reception room upstairs from which the sound of many cheerful young voices and the tinkling of many shakers was at least exhilarating. He heard his name announced with full and sonorous emphasis. A small dark young lady, of sparkling and vivacious appearance, threw her shapely little arms into the air and abandoned all ceremony at his entrance. It was all she could do to refrain from embracing him, and they stood together hand in hand for several moments without anything particularly intelligent happening in the way of conversation. At last, however, the Princess Rosina became coherent.

"Roderigo, my cousin!" she exclaimed, introducing him as it were to the whole of her little circle with a wave of the hand. "My beloved! How wonderful to see you over here in this gloomy city. But why, why in the name of all that is wonderful do you come? Except that I think something must have told you that my heart was aching to hear your voice, I can think of no other reason for your visit."

"I can at least confess, dear Rosina," he answered, "that it was my heart which made me come. I suspected it at the time. The sound of your voice as I climbed your beautiful staircase convinced me."

"But the true reason," she demanded, with an impatient little stamp of her tiny foot. "The true reason! Why are you here?"

"Rosina," he whispered earnestly, "I ask myself that with every breath I draw. I do not know. There is no answer. All that I can tell you is that I was driven out of Lisbon by a multitude of wild people. I had to escape. It was here or South America. I chose here. I know now that I was right."

"You were very, very wrong," she assured him, "from your own point of view. The only person whom you will make happy here is myself. I am very lonely, Roderigo. But in Buenos Aires they are gay. In Rio also. The whole of the Southern Hemisphere is happy. Here they are—what shall I say?—grim. It is not that they are afraid, they have the courage of lions, but the shadow hangs over them. They have fear. What shall we do with you, dear cousin, now that we have you?"

"Give me a cocktail to start with, please," he begged.

She took him by the arm and led him to a pleasant little corner of the room. All the time introductions of an informal type flowed from her lips. Roderigo found himself bowing to the right and to the left at every step. In the end they made a joke of it. Everyone seemed to understand the gay little Princess and her ways, and gradually they reached a quiet retired spot where there were very few people, and a footman who had assiduously followed them presented a tray laden with glasses.

"We will not sit down," she said, "because you will have to be leaping up again all the time with those charming manners of yours. We will drink to one another. Here you will find real lemons for your Martini, lemons which they tell me have been stripped away from our own dear land. I have you here, Roderigo, but I do not feel that you are real unless I hold your arm all the time. I feel that you will slip away. Do not dare to leave without seeing me again and making a rendezvous. You dine with us, when? To-morrow, perhaps?"

"To-morrow with joy," he answered. "About ten?"

"Remember," she laughed, "that you are no longer in the country of civilization. We dine here about half-past eight, and the English think *that* late. Never mind—their food is good, all their game is wonderful, and we have our own chef. Fernando will be crazy to see you, and I know perfectly well what his advice to you will be; but since I married Fernando's First Secretary and became the wife of a budding diplomat, I never tell anybody anything. I will introduce you to some beautiful women later on—but not for keeps, none of them, mind! I flit away now for a moment," she went on after receiving a message from the dignitary who had welcomed Roderigo. "I have a guest arrived, I know by Antonio's face, who must be welcomed. Royalty," she whispered, dropping her voice. "But see how soon I shall return."

Roderigo settled himself down in a high-backed chair, watched with admiration his young relative's graceful curtsy, and also suffered his glass to be replenished by the assiduous young footman. Life had seemed serious enough only a fortnight ago when he had suddenly decided to leave Portugal, but it was all very different now. He was very much a schoolboy at heart, and those vague apprehensions which had troubled him, the loneliness he was beginning to feel after that departure from his own country estates, the black depression of Lisbon, the dubious forebodings even of his own countrypeople, everything had been growing intolerable. This was the first taste of real light-hearted living he had seen or experienced for months. He welcomed a few minutes' conversation with the librarian and the treasurer of the establishment who, hearing of his arrival, came up to greet him, and he enjoyed once more the sound of his own tongue carefully and correctly spoken.

The librarian, whose name also was Gomez and who was a distant relative of the Minister, drew him on one side for a moment.

"I was asked, if I could, to find you at once, Marquis," he said. "You remember without a doubt Manuel di Gomez?"

"I think so," Roderigo answered. "A rather stocky built man with a very earnest manner. I met him once or twice at family parties. I thought he was in Berlin these days."

"He arrived in Lisbon three or four days ago with a special despatch to our chief there."

Roderigo nodded. He was not greatly interested. "Well, what about him, Dr. Gomez?"

"It appears he has business with you."

"With me?" Roderigo exclaimed. "Business? Why, I have scarcely ever spoken to him."

"He is the bearer of a message, at any rate," the librarian replied. "I reported it to the Baron, who told me to try to find you."

"I cannot conceive what message he could have for me of the slightest interest, or from whom it could have come," Roderigo said with an unexpected flash of ill-humour. "Anyhow, I have given my word to the most charming lady of my acquaintance, and withal a relative, that I will not move from this spot until her return—so you see, Doctor, I am a prisoner. You are a man of gallantry, I am sure you will approve of my fidelity."

The librarian was not altogether satisfied.

"Of course I do not know any particulars, Marquis," he confessed, "but this much is a certainty: The young man arrived in Lisbon from Berlin a few days ago with a despatch for you, and one to the President, begging that he would insist upon this young man having priority if necessary on the boats, if you had already left Lisbon for London, and in any case that his interview with you should be facilitated as far as possible."

Roderigo sat quite still for a moment, and no one who was not intimately acquainted with him would ever have realized that rather stony change in his manner.

"I have not sought messages or correspondence of any sort with anyone in Berlin," he confided, "and I am not going out of my way to receive any. A written communication will receive my attention, of course, but I cannot conceive an idea as to what its nature could be."

"You will not descend and receive the message from the young man's own hands? He has been given every facility by the authorities for reaching you quickly."

"I shall not leave this spot," Roderigo insisted.

The librarian was thoughtful for a moment.

"What if the Baron...?"

"That would be a different matter," Roderigo interrupted. "I am under the roof of the Embassy for the moment, but it is at nothing more important than a cocktail party. I have promised to stay here, and unless the Baron himself comes and releases me, or his charming niece, my present hostess, I shall stay where I am."

The librarian took his leave, passing through a door at the far end of the reception rooms which avoided any contact with the crowd. Almost at the same moment from the direction of the main *salon* Rosina reappeared. She made charming progress through her now thinning company of guests, calling out a light

farewell to an intimate friend, or a more formal leavetaking to another, but all the time carefully steering her two companions towards Roderigo. He rose to his feet and stood awaiting them.

The girl on Rosina's left was small, with the figure almost of a schoolboy—thin, but elegant—her feet seemed scarcely to touch the floor, her face was rippling with smiles, her volubility almost equalled her hostess's, her voice was low, yet musical and distinct. Her hair was the real colour of gold. She deserved the exaggeration of one of her admirers who had called his impression of her "a trapped gleam of sunshine." The girl who had been on Rosina's other side fell a little behind as they neared Roderigo, and something odd and yet familiar drew his whole attention towards her. For a matter of seconds perhaps he stood almost spellbound. What seemed to be happening was surely an impossibility. The newcomer was very pleasant to look at, dressed in the latest fashion, very graceful, with dark brown hair, eyes that were superlatively attractive, a complete lack of cosmetics on her oval, finely shaped face, a faint, half-concealed smile of humour which died away even as his eyes discerned it upon her full lips. She had a beautiful body, a beautifully controlled and gracious bearing. Roderigo, as the first shock had passed, watched her approach with a dazed, unchanging expression. The fact was that he thought of her as a vision, a tangled realization put together in new fashion, and yet the exact duplication of the girl who had been ceaselessly in his thoughts since he had left Lisbon. It was only when she came to a standstill that he realized the truth. It was indeed the same girl, although she seemed to be avoiding any gleam of recognition.

"You are properly grateful to me, I hope, Roderigo," his cousin exclaimed, "that I keep my word so soon and that I am able to present you to one at least of my most attractive guests—two, I shall add, from all I see, but one, alas, is almost a stranger to me. This is my dear little friend who matches me, they all say, in gaiety and high spirits and vivacity: Myra Huddleston, Roderigo—one of the most popular debutantes of the small court which has been held this year. And this other dear young lady," she went on, turning to the girl on her other side, "you will have to find out all about for yourself. I think that she is an English mees, but she might be American. She comes to me from a dear friend, and her name, she tells me, is Anne Strangeways. Roderigo, I must introduce you, alas, because I know that both these young ladies would be too shy to accept you with a Christian name only, so in all formality I present the Marquis di Cordovina to you both—Miss Anne Strangeways, Lady Myra Huddleston. Do not one of you dare to move until I return! Roderigo, let that be your charge. I go to say farewell to one more of my visitors whose rank demands it, and I hurry back to a little chat with you three. We will plot some mischief together. I have ideas. Make friends, please. You are, two of you at any rate, the treasures of my life."

Rosina was gone like a gay little flash, passing through the opening ranks of the people left in the room with a sort of effortless, but perfectly graceful haste. The younger woman, Lady Myra, laughed as she watched her for a minute. No one had even noticed the strange silence of the other two.

"I wonder, Marquis," Myra Huddleston remarked, "that we English girls ever dare to show ourselves in the company of foreigners. Rosina has such exquisite grace of manner, she talks in a strange language perfectly, and she says always the pleasant things. Don't you think so, Miss Strangeways? I can't imagine a luncheon party or a dinner party, or any form of entertainment where she was hostess, encumbered with a single gloomy moment."

"I agree with you entirely," the other girl said, and even though her voice sounded strange Roderigo found it impossible to doubt her identity.

He arranged places for the three women with the help of the footman who had hurried away to secure the chairs.

"You will sit and talk to a stranger for a few minutes, please?" he begged his companions. "You heard what the Princess insisted—I was to resist your departure with force if necessary. Besides, I claim the privilege of hospitality. I have only just arrived in this country and it is years since I have visited it."

Lady Myra Huddleston indulged in a little grimace.

"You have chosen rather a sad time for your journey, Marquis," she said. "There is very little entertaining just now and very little that we have to show visitors that is likely to be interesting."

"That depends," Anne Strangeways observed, her voice so low that if her enunciation had not been beautifully clear it would have been almost inaudible, "on of what he is in search."

He followed her lead, but kept his face turned away from the speaker. He replied more to her companion.

"If I were in search of anything in particular, if I were conscious of any real object in my visit, I should feel too much of the prying stranger to be comfortable. Believe me, if I may take you into my confidence, I have left my own country chiefly because of a fit of weary discontent with the conditions of life there. We have at the present moment no serious plan of existence in which one could take an interest. We have marched hand in hand with the rest of the world, I think, in one respect: the passion for amusement and sports which only a year or two ago almost enslaved us, seems to have faded suddenly away and left nothing in its place."

Lady Myra nodded sympathetically.

"How dull that sounds," she remarked, "and yet of course it is absolutely what is happening here for more vital reasons. In England it is the war first and the war only. The sports, such as they are, exist only for the recreation of the toilers. I suppose racing is the only exception. A few Englishmen play cricket, but I fancy it is only '*pour encourager les autres*.'"

"But after all," Roderigo ventured, "the complete closure of the ordinary occupations in life must leave other avenues of interest open. For instance, your universities. Already there are half a dozen economic societies in your country which have been founded since the war and which exist only for the sake of learning how to deal with the problems which will present themselves afterwards. And then look at the laboratories which are working day and night, studying new explosives and quicker ways of consigning an enemy to oblivion. The murder factories, they call them somewhere, but after all, they need effort and brains to develop them."

"In a general sense that may seem to be the truth," Anne Strangeways admitted. "Still, you could not count upon any one of these things as being fresh developments in the life of any country likely to attract even a scientific tourist. The discoveries in the workshops—the secrets of the laboratories—would certainly not be disclosed to visitors."

"There you are," smiled Lady Myra. "You are left without a reasonable excuse for your presence here, Marquis. Explain it at once, please!"

"I heard that my cousin was entertaining the most interesting young women in England," he replied promptly. "I have come over to see for myself."

"Not bad," Lady Myra admitted. "Rather evidence, though, of too gallant and trivial a spirit in these sober times."

"What surprised me," Anne Strangeways observed, "is that you did not choose a Clipper going the other way for your little excursion. Why not one of the Americas? There is a gaiety of every sort to be found there."

"Now how did you know," Roderigo asked, speaking a little lazily and with perfect suavity, but with a certain inquisitive light in his eyes, "how did you learn, Miss Anne Strangeways, that I arrived in this country by Imperial Airways?"

She returned his move without embarrassment.

"Everyone who visits England to-day," she told him, "arrives by the English half of the Clipper, which is the Imperial Airways. You could not have walked the seas, and it is doubtful whether any boat could have brought you from any other place."

He bowed in token of defeat.

"I understand that you too have only recently arrived in this country, Miss Strangeways, though," he countered a little stiffly. "Where then did you come from? By boat or by annex to the Clippers, the Imperial Airways?"

She shook her head gently.

"That adorable cousin of yours, Princess Rosina," she confided, "warned me that I should find you amusing but impertinent. Why should I tell you where I came from?"

"Because," he told her with a great deal of mock earnestness, "you have the appearance of a young woman of considerable intelligence. Unless you belie your looks, then, how is it that you do not realize that it is a matter of considerable importance to me to know—"

Roderigo paused. Rosina, their good little hostess, was sailing into their midst. She stretched out her hands to them with a dramatic little gesture.

"My darlings!" she exclaimed. "Everyone has gone. I say to myself, What a wonderful opportunity for me! Fernando is dining at the St. James's Club and it seems to me a perfect opportunity for us to finish up all these scraps of sandwiches—forget these stale champagne cocktails, because we have some real wine in the cellars—have a picnic here and go on somewhere and dance. If you agree," she went on gaily, reading assent already in her guests' faces, "I go myself to my housekeeper, I propose it. All London is hungry, my children. My guests have eaten like ravens. Never was there such an empty larder, but miracles we must and will perform."

"On this occasion," Roderigo interrupted, "you will perform no miracles. Your sandwiches were too wonderful, Rosina. No wonder they were all swept away. You will all do me the honour of coming to one of those half-open hotels—you will know which, Rosina—and we will have a banquet there. We will eat everything they will give us. We will collect two of your worthiest and steadiest young men, Rosina, and we will dance."

"Till half-past ten," Lady Myra complained. "I think we ought to start at once."

There was a sound of footsteps in the hall outside and the clanging of doors.

"What is this that has arrived?" Rosina cried. "I have another guest, perhaps. It is a Portuguese habit, my children. Someone always comes an hour after the others. Can I stop him from being announced, I wonder?"

It was too late. The door of the reception room was once more thrown open. The major-domo himself indicated the newcomer with a polite bow. There was a slight, almost an awed hush in his manner. It was as though he realized the coming world importance of this man whom he was ushering for the first time in his life into a London drawing-room.

"Mr. Mirakel, Your Highness," he announced.

CHAPTER IV

There was a curious little silence, a singular impassivity also amongst the few of her remaining guests who were gathered around Rosina, their hostess. She herself seemed to be startled out of her usual composure as she faced this new arrival. Lady Myra gazed at him with frank but speechless curiosity. Anne Strangeways remained perfectly normal, an expression of vague interest in her face as she glanced towards this visitor who had so far lost his sense of decorum as to come to a reception after its termination. Roderigo looked across at him also with faint interest, but a very small measure of curiosity. However, the new arrival with the strange name did not for a moment falter in the preservation of his own complete composure.

"Princess," he said, presenting a letter which it was observed that he had just drawn from his pocketbook. "Nothing but the contents of this slight communication of which I am the bearer would have given me the confidence to present myself at such an untimely hour."

Rosina was recovering herself. She smiled hospitably, slipped open the flap of the envelope and stared at its very brief contents. She read the two sentences, and reread them before she looked up to the bearer.

"Mr. Mirakel," she exclaimed graciously, "you are welcome. With an introduction such as this you would have been welcome at whatever hour you had chosen to arrive...My dear friends," she added, smiling at the little group by which she was surrounded, "a man who stands almost alone in the world has given our friend here a brief note to me. I may not show you the note because you would read the signature, but this is how he concludes it:—

"Rosina, I have imposed upon the bearer, my friend Mr. Mirakel, the promise that he will not sleep a night in England before he has presented himself to you. You can then sleep knowing that you have added to the long list of your marvellous friends and acquaintances a man whom I consider the most wonderful human being now alive and breathing in this besotted atmosphere."

She crumpled the note into a little bag she was carrying. No one in the room had seen the signature.

"Sir," she said, offering him her fingers, "you see I am one more slave to our mutual friend. I offer you my welcome. I present you, Mr. Mirakel, the honoured friend of a great man, to Lady Myra Huddlestone, to Miss Anne Strangeways, and to the Marquis di Cordovina."

The newcomer's bow, for a gesture of a man of medium height and restrained bearing, was easy and almost graceful. Although he only glanced at each in turn for a second or two, his penetrating eyes seemed to detect something of interest in each one of them.

"You have come a long distance, perhaps, my dear new friend," Rosina said. "Yet you have not the air of a recently arrived traveller," she added, glancing at his immaculate town attire.

"Princess," he observed, "science and an over-assiduous study of its minor usages will some day, I have no doubt, banish the fatigue from our bodies as easily as it succeeds in keeping our toilet in order for any emergency."

"In plain speech," Lady Myra whispered to Anne Strangeways, who was standing a little in the background, "he must mean that he had a wash and brush-up on the way."

"You arrive from Lisbon?" Rosina asked. "But no, there is no boat at this time."

He shook his head.

"I passed over Lisbon," he answered. "I travelled by a new route and I finished my journey by car."

"Well," Rosina concluded hospitably, "you are just in time to join us in a little picnic party. I have had a small reception and my guests—we are all hungry in London, you know—have eaten all the sandwiches and even my insignificant reserve stock which we were keeping for ourselves later on. We are thinking of making a raid upon a neighbouring restaurant. Do we dare, I wonder, to offer you a little very informal hospitality?"

Mr. Mirakel produced from his waistcoat pocket another diminutive note. He handed it across to her.

"Madame," he ventured with a faint but pleasing note of apology in his tone, "you will glance at that perhaps, after which I shall dare to hope that you will accept my suggestion."

Rosina glanced through the second note, then with a smile she read it aloud.

"The letter of introduction which Mr. Mirakel has presented," she said, "and this note which arrives as a postscript to it, come from one whom I always obey. I will read you what he says:—

"Rosina beloved"—you see, we are good friends—'Grant me one great favour. Never refuse anything that Mirakel asks from the moment of your first meeting till the eternal farewell is spoken. He is a man to whom one should never say no.'"

They all laughed heartily, Rosina perhaps more heartily than anyone.

"Why, Mr. Mirakel," she exclaimed, "you are one of the most dangerous men I ever met! How must I feel after the receipt of such an injunction?"

There was a humorous flash in his eyes which answered the coquettish gleam in hers.

"Madame," he said, "you must answer it by trusting to the discretion of your unseen mentor. My present request will not involve any great sacrifice in principle. It is simply an invitation that you and your friends accompany me to a very simple repast at my hotel. It will be what I think they call over here a 'housewarming.' My secretary has made the necessary arrangements and if there are other of your friends you wish to include, His Excellency, your distinguished uncle, for example, or your husband, Prince Charles, they will be welcome."

"This sounds most delightful," Rosina smiled. "I am sure I can answer for my friends as well as for myself. Well, Monsieur," she went on, taking a glass from the tray which a footman had just brought in,

and offering it herself to the somewhat singular guest, "I shall beg you to let me flit away for a few moments and change this somewhat cumbersome reception attire for a lighter frock. I shall take with me these two young ladies, from whom your separation will only be temporary. My Cousin di Cordovina will entertain you until I return. You will gather that we have all accepted your invitation and we look forward with pleasure to being entertained in this unusual manner."

Mr. Mirakel drank his wine and replaced the glass upon the tray.

"Ah, Madame," he protested, "you call it unusual only because you like to think that we are strangers. But this psychic world of ours is passing into a new condition of existence. We have been friends for many years. I wish you *au revoir*, Madame, and to your friends I express my great pleasure that they will join my simple party. At any time within the next hour I shall be awaiting you at the Milan Hotel. There will be servants who will bring you to my apartments."

Once more his bow was a perfect gesture. They all watched him as he left the room. His manner was easy and his walk might almost have been described as gracious. He carried himself with a sort of unconscious dignity which was without doubt an inbred part of the man himself. They all looked at one another as the door closed behind him.

"My friends," exclaimed Rosina, "I fancy we are going to have our hands full with this extraordinary person."

"Tell us all that you know about him," Lady Myra begged curiously. "At once, please."

"Precisely nothing, my dear," was the light reply. "But I know very well indeed the person who sent him with such a *carte-blanche* letter of introduction. I would trust him anywhere and under any conditions."

"Is your friend's name a secret?" Myra asked.

Rosina hesitated.

"Not exactly, my dear," she answered as she led the way towards the door. "Every scrap of interest I possess in the world for the opposite sex is concentrated for the moment upon Mr. Mirakel, the man of mystery himself. There are certain men, Fernando told me this himself, whose names it is wise never to mention. What I should like to know is, what brings Mr. Mirakel to this part of the world; what brings him to-day to the danger spot of all the world: London, the beleaguered city? He could not have crawled here underground, yet how could he have arrived here by a new route? That I do not understand."

"I have heard him spoken of more than once," Anne Strangeways observed, "but it is the first time I have seen him face to face. He is without doubt a mysterious personage."

"Concerning that there can be no mistake," Rosina admitted.

"Yet you accept his friendship without a moment's hesitation," Myra commented.

"My dear," Rosina replied, "I accept because no one in the world has ever been known to refuse anything he asks. He has the reputation of entertaining the most gloriously mixed-up crowds from the most impossible places. If you dine with him to-night you are quite likely to find yourself seated between the Archangel Gabriel and Mr. Gordon Selfridge."

Lady Myra smiled ecstatically.

"I know which of the two I'd rather dance with," she murmured.

CHAPTER V

Roderigo, left to himself, made prompt use of his knowledge of the geography of the house acquired during a former visit. He slipped down some back stairs, traversed a corridor encircling the more important rooms on the ground floor, and arrived at the library. A young man who had been busy at a writing table in a corner sprang to his feet at Roderigo's entrance, and approached him.

"You permit a few moments' conversation, Marquis?" he begged. "I was just writing you a note. I have important things to say to you."

"You are Manuel di Gomez, aren't you, from Berlin?" Roderigo asked a little coldly.

"I am," was the quick reply. "His Excellency here is a connection of mine, and the Princess, your hostess, is my second cousin."

"But you yourself are attached to Berlin, are you not?"

"I was transferred there recently," was the prompt reply. "I was second Portuguese attaché at the Embassy in Berlin. I served in Madrid before that."

"Before I listen to your message," Roderigo said, "I would like to know from whom it comes."

"You will not remain for very long in doubt about that," the young man assured him earnestly. "It is from one who is a great and fervent admirer of yours, from one who has heard of your prowess in the insurrectionary war, and heard with deep regret of your injury there."

"My injury there was nothing," Roderigo said curtly.

The young man dragged his chair a little closer. He was a thick-set, dark-complexioned youth who wore black spectacles, which, with his black hair and generally sombre appearance gave him a somewhat sinister aspect.

"You are in a way a distant cousin of mine also, Marquis," he said, "but I do not presume to recommend myself to your notice because of that. I want to speak to you as belonging to the same nationality. We are both Portuguese by birth, we are both neutrals in this great struggle which seems likely to tear all Europe to pieces."

Roderigo rose from his chair. His companion was on his feet in a second. He pushed Roderigo gently backwards.

"Listen, if you please," he begged. "Listen, I beg of you. You fought as a volunteer in the war which seems to have drained the lifeblood out of Spain. You must be fond of fighting. Nothing else could have induced you to go through the hard discipline of those days."

"Young man, second, tenth or hundredth cousin, if you like," Roderigo said firmly, "I can only surmise what you may have to say to me, but I want to beg you not to say it. You are entirely misinformed as to my capability and my tastes. I had all of war I wanted a few years ago. I dislike fighting, I am not a soldier

by instinct, I have no great gifts that way, although having a good deal of geometrical knowledge and a certain aptitude for science, it pleased me to master the details of army mechanization. Good. I admit this to keep your tongue quiet. Now let me tell you something. Whatever I may do with my future life—I am only a young man, I admit, and I sometimes wonder what on earth there is worth doing—I shall never fight again. I have seen enough of it. I am only guessing at what may be at the back of your mind, young man—keep it there if I am right. Get this into your head and cork it down. Nothing would induce me to mount a horse, or to drive a car except for the purpose of sport, or to look at a tank under any possible circumstances. Now what is it that you have to say?"

"You do not realize," the young man continued, and his thick voice seemed to be shaking a little as though with emotion, "the great honour, the glory that may be won on the field of battle. There is no other place for men in these days."

"If you realize that, my dear relative, my second or third cousin, whichever you may be, my stripling Gomez, why are you not a soldier yourself? It is open to you to volunteer for any foreign country if you feel the urge—go and do it! And don't presume—you get the word, I trust?" Roderigo added with a little flash in his dark eyes. "Don't presume to offer advice or to bring messages to a Cordovina. I don't dispute our possible relationship but if it exists, remember this: I am the head of the family. You have heard what I have had to say and I think you understand me."

The young man understood well enough and his expression was very gloomy indeed.

"My illustrious relative," he persisted sadly, "you do not understand even now the honour which I have to offer you."

"I understand just this," said Roderigo, rising to his feet. "I have heard all I am going to listen to of your talk. If you attempt to detain me you will receive some portion of the punishment you deserve."

The young man sat nervously clasping and unclasping his hands. He rose to his feet. They heard a light voice in the distance through the open window as a car drove into the courtyard.

"Roderigo, my beloved! Have you lost yourself in this barrack? We wait for you."

"I am coming," Roderigo called out gaily. "I have been looking for an old missal in your library that I might say a prayer."

He turned towards the door. His distant relative looked for a moment into his face and glanced quickly away again. The temper of the Cordovinas was a byword in the family. He held his peace and Roderigo made his way outside through the great portière, before which Rosina, Lady Myra and Anne Strangeways were collected. Rosina, who was wearing a delightful rose-coloured dance frock, held out her arms to him.

"We are all free and all aching for our adventure, dear cousin," she cried. "My beloved uncle has gone off to the St. James's Club, and as for my husband—well, for once I am forced to believe him, for I saw dear Fernando handing him a roll of papers, very, very thick. It is better so. My husband has no taste for mystery and he hates dancing. But we"—She passed her arm through Roderigo's—"It will be like paradise to dance again with you, dear cousin. And as for the mystery, well, I feel it everywhere I move."

"Here in London it is in the atmosphere, just as it was in Lisbon, just as it always would be where Rosina was," he declared.

"Rosina," Lady Myra pouted as they took their places in the large Rolls-Royce, "it is not fair to monopolize your cousin so. Is it to be like this all the evening?"

"I do not know, my dear," Rosina replied. "A wave of family affection has overcome me for the moment. I was always very fond of Roderigo, even when he disobeyed me and went off to that war of vulgarians. Now that he is safely back, though, he is almost forgiven. You are almost forgiven, are you not, Roderigo?"

His response was merely a gesture. Then for the first time Anne Strangeways looked into his eyes as she addressed him. A suggestion of that half-mocking smile which he had first seen at Cintra parted her lips.

"It seems to me, Marquis," she said, "that unless our amazing new acquaintance is able to draw from his wizard's bag something transcendently superior, we others are fated to have rather a dull evening."

Rosina smiled happily.

"So long as no one robs me of Roderigo," she murmured, "all will be well."

* * *

They stood for a moment or two in the reception hall of the hotel, but the seconds of their waiting were literally few. The largest young man, as Rosina said afterwards, whom she had ever seen in her life, presented himself with a low bow and a somewhat American accent.

"My name is Homer Bayes," he announced. "I am private secretary to Mr. Mirakel. Will you, if you please, come this way?"

He led them to the elevator. They mounted several floors and then followed their guide along a corridor to a small private lift which he unlocked with a key. He ushered them in, closed it with a little snap, and turned towards an adjacent staircase. With a wave of his fingers he pointed upwards. The lift, with a musical click, shot away. Mr. Homer Bayes, who was waiting on the next floor, led them out and across towards doors which might, as Rosina murmured, have been doors into a cathedral. They rolled slowly open. Servants in plain livery were waiting to relieve them of their cloaks and hats.

Mr. Mirakel, with a youngish man in naval uniform on either side, was waiting in the immediate background.

"Princess," he remarked with a bow, "you do me great honour by your punctuality. I do not fancy that in this small world in which nowadays you live introductions are necessary, but this," he went on, indicating a man in naval uniform, "is Admiral Fawcett, and here on my other side is Commander Rushton. They both tell me that they have had the honour of meeting you."

"Indeed that is so," Rosina acknowledged graciously. "I have no doubt you both know Lady Myra Huddlestone, and perhaps also Miss Anne Strangeways. Here also is my cousin, the Marquis di Cordovina."

Mr. Mirakel turned to Rosina.

"If you will come with me, Madame," he suggested, "to the little anteroom just across the dance floor, we shall venture to offer you an *apéritif*, although I feel it will not be so good as your own this afternoon. There is something about a hotel-mixed cocktail," he added, as the little procession followed them, "which always tastes a trifle artificial. The finest cocktails in the world, Admiral," he went on, half turning his head, "are to be met with on a British man-of-war. And the next best," he added reflectively, "I think I have drunk in the shade of the linden trees of an American country club."

"You know about the world a good deal, sir," the Admiral remarked.

"I like to travel," his host replied. "I enjoy life, and the thing I enjoy most about it is the search for new experiences."

Rosina, whose fingers were resting upon his coat-sleeve, gave a little exclamation as they passed into a small room, beautifully furnished in Louis Seize fashion, a room which seemed to be brimming over with flowers. A bartender who appeared to be known to everybody mixed cocktails. They sat in small *fauteuils* upholstered with dove-coloured damask.

"Real limes!" Lady Myra cried out in wonder, pointing to a dish.

"You will find them in your cocktail, I trust," Mr. Mirakel observed. "To tell you the truth, I prefer limes to lemons in nearly any form of cocktail or cooked dish. It is perhaps a matter of taste and because I love so much the country where the lime grows.

"But this is wonderful!" Rosina declared, looking round her. "I have never seen this room before."

"Nor this portion of the hotel," Lady Myra exclaimed.

"That is possible," Mr. Mirakel murmured. "We are in rather an out-of-the-way corner, and always I like places where I am not jostled by neighbours."

"What an amazing party!" Rosina cried.

"I hope that you will not be disappointed," her host sighed. "I am afraid that I have in some things rather queer tastes. I am not offering you, you see, champagne cocktails. I do not think that fine champagne is improved by the addition of sugar, orange or lemon bitters of any sort—that is not my idea of cocktails. If you, Admiral, or you, Commander, would prefer champagne, it is there at your elbow. I recommend the Krug 28."

"At any other time, sir," was the Admiral's smiling reply. "Your cocktails are too marvellous to leave, though."

"It is the limes," Mr. Mirakel declared; "they make so much difference."

They crossed the few yards of floor presently towards the round dining table, set upon a small circle of pearl-grey carpet in the middle of the room. The large young man, as they had christened Mr. Homer Bayes, was standing at the table and indicated to each his place. There were faint strains of music as the vodka and caviare were served. Rosina, catching the eye of the violinist, waved her hand to him in astonishment.

"Why," she exclaimed, "Myra! Do you see? That is Maurice himself."

"Yes," assented Mr. Mirakel, "that is Maurice. They tell me that he is the popular performer to-day.

"But my dear man," she exclaimed, "he is the greatest leader of a dance orchestra we have in London. I have never known him to play before at a private party."

"He is very good, I believe," her host observed equably. "You must not refuse that vodka, Madame. It is the Revel, secured by one of the clever wine merchants here, I suppose, years ago. Yes, Maurice's music," he went on, "will charm women from their places even when they are a little fatigued."

There were only four performers in the small orchestra, but all famous, and before they had progressed very far in the dinner Myra leaned pleadingly towards her host.

"Might we?" she begged. "This is one of Commander Rushton's favourite dances, and mine."

"By all means," Mr. Mirakel agreed. "Please dance as you will, when you will. Princess, when the spirit moves you I trust..."

"My dear host," she declared, "nothing would make me happier than to have just one turn with you."

"Alas," he answered, "I must leave all the best things for my guests. If you will favour me a little later after the Admiral, I shall be very proud."

"With the Admiral, certainly, in five minutes," Rosina assented. "My dear Admiral, we are old friends, so I shall tell you I am twenty-nine years old—it is a dangerous age. Oh, no, no! Not what you mean, bad man! I mean that it is the age when one sometimes prefers not to leave one's place too soon when one has the feast of a Lucullus to deal with. The sauce with this fish is too exquisite."

"Madame," the Admiral replied, "I am of your way of thinking, but my feet will not stay long idle. I watched you dance only the other night and I sighed that I was not of the party."

Roderigo rose to his feet.

"Would you care to dance, Miss Anne Strangeways?" he asked her. For a single second she hesitated, then she followed his example.

"If it pleases you, Marquis di Cordovina and many other names," she replied.

"I congratulate you upon the re-establishment of your memory," he observed.

She protested with a very pleasant smile.

"I think we will not fence any more," he continued. "It is so much waste of time. There are two things we must say, and then perhaps we could have a little conversation. This floor is marvellous, and the music..."

"Well, the music one expects from Maurice," she agreed, "but one does not often find a floor like this, and what one doesn't understand is, that it seems to be all for our small party."

"I should think," he answered, "that they are not very small parties so far as importance goes when they are given by our host."

"If someone will not tell me soon who he is and where he came from, and whether he belongs to this world or the one underneath, I shall go crazy," she sighed.

"The Admiral might know," he suggested.

She shook her head.

"Let's not bother just now," she begged. "This is too delightful, and I was told, you wicked man, that you had had a piece of your leg shot away."

He leaned towards her.

"It was only a toe," he whispered.

"I will not laugh," she answered. "I will not even smile. This is too wonderful. Move back into that half-time," she begged, after a minute. "I love it."

"It facilitates the conversation," he remarked. "There are other mysteries in this world, Miss Anne Strangeways, besides the mystery of Mr. Mirakel."

"You have discovered that?" she murmured.

"I have indeed," he replied. "There is the mystery, for example, of Miss Anne Strangeways."

"I am flattered!"

"Is it flattering, I wonder?" he asked himself. "I think no. To be mysterious is to incite curiosity. Well, you certainly do that."

"Whose curiosity?"

"For one in a million, mine."

She shook her head.

"You would derive no satisfaction from anything you heard about me," she warned him. "You would simply shake your head and say 'How ordinary.' With our host it is different."

"I have never met anyone, I never expect to, who—according to the Admiral—could do the same things in just the same way that he can," Roderigo confided. "You know what the press is like nowadays. No rich man can escape their notice, no millionaire can stroll along the sideways of life and keep his wealth and his hobbies a secret. Yet who but a millionaire could hire Maurice to play at a scratch supper party? Who but a millionaire could give us Volga, caviare and Revel's vodka? We are not yet at the end of the feast, either. I should not be surprised if each of you girls were to find a pearl necklace amongst your grapes, and we men each a gold cigarette case in the brandy glass."

"I cannot bear the suspense," she declared. "Let's get back to the table."

He turned reluctantly.

"This serves me right," he said. "I have been frivolling instead of setting myself to the serious business of the evening."

"Which is?"

"To discover all about you and where you came from."

"That would be of no interest to anyone," she declared.

"Just one more turn," he begged.

She shook her head. They were already approaching the table.

"You have not danced yet with your cousin," she reminded him. "Why not try and find out how much she knows of her second mysterious guest?"

"I would rather hear from your own lips about yourself," he told her.

But Anne Strangeways with a little shake of the head had already taken her place at the table. The business of dinner had become very important indeed, with a joint of venison from a well-known deer forest in Scotland and a red currant sauce for which *Monsieur le Chef* had begged the earnest attention of his patrons.

Rosina sighed resignedly.

"I always declared," she confided, "that I should lose my virtue before my figure, but I made a mistake. The first thing I shall do to-morrow morning before I have my bath is to send my scales to be sold. I dare not face them."

"A beautiful woman," Mr. Mirakel pronounced, "is wholly independent of such monstrosities as scales and exercises. She triumphs over the snares of gymnastics or the lures of the chef."

Rosina looked into her tiny mirror with its setting of rubies.

"The trouble is," she sighed, "that no one yet has succeeded in making me believe that I am really beautiful. Nothing would make me happier than to have that fact, if it be a fact, clearly demonstrated to me. Then I would give up hunting and golf, and would offer half of my income to the chef who prepared this dinner."

"Madame," he assured her, "why seek elsewhere for confirmation? Your mirror cannot lie."

"What a nimble tongue this man has!" Rosina smiled. "You can trap me anywhere. My friend, everything that is upon my plate at the present moment I am going to finish. When that is over I will smoke one of your adorable cigarettes, and you..."

"A dance?" he asked hopefully.

She shook her head.

"No, you must dance with Myra. You have already had your duty dance with me, and very nice it was. I am going to dance with my wild and wicked cousin, Roderigo."

Lady Myra considered herself a privileged person at the Milan Hotel, as indeed she was, and later on that evening she stopped a well-known functionary of the place and asked him a question.

"Monsieur Salonita, tell me if you please," she begged: "What do you call the room in which we are having supper to-night? I do not recognize it."

Salonita smiled.

"It did not exist before to-night, your ladyship. It is the fusion of three small private dining rooms into one."

"Whose idea was that?" she asked. "It makes a very charming apartment."

"It was the idea of your host to-night, Mr. Mirakel," the man told her. "His secretary was here a month ago with the plans and instructions. They have been working day and night to complete it. It is now a private *salon* attached to the suite of Mr. Mirakel."

"He is a very extraordinary man," Lady Myra observed.

"Milady," the Manager agreed, "he is probably the most extraordinary man in the world. He permits no one to talk about him, and I can assure you we are very particular to study and obey his whims."

Commander Rushton, her partner, was passing on, but Lady Myra was still not satisfied.

"This room which has been specially built for him...?" she asked. "When he leaves, what will happen to it?"

"Unless Mr. Mirakel gives us instructions to the contrary," Monsieur Salonita confided, "it will remain the private *salon* for him whether he is in the country or not. Your Ladyship will excuse."

Lady Myra regained her escort.

"Commander Rushton," she asked, "had you ever heard of this extraordinary man, our host, before you came to London?"

"I had never met him," the other replied. "I have heard him spoken of once or twice as a sort of Baron Munchausen who owns half the world and several outside planets, who buys up anything that seems derelict, from a battleship to the national debt of a bankrupt country, and everything turns to gold in his hand. They say, for a small example, that the whole of this hotel is his, that he is responsible for the rebuilding of nearly all of it."

"But what is he," she asked, "an American?"

"I believe he is a Swede," the young man replied, "but I really do not know very much about it. I only know that we used to think Rockefeller and Morgan pretty well off in the world's chips until he came along. Now they are simply has-beens."

"Why doesn't he stop the war or do something useful with his money if he is as rich as all that?" she speculated.

The Commander shrugged his shoulders.

"You will excuse me, Lady Myra," he said, "but he is our host for one thing, and for another he is on the list of men whom we do not talk about. The proper answer is, 'I know very little about him,' if anyone asks you."

"A foot in the Secret Service is making you mysterious, Henry," she laughed.

"A Third Secretary doesn't even get a sniff of the Secret Service," he returned. "Let's go back and have one more turn."

She sighed.

"I can't refuse," she declared, "you dance so divinely. All the same, I am going to wander round and find someone who is not a naval man, nor a military man, nor a diplomat, and who doesn't mind a little gossip and who will tell me where this Croesus with the strange-coloured eyes and the beautifully cut features comes from and all about him."

"You will find it difficult," he warned her with an odd little smile, as they stepped onto the floor. "Why don't you tackle him yourself? He confesses that he is very susceptible."

"A magnificent idea!" she declared. "I am going to have the next dance with him and I shall see if I can make him talk."

CHAPTER VI

"The two things I enjoy most in the world," Lady Myra confided to Mr. Mirakel about a quarter of an hour later, "are dancing with a man who dances quietly as you do, and having my curiosity satisfied."

"My dancing," he assured her, "is at your service always. Of course, you know that you are rather wonderful yourself. As regards your curiosity, that is another matter. I am not a talkative person."

"You needn't put on airs," she told him; "my questions are so simple. I want to ask you why I have never heard about you before."

"That is a very difficult question for me to answer, Lady Myra," he countered. "Why should you have heard about me? Now, instead of stirring up my exceedingly murky past, you shall hear how much closer my own psychic desire for knowledge about interesting people in the world brings me to my previously unknown friends. I will tell you about yourself."

"About myself?" she repeated, a little puzzled.

He smiled at her pleasantly. For the first time she realized that those strange eyes were a wonderful shade of blue, clear and very human. His mouth, too, pleased her. It seemed to be all the time trying to find its way into a smile.

"You," he told her, "are the second daughter of a duke. You are famous in the North Country for being a beautiful horsewoman; you are also a famous golfer; you have published a novel and three or four times in the past verses have appeared in a very high-class magazine, now, alas, extinct, which bore your initials."

"For heaven's sake, stop!" she begged. "You frighten me. You know more about me than anyone else in the world, I should think."

"Ah, not quite that," he smiled, "but very likely I know a little more about you than you know about yourself."

She stole a quick sideways glance at him. He was not in the least like her first impression of him. His smile seemed to have come to stay, he walked with his head a little in the air. If people whispered about him, when once they passed out into the public part of the hotel and gazed down at the crowd below, he was supremely, almost superbly unconscious of the fact. His first few steps, too, on the dancing floor had astonished her. He was an accomplished performer. He was taller than she had believed, half a head taller

than she was, and although his hair was faintly streaked with grey it was a very becoming shade and brushed with great care.

"So you want to ask questions about me," he went on quietly. "And I have surprised you by telling you a few little things about yourself, trifles that all the world knows. There will be a great deal more for other privileged people—or shall I say, another privileged person?—to find out some day."

"You are a wizard," she laughed.

"Not I," he answered. "You are so clever that I do not think you will ask me another question tonight; but I, on the other hand, will ask you something. There is one young lady here who I think has brains, as you have. She slipped into our little gathering very gracefully and very much to my pleasure. She was a complete stranger to me; I feel that she is still. You shall tell me who she is."

"I would love to."

"I mean, of course, the young lady who was with you in Madame's inner reception room this evening when I arrived, the young lady who seemed to be just leaving, but whom I was fortunate enough to be able to include in my party."

"Well, you have been told her name," Lady Myra said. "It is Anne Strangeways; but I think it is very ungallant of you to be so interested in *her*."

"My reasons for asking her name were entirely impersonal," he assured her quickly.

"Is that meant to be consolatory?"

"Do you ever need consolation of that type?" he asked.

"Why should I not? You haven't even begun to get interested in me, and already you are asking questions about another girl."

The music moved to another tune. Lady Myra was enjoying herself very much indeed and was becoming more than ever fascinated by her partner. His voice had a sort of delicate softness which seemed to her puzzling. It was sometimes almost Attic in its clearness.

"When did you begin to carry the world upon your shoulders, my host?" she enquired.

"If you are referring to my early education," he replied, "modesty compels me to assure you that it was before my shoulders were fit for the task. You will understand this when I tell you that the only education I ever received was at the Swedish national school."

The music came to a sudden pause. They made their way back to their places.

"My friend Maurice made a clumsy finish," Mirakel complained. "He will hear from me to-morrow about this. I was dancing my way into what a distinguished young poetess of my acquaintance once called the divine forgetfulness."

"How dare you!" she reproved him.

"I am the slave of my memory," he confessed. "Yet I owe everything in my life to that somewhat unusual gift. A phrase, the cadence of a woman's voice, a word she lets fall unexpectedly..."

"But why the schoolgirl's doggerel?" she protested.

"You never wrote any doggerel, Lady Myra."

"I do not write anything nowadays," she sighed. "Life is becoming far too enclosing. I do not seem to have the courage to find my way out."

"The time may arrive very soon," he prophesied, "when you will find yourself desiring once more to sail amongst the clouds. In other words, there is going to be a revival in the study and pursuit of poetry. The gay fantastic prose of the Ronsard period may be heard again. One even dares to hope that the art of painting will be recovered and find its way back amongst the arts."

"Who let you into these wonderful secrets?" she asked.

Rosina had risen to her feet. He approached her with outstretched and protesting hands.

"You must please none of you leave me for a few minutes," he begged. "There is just one more thing I want to show you all. I want you to look at something with me, and go away and think about it again. You see what appears to be a stage at the further end of the room?"

They all looked in the direction towards which he pointed. Perhaps Myra was conscious of a slight sense of disappointment.

"It looks like the magic lantern of my youth that they are arranging there," she remarked.

He smiled.

"It is a very modern little cinematograph," he told her, "quite an advanced type, I believe. Extraordinarily clear, yet you could almost pack it into a despatch box."

There were half a dozen porters hastening back and forth about the place. The dining table seemed to have miraculously disappeared, and there were easy chairs arranged in a semicircle round the space where it had been. The doors of the apartment were now closed. They could all distinctly hear the click of a lock. The lights began to decline.

"You must not be too bored," he begged as he handed Rosina into one of the comfortable chairs. "Please all find places for yourself. When you are tired, you may go, but I hope that you will not be tired too soon."

"What are we going to watch?" Rosina asked.

"You may make what you will of it," he answered enigmatically.

"And geographically what portion of the world are we going to peep into?"

He shook his head.

"No direct questions, please," he begged. "Let us say somewhere in a corner of the state of Elysia, or perhaps it might be described as being on the borders of the long-lost kingdom of Arcadia."

"Alas," Rosina sighed, "the only geography I ever learnt was from blackboards at college and from green-bound atlases. I feel that they will not take me into the world you are talking about."

"Another proof," he pointed out, "of the eternal truth that your education only begins when your schooldays are over and you are taking your first glimpses into life."

"Perilously near the obvious," Anne Strangeways murmured.

"I object to the 'perilously,'" he whispered. "These will be facts, not fancies, towards which my dream picture will point."

Then the failing light paused in its progress towards darkness. There was a gentle twilight in the room, followed by the voice of a man speaking from some unknown and invisible place. It was a voice full and deep and resonant. The one thing it lacked was a touch of humanity.

"Our friend, Mr. Homer Bayes," Roderigo whispered to Rosina.

"I think so," was the murmured reply.

"*I am to show you,*" the voice announced, "*the land of Mirakel.*"

* * *

The silence which followed the announcement was complete and absolute. Not even a whispered word passed between those seven people. Their eyes were fixed upon the succession of strange, exquisite pictures which seemed to flow in one unbroken stream from an unseen creative force on to the screen. There were rivers and hills, streams and rich stretches of meadowland. There were villages with cottages of curious architecture. There was even a small town with motor cars in the streets whose honking they could plainly hear. There was a railway train at one time, creeping along a level stretch of lines which seemed to lead to infinity, and then, even as they looked intently without a blink of the eyes, the train disappeared. There was a station. They passed through a wood, and saw birds flying and men shooting. There was a church, something that looked like a cathedral. There was another small town, electric cars in the streets, automobiles in plenty, little crowds of shoppers. They passed a golf club, a polo ground, a country club with richly decorated restaurant and out-of-doors dining rooms. There were tennis courts here in great numbers. On the broad piazzas men and women in costumes of the tropics were playing cards. Once or twice the little company of seven found themselves leaning forward in a state of wonderment. There was a verisimilitude of sound and vision in all that they saw and heard. They could hear the low muffled roar of the sea from a great distance. They passed an airport. There were a dozen planes upon the ground, one in the act of starting...

* * *

As they sat in their beautiful chairs, enthralled, there came a change so sudden that for very shock the silence remained unbroken. Twilight, followed by night, fell upon one of the most beautiful landscapes. They saw the reflected moonlight in the river flowing slowly down towards the great space where it seemed the sea must be. Lights flashed out from amongst the trees, and here and there were electric standards lighting the road. Their illusion of movement remained, but they were going much faster. They were passing through the country at a great pace. There was a town. They saw the lit cafés, they heard the clanging of streetcars, the honking of automobiles. They passed companies of musicians in the street, playing dance music in the public gardens to small crowds of men and women, lightly but picturesquely dressed, the men nearly all in white. They passed a stretch of swamp country where millions of frogs seemed to be indulging in their night antics, and mountains in the far distance, dark and menacing. Mists

rose from the swamps, strange birds flew in and out of them. Then the atmosphere cleared, they seemed to be mounting. They were back again in a land of well-built villas, of white houses with long piazzas, men lolling at their ease, smoking, girls playing the guitar and ukulele; the streets again where all was gaiety. Then they came to a great aerodrome, the largest of all they had seen. They saw a boat circling round and landing. They watched the passengers on the dock counting out their luggage. Now the sunlight had come again; there was blue sky. A crowd of hot, very exhausted people were streaming from a factory. The illusion of speed became greater. They were shot out into the country. They seemed to be travelling in an express train or a fast aeroplane, a hundred, it might have been two hundred, miles an hour. The ground spun beneath their feet. They found themselves yielding to the desire to crane their necks every few moments and then, before they realized it, the screen seemed to have vanished. It was all sea. They could see nothing but the great waves tossing restlessly about; sea, as far as their eyes could reach. Not a single ship, not a harbour, nothing but a gathering storm.

* * *

And then it all passed away into the mists. The lights came slowly into evidence in the room. The screen or whatever it might have been had disappeared. The wall had closed in upon the space which it had occupied. Rosina's voice pealed out.

"I pinch myself," she cried, "I am going mad. What is it that we have seen?"

"Heaven knows," the Admiral declared, mopping his forehead. "What do you make of it, Rushton?"

"I never saw anything like it," the other replied. "Where is Mr. Mirakel?"

His was the one empty chair. The other six were still seated in their places, but Mirakel's chair was empty. Unseen and unheard, he seemed to have passed from the room.

"He left behind a very human thought," the Admiral declared, pointing towards the table which had reappeared. "Whisky, soda, champagne. Come on, we will all have a drink to our host, and reel home."

The small part of the room which had been left in darkness was suddenly illuminated. The largely built young man came in by the ordinary entrance and made his way towards the table, followed by a couple of waiters.

"Gentlemen, perhaps you will help yourselves," he invited. "If the ladies would like any advice, Mr. Mirakel recommends the Veuve Clicquot. May I suggest a glass, Princess?"

"I will drink a glass of champagne with pleasure," Rosina gasped. "Feel my hands, Cousin," she exclaimed, laying them upon Roderigo's cheek, "they are as cold as ice. I feel like that inside."

He filled a tumbler with the wine, which she drank feverishly. Lady Myra was clutching Roderigo's other arm with fierce gripping fingers. She was as pale as death.

"Rosina," she faltered, "I believe I am frightened. It was all too real, those places. Were the men and women real? The life there, the horses, the lights?"

She broke down. The secretary, who was still in the background, filled a glass with wine and held it to her lips.

"This isn't so queer," he said soothingly. "The first man to whom Mr. Mirakel showed some of these pictures, a great strong fellow he was, too, nearly fainted."

He placed her in a chair. She drank her wine fitfully.

"Tell me, Mr. Bayes," she begged, "you must tell me. What is it we have been looking at? Were those real places?"

He made no answer. She looked up at him. His face was the face of a Sphinx.

"But it isn't fair," she faltered. "There is something unnatural about what you were showing there, something terrifying. You ought to explain it."

"You mustn't ask questions, please," he said simply. "That was the only condition Mr. Mirakel made. You have been wonderfully privileged to have been shown what you have been shown. Let it go at that, please."

"Surely there could be no harm in telling us a little more, Mr. Bayes," Anne Strangeways begged. "I can't help it. I should have said that I hadn't a nerve in my body, but I am shaking all over."

"Say, that's too bad," Mr. Homer Bayes said icily. "I can't help you, any more than I can help these other ladies. The only thing to do is to take a glass of wine and forget it."

Anne Strangeways accepted the wine, but she drank it almost like a person in a dream.

"You know, after all," the Admiral complained, appealing to the secretary, "it is trying people pretty high to give them a show like that and then not offer them a word of explanation. The photography was amazing, of course, but it was the production of the voices and the music and the sounds, and everything in its place, which gave an unnatural touch to the thing."

Mr. Homer Bayes raised his eyebrows.

"That seems queer to me," he admitted. "I should have thought that it would have made the whole thing more natural. Such as it is, ladies and gentlemen, you have seen what Mr. Mirakel wished you to see, and I believe that when you have had time to think it over you will realize that it has been a tremendous privilege. There are not twenty people in the world who have seen what you have seen. Let it go at that, please."

"Has this been shown anywhere else in the world?" the Admiral persisted.

"Sir," Mr. Homer Bayes replied, and there was a very awkward and threatening glitter in his eyes, "you are abusing the hospitality which you have received when you transgress against Mr. Mirakel's wishes and ask questions. I must beg you to desist. This room is kept under lock and key, and if you will excuse me..."

He touched one of the electric switches by his side, and the room was at once in partial darkness. Everyone promptly rose. There was no more delay. They made towards the door.

"If you have questions to ask," the secretary said as he drew aside the curtains, "keep them for Mr. Mirakel; but if you take my advice," he added very seriously, "you will ask him nothing. Be contented with the fact that you have been privileged to see something obviously unique and leave it to him to tell you more if he wants to."

The last light went out and no one hesitated another moment. Their farewells to the secretary were scanty. Rosina afterwards confessed that the one thing in life she was longing for in those few minutes was to get out of doors, breathe the fresh air, listen to the traffic in the street, and hear some outside voices.

"He is the only man in the world who can decide exactly how much he will expect you to take upon trust."

CHAPTER VII

The hall porter at the new Berkeley Flats—one of the most distinguished occupants of which was Roderigo, Marquis di Cordovina—was a handsome fellow with one fault. He was a Czechoslovakian and eleven o'clock was to him a sacred hour. As the clock struck he took down his plum-coloured cap from its peg and crossed the Square, or what remained of it, in the direction of Shepherd Market. Ten minutes afterwards he was established in a comfortable chair at the Craven House Arms enjoying the first drink of the day with his bosom friend and fellow countryman, Felix Politov.

"How long do you allow yourself, Antoine?" asked the latter.

"A quarter of an hour," the hall porter replied. "For a while now I am practically safe. Those who slept in have gone out, and it is too early for callers."

"What about the telephone?" his friend enquired.

"The telephone," Antoine replied, "is always engaged."

Felix Politov sighed enviously.

"Alas, we have a young lady operator," he confided, "who is lame; and save for me there is no one to take messages around."

Antoine grinned happily.

"It is good for you, that," he said. "Up and down the back stairs you go and you lose weight. For me it is different. When I return I have only to ask a young friend of mine in the telephone bureau whether anyone has telephoned. As for callers, they do not appear at this hour of the morning."

So far as that last piece of information was concerned, Antoine was mistaken. A young lady had called, a few minutes after his departure, at the Berkeley Flats; had some five minutes ago possessed herself of the key which was hanging upon Roderigo's hook; and, after one last glance into the empty office, had mounted the stairs and was now installed in the chair from which Roderigo conducted his somewhat meagre correspondence. She was writing very fast, and was nearing the third page in an unusually long letter some time before Antoine was due to return.

I hope I have made myself quite clear, dear friend [she finished]. Manuel di Gomez has followed you to London for one purpose and one purpose only. He is absolutely pledged to produce you, not in Brussels or Berlin, the first two places named, but in a much more dangerous haunt—in Paris—where your chance of escape will be much less. For some reason or other, our friends are determined to secure your co-operation in their new scheme. I am quite sure that I am the only one who knows their secret, and all I have to do really is to convince you that I am in real, deadly earnest and that every word in this letter is the solemn truth. I shall have no further chance of communicating with you for I am leaving England at once to take

up a new position in an unknown country, and I beg you to believe me. Do as I have suggested and you will extricate yourself from what might be a very serious position. It is my thank-offering to you. Do not let it fail.

She reached the end of her letter. She dipped her pen in the ink. Whilst it was still suspended in the air she hesitated, a fatal thing to do. Her first impulse had been right: she was not alone in the room! That second's hesitation very nearly cost her her life. She felt the gloved fingers upon her neck and she knew that she was in the grip of the one man in London whom she had cause to fear. He began to talk to her, but his voice sounded very far away. In a very few moments she felt that consciousness would leave her. She tried to shout. Her voice was as dry as a kiln. She tried to upset the table. The man in whose grip she was only laughed.

"A double capture," he remarked gruffly. "I never trusted you, Anne Strangeways. That Swiss fellow swore by you, but I felt that he was wrong. You told me a falsehood once in Geneva; that should have been enough for me."

Anne was almost strangled but she faltered out a few words.

"You are the sort of man," she told him, "to whom honest people would always tell a falsehood."

"A liar, and in the family too!" Roderigo said calmly, insinuating his way gently between the chair in which Anne was leaning back and di Gomez. "Listen to me, you pernicious young skunk. Tell me what you are doing in my rooms, and how you found your way here."

"Better ask the young lady," di Gomez snarled, his fox-like eyes all the time following the other's movements. "She was here before me. She was at work at your table when I arrived."

Roderigo was a little breathless. Di Gomez had the air of one who was speaking the truth.

"He is quite right," Anne gasped. "He found me here. Needless to say he would not have found me if I had any idea that you were bound to return."

"Then may I address the same question to you?" Roderigo enquired sternly. "What are you doing here, Miss Anne Strangeways? I thought you were meeting me at the Milan Hotel."

"And I thought you were there," she answered, "or I should not have been here."

Roderigo took out his case and lit a cigarette. All the time, though, he was watching di Gomez.

"I asked you to lunch myself," he reminded her.

"I wanted to write you this letter," she went on anxiously, "and I wanted you to receive it in case anything prevented my meeting you. I found out where your rooms were and when I saw your key hanging on the board below, I decided to write it here and take my chance of making you furious. Your distant relative had his hand on my letter and I expect it is in his pocket now."

"I shall take it from him," Roderigo said cheerfully. "Come on, di Gomez! Get ready for it, because I am going to finish your following me round like this. Ten seconds for you; get ready!"

"I am not a fighter," di Gomez muttered.

"So I see," Roderigo replied, stepping swiftly on one side. "All the same I do not like the way your hand is slipping down towards your hip pocket."

A second later di Gomez lay on the floor.

"I ought to have warned you," Anne said regretfully. "His hand slipped down there just before he tried to strangle me."

"He tried to strangle you, did he?" Roderigo exclaimed. "Well, we shall have to give up toying with him."

Di Gomez had half-struggled to his feet but he made no further effort. He lay on his side, half-unconscious, but breathing heavily.

"And now, if you please...?" Roderigo asked, turning towards his lady visitor.

"I thought I should never have a better chance," Anne Strangeways confessed recklessly. "I came here to write you a letter to warn you of certain things that happened in Geneva; to warn you that di Gomez had followed you to England and was hanging around your Embassy all the time. I know what he wants from you, and I expect you do."

"He wants me to mechanize a body of cavalry for an army belonging to a people I detest," Roderigo said. "Nothing in the world would induce me to do it, but where I am going to hide to get out of the fellow's way, I can't imagine."

There was a banging on the door. The hall porter from downstairs with the plum-coloured cap stared in with amazement. Roderigo beckoned to him and addressed him in his own language.

"Perhaps you will tell me, Antoine, what is the meaning of all this commotion in my room? How many people have you let up in my absence?"

"Not a soul, sir," was the dazed reply.

"There is the young lady," Roderigo pointed out with a sudden wave of inspiration, "who was my invited guest here and who was writing a letter while awaiting my arrival, and there is this scoundrel on the floor, or rather half on the floor," Roderigo went on, moving a little nearer to di Gomez, "who seems to have followed her in. What right had you to do that?" he demanded of Manuel di Gomez.

"None at all," the young man admitted. "I wanted to see you. It is a great matter this, Roderigo. It is a matter almost of life or death. Send this fellow away and I will explain."

"I'll be shot if I do!" Roderigo replied. "We need protection, Miss Strangeways and I. I might miss your jaw next time. Although," he went on thoughtfully, "I do not think that I should."

"*M'sieur le Marquis*," Antoine said, "you are in possession here. These are your rooms. Are you making any charge against anyone?"

"Certainly not against M'selle," Roderigo replied. "She is my guest and—"

"And I am his cousin," the thickset young man observed, staggering to his feet, and groping towards the revolver—which meantime, however, the hall porter had annexed.

"Kind of family party, eh?" the latter observed.

"Don't you believe it!" Roderigo answered. "He is no cousin of mine, Antoine. He is a thief. He believes I am in the Secret Service of my country and he is probably here to steal documents. Ring for a policeman and bung him off!"

"Will you charge him, Marquis?" the man asked.

"I will charge him with anything," Roderigo answered, "but I shall not appear until after luncheon-time. I am half an hour late for my appointment for luncheon with Mademoiselle as it is."

Antoine slipped the revolver into his pocket.

"You be off!" he said to di Gomez. "Let me see you off the premises, you and the young lady, sir," he went on, turning respectfully to Roderigo.

"Fetch me a taxi," Roderigo ordered. "We shall be safer there. You can do what you like with the thick young man who goes through life thinking he is my cousin; but I warn you of this, di Gomez," he went on, his tone suddenly sterner: "If I catch you in these rooms again or interfering in any way with Mademoiselle, I will hand you over to the police here and I will see that you don't get off so easily next time. You keep him here, Antoine, until we are safe off the spot, and then do what you like with him. I should charge him with loitering if I were you."

The man saluted. On the whole he felt that he was getting out of it pretty well.

"There is a taxi outside now, sir," he observed. "He drove up with Sir Frederick a minute or two ago."

"If you are quite ready then, Miss Strangeways," Roderigo suggested.

She looked at him in astonishment.

"I am to lunch with you after all, then?" she expostulated.

"Of course you are," he replied with one of his extraordinarily pleasant smiles. "Thursday is one of my very lucky days and I want to talk to you particularly. See you later, Antoine, and next time I set eyes on you, di Gomez," he went on, "you will be sorry for the day that you were born!"

Roderigo and Anne descended the stairs together and he handed the girl into a taxi.

"I am really to lunch with you then," she repeated, "after being caught burgling your apartment!"

"It looks like it," he admitted. "You left the Clipper without wishing me good morning; you never sent a reply to the message I entrusted the steward with; you let me wangle your passport; you cut me dead at my cousin's, pretended you had never seen me before; and now you deny that you are lunching with me! It is a lucky thing that I am a good-natured man. All the same I am a little out of breath. We will smoke a cigarette and drink a cocktail at the Milan en route."

"En route to where?" she asked.

"To luncheon," he answered.

Roderigo di Cordovina, although Portuguese without a doubt by descent, and the possessor of various estates, a not inconsiderable banking account, and other worldly proofs of his nationality, was Italian to

the backbone in his culinary tastes, and particularly in his love of red Chianti from the right district. Rather than to visit the Milan for cocktails, it was to obtain spaghetti cooked in a particular manner, and Chianti of Ruffino, that he had inveigled Anne Strangeways that morning into traversing the byways of Soho.

"How good-natured you are," he told the girl, who was seated opposite him a few minutes later in the somewhat smelly, distinctly shabby, but still picturesque little restaurant not far from Shaftesbury Avenue.

"I am not sure that I suffer by it," she replied. "One gets tired of these grill rooms with a grill, and restaurants which have become nothing but eating-houses. I was so afraid, too, when you suggested a cocktail at the Milan bar this morning, that you would expect me to lunch there."

"You are tired of the fashionable places?" he suggested.

"Sick to death of them," she agreed. "London has gone right off the rails so far as its restaurants are concerned. Everywhere it is the same food and the same crowd of people eating it and complaining about the cocktails."

He nodded.

"We are much too indefinite in our choice of a restaurant," he agreed. "The thing to do is to cultivate a greedy spirit. Thrust away disagreeable thoughts. Concentrate upon what you intend to eat and drink. Think of the earthy, violet flavour of this Chianti, and think too with respect and wonder of the condiments which made up the marvellous sauce we had with the spaghetti."

She laughed softly.

"Aren't you a little young to be treating your food so seriously?"

"Not a bit of it," he assured her, "and I am not nearly so young as you seem to think. I am old enough, at any rate, to treat my food with respect. For that reason I eat very seldom. I often go for a whole day with little more than a rusk."

"It is clearer than ever," she decided, "that you were never meant to live in England."

"I have never succeeded in finding the country which I could have adopted wholeheartedly, if I had had anything to do with it," he confessed. "I certainly should not have liked to be a Frenchman. Portuguese are worse still, and Spaniards seem to have had all the life stamped out of them by that disgusting war."

"How should you like being an Iceland?" she asked. "They are rather fashionable just now."

"Not in the least," he replied. "I hate the cold."

"Nothing left for you but South America," she decided. "However, I didn't accept your invitation to lunch to discuss your taste in nationalities."

"Why did you come?" he enquired curiously. "I was rather surprised when you said yes."

"Well, for one thing," she confided, "I wanted to know why you used your influence to get me on that flying boat."

"Well, I can satisfy you about that with pleasure," he replied. "I did my best to get you on the boat because I am a very credulous person, and I really believed that for some reason or other you were in a state of great distress. I certainly did not expect to meet you at a frivolous cocktail party a few days afterwards."

"Reason Number One," she assented. "Go on please."

"Reason Number Two," he proceeded, "is that from the moment you sat down on that bench at Cintra I found you attractive in a somewhat indefinable way, and reason Number Three," he concluded, "was because I could not help believing that you would reward me sometime by coming and lunching with me here in dingy state."

"Well, of course," she reflected, "that is all very pleasant and complimentary, but it does not seem to add up right, somehow or other."

"Why not?" he demanded. "You are rather attractive. I suppose you know that. You have nice eyes, a pleasant smile, a delightful little twist of the lips sometimes, and your figure, to say the least of it, is agreeable. These things have an effect upon the susceptibilities of my sex. I would always do ten times as much for a good-looking woman as I would for a plain one."

"What a confession!"

"All right, I do not mind. It has the rare and agreeable quality of embodying the truth. Do you often listen to the truth, Miss Anne Strangeways?"

"Not often," she confessed. "And still less often to the whole truth."

"*Touché!*" he admitted. "Very well then, you shall have the fourth reason, and then you will have had the whole truth. I had a curious sort of conviction that you were hurrying out of Portugal for something like the reason I was hurrying out of Europe. I dare say I was wrong, but these are queer times, and for a young woman of character you had a touch of that fear in your eyes which I never like to see in a woman."

"You are very observant," she said calmly.

"Confess," he begged her, "that I have not plagued you with questions. I even received the shock of my life meeting you again at the cocktail party without turning a hair."

"You kept your head wonderfully," she agreed, smiling. "If you felt a paroxysm of joy you concealed it admirably. If on the other hand you have been depressed since by a dull fear that you were going to be haunted by my sudden appearance wherever you go in life, you have also managed to conceal that."

"I am bearing up," he admitted cheerfully. "Coincidence has always appealed to me since that brief and accidental meeting on the *plage* at Cintra. Since then we have attended a reception together; we have been fellow guests at a marvellous supper-dinner feast given by the mystery man of the world. We might have got through quite a lot of conversation and become fast friends by this time, you know, Miss Anne Strangeways, if you had shown the slightest possession of that very admirable quality, fidelity."

"Why should I be faithful to you?" she asked laughing. "We are still very nearly strangers. It was only by accident that you were introduced to me. Your very ability to render me the service which you did render me is enough to arouse my suspicions to start with. You have paid me compliments which should add to them, and when I meekly accepted your luncheon invitation you brought me to a rendezvous for the wholehearted respectability of which I should not like to pledge myself."

"You know you are a very glib talker," he observed. "You are not an American girl professor or anything of that sort, are you?"

"Nothing in the least like it," she assured him. "You are right off the line."

"Let's tell one another our life histories," he suggested.

"I would not tell you mine for the world," she replied. "You would simply doze off to sleep. On the whole I think that so far as I am concerned, silence about my past is best. I fancy myself to be a little more attractive as a mystery. That leaves so much open to your imagination. You can suspect me to be a political spy whom you have helped to escape from a greedy European political association, the unmarried secretary of an American multi-millionaire, or..."

"Stop there, for a moment!" he insisted. "This is interesting. I never considered the possibility of your being a married woman. I hope you are not."

"What concern is it of yours, dear Marquis di Cordovina?"

"Alas," he admitted, "it should not be so, of course, but it is a sad truth that a married woman loses glamour."

"What about your little cousin, the Princess Rosina?" she asked. "There isn't a woman in London who has more admirers."

"So you know that, do you, Miss Anne Strangeways?"

"An accident," she murmured. "Lady Myra talked to me for a long time last night, and it seems that they are very great friends."

"You had met Lady Myra before then?"

"No."

"The coincidence of our meeting again then seems to have become more impressive."

"I do not think so," she objected. "London is a very small place really. However, we are getting to know one another quite nicely. Apart from the fact that I don't believe you would find me in the least convincing, I can assure you that I have no desire to present myself as a political spy. It is too exciting and personal a role; you would lose faith in me. It would certainly interfere with my digestion. Violent disappointments are not well supported after spaghetti served with this particular sauce."

"There is chicken to come," he reminded her.

"Heavens!" she exclaimed. "I had forgotten that."

"You should look at your menu, Miss Anne Strangeways," he admonished her. "I do not bring a girl out and treat her to Soho napkins, indifferent tablecloths, rather indifferent cutlery, and spaghetti only. Something tells me that with the chicken we shall find the famous asparagus sauce Carlo himself claims to have invented."

She sighed.

"When one thinks of this luxurious meal and then reflects upon your deserted estates in Portugal—"

"But, my dear Miss Strangeways," he interrupted, "my estates can look after themselves very well for a few years. You might even, if you made judicious enquiries, find out that I could afford to marry you and keep you in the style to which you have been accustomed."

"I will call round with you at your bankers at any time you like to suggest!" she told him..."Really, my dear host," she went on a few moments later, "this is a very delicious chicken. Your friend Carlo can cook. You are spoiling me; and after all, you know, it should have been I who was the hostess. If I had had meals for the rest of my life at my disposal the other night at that ghastly shed, I think I should have offered them all to you when the pilot slipped that passport into my hand. You rendered me a marvellous service without any hope of return."

"Oh, I am not so sure about that," he warned her. "My time has not come yet. I can make all sorts of demands."

"Until we have finished this meal," she declared with a bewildering smile, "I will not lose my respect for you. I shall continue to think of you as a man of honour so long as there is a spoonful of this sauce left."

"The black coffee is good too," he assured her. "The Portuguese brandy is not bad either. I am not sure that a combination of the two might not weaken even my high principles."

"Roderigo di Cordovina," she declared fervently, "you are a gift from the gods."

There was a blue haze of cigarette smoke over their table soon after the coffee had been served. Roderigo leaned a little nearer towards his companion.

"To leave for a moment this fascinating babel of personalities," he suggested, "I think it would be rather interesting to discuss Mr. Mirakel's party last night. Why did he give it, who were all those people, why were we invited? Who is Mr. Mirakel?"

"You should go to your cousin," she reminded him. "She must know all about him. They nearly fell into one another's arms after she had read the letter of introduction."

"Quite true," he admitted. "Yes, I must try and find out something from Rosina. When I come to think of it, though, I seem to remember that considering that she is generally so confidential with me, she did dry up rather quickly when I asked a few questions about him. She became suddenly dumb. She knew nothing."

"You must persevere with your curiosity," she insisted. "I think it is your duty to call upon her this afternoon and find out as much as you can of the man's history."

"I don't believe anyone knows much," he confided doubtfully.

"The Princess must know more about him than we do," Anne Strangeways persisted. "He must have had some reason for showing those panoramic pictures to us."

"I think he was just showing off that new instrument of his," Roderigo suggested.

She shook her head.

"There was something behind that," she declared emphatically. "I have heard it said about him once that he was a man who did nothing without a purpose. Why did he want to show us all those beautiful places and then disappear without a word of explanation?"

"No idea," he frankly confessed.

"Then I think you ought to go and ask your cousin and try to find out."

"Don't say that," he begged.

"Why should you mind? You and she are bosom friends."

"Yes, that's all very well," he agreed. "But I am not very keen about going to the Embassy just now. Our young friend of this morning hangs about there and if he goes on annoying me I am afraid there will be trouble."

"Your distant relative from Madrid?"

"That is the fellow, but how on earth did you know it?"

"I am very clever at guessing," she admitted. "I heard him asking where you were to be found. I am coming to the conclusion, Marquis, that we are both conspirators."

He shook his head.

"Not guilty," he assured her. "The young man di Gomez annoys me. He inspires me with a desire to kick him. He presumes too much upon our relationship."

"Why don't you set your mind at rest about Mr. Mirakel and find out about his pictures?" she asked, with a sudden change of conversation. "That seems to me much more interesting."

"I don't know that I am very keen," he admitted frankly. "I believe that the pictures were faked and that they were just shown to us as an after-dinner amusement."

"I do not agree with you," she said firmly. "If Mr. Mirakel is really one of the richest men in the world why should he waste his time showing us faked pictures?"

"I should still suggest that he had no real object," Roderigo rejoined. "It was just for a little brief amusement. He has probably bought up some new patents in the film-production world and he was showing them off."

"Well, all I can say is that if that is true," Anne Strangeways declared, "he ought to be ashamed of himself. If he is as rich as all that he ought to be able to buy what everyone is aching for just now—world peace."

"Why should he want to buy peace for the world, Miss Anne Strangeways? You will find that people have different ideas about that. If you read the *Northern Review* this month you will come across an article, written by a very famous Scandinavian, professing to be written from a purely altruistic point of view. From the writer's outlook, to buy peace now would be to nail temporary boarding over all the sewers of the world."

"I know the man you mean," Anne Strangeways admitted. "He writes well sometimes but he is wrong. The whole world is aflame with misery. Surely Mirakel with an unlimited amount of money could do something to lessen it."

"I doubt it," Roderigo declared.

"Why?" she demanded.

"Because war has a dual demand," he argued. "War could never start, it would never continue if it had not two sides to it. It is a filthy business, it is a carnage, it is a blasphemous outburst of all the foul gases in the world. It is also an automatically started economic effort. Cannot you see, therefore, that any attempt to strangle it unnaturally by purely artificial means could have nothing but a temporary effect? I don't say that this is so, but it is possible that Mr. Mirakel is one of those men, like the great company of American millionaire philosophers, who look at this horrible debacle and who proclaim that intellectual mankind has no place in the making or stopping of what is going on."

"Then how is it to come to an end?" she demanded.

"By exhaustion," he answered, "and in no other way."

"What a brutal idea!" she exclaimed indignantly, "and from you too, a man of your culture, of your aesthetic taste. How you can even harbour such a fancy in your brain amazes me."

"Exhaustion is a form of disease," he admitted. "But I ask you this, Miss Strangeways, have you ever seen a word of mine in print or ever heard of me upon a platform? No. That may be because I am not a writer and not a speaker, but it may also be because I have had a glimpse of the truth and believe that it is better in the interests of the whole world, if this is a truth, to keep it unpromulgated."

"You had better pay your bill," she told him shortly.

"Meaning," he asked with that queer little smile once more upon his lips, but with his eyes very bright and gentle, "that you will accept no more of my hospitality?"

"Not at present."

He summoned a waiter who was passing their table.

"Two more coffees, Giuseppe," he ordered. "Strong, black and plenty of sugar in the basin."

"*Sì, sì, Signor*," the man replied with a smile.

"Honestly," she begged, "am I to take it, Marquis, that you have been talking seriously to me?"

"Anne Strangeways," he rejoined, "think for yourself. How are you going to continue, do you think, to live intelligently and reasonably in this terrible whirlpool of desolation and bloody destruction that is raging at the present moment, unless you look at the subject from every possible point of view? Think of it for a moment and then detach your thoughts. You will feel the relief. It will be like the west breeze of the Atlantic after the raging fury of the Sirocco. It only needs a few thousands of people with your brain and sensibilities to fasten their thoughts upon one aspect of all that is happening around you and you will all go mad. You must keep your thoughts and ideas fluid. You must weigh carefully in the balance every possibility."

"It is not only I, and a few millions of others," she agreed; "I think that the whole world would drift into lunacy if our ideas got set."

"Precisely. Now try and believe as I am doing that Mirakel, who has had more opportunity of doing so, has been gazing down into the same infernal cauldron with the same vision. He would realize, as I do, that it is impossible to affect it in any way whatever with his millions or billions or trillions. I tell you, I am perfectly convinced that if he emptied the whole lot into this turmoil, with heaven itself whispering in his ear words of guidance, he could not do a thing. In a sense every philanthropic venture is directed on a wrong basis, and I believe that the millions or billions which Mr. Mirakel may, or may not, possess are needed to save the world when sanity returns, not to be thrown into the cauldron now."

She took a cigarette from his case and began to smoke almost furiously. He followed her example. There was a little casement window behind her head. He thrust it open. The breath of fresh air that swept in brought with it much of the disturbance of the street, but it was still amazingly refreshing. She took off her hat and the wind rippled through her beautiful brown hair.

"Have you five shillings left, my friend," she asked, "having paid that amazing bill?"

He emptied his pockets.

"Very nearly five pounds," he chuckled.

"Take me for a drive in the Park," she begged. "Anywhere—down to Kew if you like. I want to be somewhere where I can breathe quietly. Do not be afraid, I want neither to talk nor to argue, my head feels as though it were bursting. I will not think, I promise you. I shall close my eyes and rest."

He patted the back of her hand sympathetically. In a very few minutes they paid their adieus to the restaurant and a taxi was easily found. Soon they were out on the broad ways where the wind comes sweeping from open spaces. It must have been half an hour before either of them spoke. The colour was back in her cheeks and he thought that little flash of gratitude that shone in her eyes, faint though it might be, was utterly and entirely transforming.

"So much," she exclaimed, "for Mr. Mirakel's magic lantern! I will tell you now," she added, "that when you found me on the beach at Cintra, when you helped me with my passport in the shed at Lisbon, you were helping me to get away from the lunacy you have been speaking of. I am thankful."

"And yet," he reminded her gaily, "when I ventured to call your attention to your disappearing money you would have given the world to be rude to me."

She flashed a sudden brilliant smile at him. It reminded him somehow of the dancing sunshine which rode that afternoon upon the waves of the fierce Atlantic.

"I was as rude as I dared to be," she admitted.

"Well, I was coming over to England," he confessed, "chiefly to escape from what I was threatened with in my own country. I think in a faraway manner I am beginning to understand how difficult life is likely to become."

"Cannot we go to Mr. Mirakel and ask him to discuss the whole subject with us?" she suggested. "I have every excuse for presenting myself to him."

He shook his head doubtfully.

"Frankly I do not think so," he replied.

"Why not?" she demanded.

He hesitated.

"We both of us met this man almost for the first time the other day," he confided, "but he is quite a unique personality, you know, and very difficult to approach. He has not, in his whole make-up, one grain of pride or conceit but he has grown to think of himself almost as a prophet. I tried to talk to him last night, Anne Strangeways, but I had to give it up. I cannot think fast enough, and he has a strange impatient, yet absolutely concealed, resentment of lack of understanding. He thinks he sees what baffles other people. I believe he does see more quickly than most of us. He will not discuss present-day affairs with any of the great thinkers of the hour. He has a curious little smile if ever their names are mentioned. That is what makes me think that sometimes he really does believe that he has seen, either in a dream or revelation, something to which others have been blind. With Rosina it is different. She does not want to understand. She only wants relief and escape. We will talk to Rosina about frivolities and leave Mr. Mirakel alone."

"Very well," she agreed. "Rosina is frivolous; but she has plenty of understanding...Heavens!"

"Anything the matter?" he asked.

"I am shocked at myself," she confided. "I am beginning to obey you already!"

CHAPTER VIII

The Prince Charles di Gomez, husband of the beautiful Rosina, a sandy-haired, freckled-faced young man, had a wholesome fear of his chief although the latter was a not too distant connection. He handed his stick and gloves to the footman in the hall of the Embassy later on that afternoon, and glanced with apprehension at a closed door opposite.

"His Excellency in, Antonio?" he asked.

The man smiled and bowed.

"His Excellency is somewhat impatient, I fear," he replied. "He has asked for Your Highness two or three times already this morning."

The young man's expression indicated no pleasure at the information. He followed the servant across the hall, however, into the Ambassador's private rooms, where His Excellency was lounging in a stiff high-backed chair in front of a table littered with papers. He was smoking a very excellent cigar, which he laid carefully in the ash-tray at his nephew's entrance.

"Well, what news, Charles?" he demanded.

"None at all, sir," the young man replied.

"None at all," His Excellency repeated; "don't talk nonsense, Charles. You saw the Home Secretary?"

"I did," the Prince admitted. "He was civil, but very curt. As soon as he found out that yours was only a general enquiry he declined to have anything to say to me."

"You mean to say that he would give no information whatever?" the Ambassador asked angrily.

"Not a word, sir. When I pressed him, all that he would say was that 'Mr. Mirakel is not in politics, and his social standing is an affair in which the Home Office are not interested?'"

His Excellency picked up his cigar and found that it had gone out. He made use of a Portuguese expletive, high-sounding, but profane.

"And afterwards?" he demanded.

"I delivered your note in person to General Dawson. He was very polite until he came to the name of Mr. Mirakel. Then he dried up completely. 'We have no information whatever against a gentleman whom we have always heard spoken of with the utmost respect,' he declared."

"Well, you tried to get a little more out of him than that, I hope."

"It was difficult," the young man answered. "I stumbled on for a moment or two, but he soon pulled me up. 'Mr. Mirakel is famous all the world over for his wealth and influence,' he told me. 'His activities, however, do not concern us. Sorry, Prince. My compliments to your charming wife.'"

"And then?" the Ambassador demanded.

"I came out," his nephew confessed. "There was nothing else to do."

The Ambassador leaned farther back in his chair and lit another cigar.

"Well, what are you going to do about it, Charles?" he asked. "It is true that Rosina is my hostess here, but what should be more important to you is that she is your wife."

The young man sat on the corner of the table and leaned towards his relation. It was not a very dignified attitude, and for a member of a profession amongst whom dignity is recognized as a necessary virtue, he was certainly not a shining example of his class.

"What do you think I ought to do?" he asked dolefully.

The Ambassador's face darkened. He had no great opinion of his nephew.

"It isn't for me to teach you the position a husband ought to adopt under such circumstances," he snapped. "You ought to know for yourself. What I am considering is what position I ought to take as the head of the Embassy."

"Don't do anything to annoy Rosina too much," the young man begged. "She won't be fit to live with if you do."

"I am not at all sure that you ought to go on living with her," his uncle said gloomily.

His nephew's cheeks were flushed. He spoke with unexpected spirit.

"That's rubbish," he declared. "Rosina's all right."

"Of course she's all right," his uncle agreed. "All the same, she's troublesome. Damn troublesome. These Englishmen don't seem to care what their wives do. They are mostly parvenus and don't count. Our womenkind come from the greatest families left in Europe. They can't be allowed to run about the world with strange men. The thing for us to decide, young fellow, is who is going to have this out with Rosina: you, her husband, or I, as the head of the family, her diplomatic and social sponsor?"

"I should say you, sir," the young man declared confidently and without hesitation.

"Get off my desk and look a little more respectful, if you please," his uncle enjoined. "There is something going on in the hall. More callers, I expect. I have told Antonio a dozen times that I will not have people shown in here without an announcement."

The Ambassadorial door was thrown open with a sudden jerk. Rosina flashed into the room, gay and laughing. She was wearing an exquisite but very daring tailored costume, and an indescribable hat. In the background loomed the lank and respectable visage of Antonio, the major-domo, who was still suffering from the indignity of having been pushed to one side.

"You two are conspiring," she exclaimed, "and I believe, I honestly believe, that you were discussing me. How can you, perfect gentlemen both of you, discuss a lady behind her back?"

She caught her husband's eye, and he inclined his head towards his uncle. The latter coughed solemnly.

"Rosina, my dear," he confessed, "it is true, we talk of you, but we are not ordinary gossip-mongers. Charles is your husband."

"Don't I know!" she cried. "How often does he not remind me of it. Charles, you must not look at me like that."

"At any rate, you might treat me with more respect," the Ambassador said sternly. "You hold a very distinguished position in the Court of this country, a position which I have invited you to occupy. We have both a claim upon you and your actions, Rosina."

"Darlings, both of you!" she exclaimed, throwing herself into the distinguished visitors' chair opposite the Ambassador. "What have I done that is wrong?"

With ponderous gravity the Baron di Gomez withdrew from his pocket an invitation card of thin white ivory, upon which a few words were engraved in gold lettering.

"This," he confided, "has been discovered this morning in the Ambassadorial letter-bag."

He passed it across the table. She handled it with her exquisitely manicured delicate long fingers. The envelope was without a doubt addressed to the Princess Rosina di Gomez.

"Oh, that!" she remarked. "What about it?"

The Ambassador exchanged a hopeless glance with his nephew. He turned away from the sheer vacuity in the latter's face to meet Rosina's dancing eyes.

"What about it?" he repeated in despair.

She nodded.

"That came for me this morning," she confided. "Oh, my dear Uncle," she went on with sudden most attractive appeal in her tone. "I do wish you would make some enquiries and find out for me all about that glorious man?"

"That—that—"

"That wonderful man."

The Ambassador placed his two elbows on the table in front of him, opened the palms of his hands and leaned his forehead against his rather pudgy fingers. He remained motionless for several moments. Then he slowly withdrew into an upright position and fixed in his left eye a black-rimmed tortoiseshell monocle. He regarded Rosina with horror.

"My niece-in-law," he said, "Princess Rosina di Gomez—have you read the invitation that has been conveyed to you?"

"Rather!" she replied. "Don't you think it sounds most interesting?"

"So interesting," the Ambassador repeated with grim fury, "that if we were in Lisbon Charles would send his seconds to the fellow at once."

"Oh, I hope not," she protested. "One of them might be hurt, and that would be ridiculous. Nowadays, my dear Uncle, people do not fight duels. And besides, what is there to fight about? This wonderful man is not inviting me to a *tête-à-tête* supper. There will perhaps be heaps of other people there. A supper on the roof of his apartments at the Milan! It sounds most intriguing."

"You are invited alone," His Excellency pointed out sternly. "The invitation came through the post in the Embassy bag."

"Well, I don't see how else it could have come," she observed, "except by messenger boy."

"You are perhaps proposing to attend this festival?" he enquired.

"Rather!" was the prompt reply. "Why should I not? It is to be a prelude, I believe, to a cruise. Myra is invited, she and all the party of the other night."

"Lady Myra Huddlestone?"

"Why not?"

"What, unchaperoned?"

"Of course, she can come with me, if she likes."

"And your own chaperon?" the Ambassador asked with frigid politeness.

"Rubbish!" she replied. "I am twenty-nine years old and a married woman. Why, you two are funny old sticks!"

"It is my desire," the Ambassador declared pompously, "and your husband's command, that you neither answer this impertinent invitation, nor attend the function to which it refers."

Rosina glanced from one to the other of the two men in mild amusement. Then she began to laugh. She laughed quietly, but with a restrained enthusiasm which was exceedingly disconcerting. She slid from her chair and dropped a little curtsy to her uncle.

"Your desire, my dear Uncle," she sighed, "I might feel it my duty to consider; but my husband's command...that," she added with a little gesture of amusement, "is not a thing to be considered nowadays? Will you tell me, please, one of you, or both of you: What has this poor man done, that you should suggest such an insult to his proffered hospitality? He is a very famous person. Who is he? Please tell me that."

The two men exchanged despairing glances. Her husband thought of his wasted morning and afternoon, spent at his uncle's behest in search of the missing millionaire.

"My dear Rosina," he intervened, "it is just because you cannot tell me exactly who Mr. Mirakel is, and what he represents, that we refuse to allow you to accept his hospitality?"

She rose to her feet, and laughed at them on her way to the door.

"Is it not a pity," she exclaimed, "that you are so ill-informed? It is because you do not know, and because I am anxious to find out, that I mean to accept the invitation. Mr. Mirakel presented a letter of introduction to me with all ceremony when he arrived here, but this letter itself told me nothing of his antecedents, and nothing in the world would induce me to disclose the name of the sender, except that I might tell you that he is one of the famous men of the world. *Au revoir*, both of you! Perhaps when we meet again I may be able to tell you all about this man of mystery. Meanwhile, I am missing some wonderful dancing upstairs."

"Rosina!" the Ambassador called out.

"Rosina!" her husband echoed.

But all they heard of Rosina for some time to come was the echo of her laugh of derision and the sound of her flying footsteps in the passage.

The Baron di Gomez leaned forward and picked up the card which Rosina had left upon the desk. He read it out with a note of disgust in his contemptuous voice:—

"MR. MIRAKEL REQUESTS THE HONOUR OF THE COMPANY OF THE PRINCESS DI GOMEZ AT HIS SECOND SÉANCE OF MOVING PICTURES TO BE GIVEN AT HIS ROOMS AT THE MILAN HOTEL AT MIDNIGHT ON THURSDAY, THE 25TH INSTANT. REFRESHMENTS WILL BE SERVED AND MAURICE'S SMALL BAND WILL PLAY DANCE MUSIC. MR. MIRAKEL HIMSELF WILL NOT BE PRESENT. THOSE ACCEPTING THIS INVITATION ARE BEGGED TO ASK FOR MR. HOMER BAYES AT THE RECEPTION OFFICES."

"Mirakel himself will not be present," Rosina's husband repeated wonderingly. "What's the catch there, I wonder?"

"If that's the truth, it simplifies matters," his uncle remarked.

"I don't think that it makes much difference," the Prince objected. "The fellow looks like the custodian of an Oriental harem."

The Ambassador grinned.

"Don't go too far, Charles," he enjoined with a shade more tolerance in his tone. "There is no man in his senses who would try any game of that sort in this country, and they all say that Mr. Mirakel has the brain of a Solomon. There it is on his invitation card that he won't be there. He can't go, after that. This is London after all, and not Bagdad, Charles. The secretary cannot pick up one of these beautiful ladies and spirit her away to his master's private apartments."

Charles smiled pensively.

"Rosina would give him something to think about if he tried any of those games on," he remarked. "I say let her go."

His uncle, who was disposed to take the line of least resistance, welcomed this suggestion.

"At any rate, we are dining towards the end of the week at Huddleston House, and we can find out whether the Duchess is letting her daughter go to this new party. You must remember, Charles, that if Mirakel is really the millionaire they say he is, he is just the man we want to take up a few of our bonds."

"That is true," Charles assented.

"There was a general meeting of the Directors last week, and I do not mind telling you, Charles, that although you haven't seen the letter yet, because it was marked 'Private,' they are very dissatisfied with the business which has been offered to them by the London banks. They thought that in my important position here I should have been able to do a great deal better for them. Mirakel, they say, has been buying freely all manner of foreign bonds, but none of ours."

"They cannot expect the Ambassador to fiddle about with a lot of bankers," Charles remarked.

"Not personally," his uncle agreed, "but still I think I might have used my influence here and there."

There was a knock at the door, and the grave-faced functionary from below presented himself. He seemed to have drawn himself an inch or two higher, and there was certainly an additional respect and gravity in his speech.

"Mr. Mirakel to see Your Excellency," he announced.

The Ambassador rose to his feet in amazement.

"Talk about coincidences," he gasped—"now at last we may find out something about the mystery man! Show him up at once, Antonio."

CHAPTER IX

His Excellency the Baron di Gomez, who possessed a fair amount of the aplomb of the born diplomat, remained seated, and smiled courteously at his unexpected visitor. Charles, who was seated in line with

him, rose to his feet and bowed. Mirakel, faultlessly dressed for an afternoon call, approached the Ambassador with a slight but courteous bow. The latter waved him into the chair reserved for distinguished visitors.

"My dear Mr. Mirakel," he said, "this is an unexpected pleasure. My niece is still talking of your wonderful party the other night. I only regret that I was not at liberty to share her enjoyment."

Mr. Mirakel made a dumb show of accepting the Ambassador's hand, but it was only with the tips of his fingers that he touched the latter's palm. The latter pointed to Charles.

"This is my nephew," he explained, "the Prince di Gomez. He is really the head of my family and he is acting here as my First Secretary. He is also the husband of the Princess Rosina who was your guest the other night."

"Wonderful," Mirakel declared, "it seems to me that very early on this visit of mine to Europe I have met with a very distinguished family with extraordinarily little effort. My Secretary," he went on, "is a stickler for etiquette. He informed me that I had had the honour of entertaining the Princess, who acts, I believe, as your official hostess, without having paid my respects to you, sir. Will you pardon the omission?"

"With the utmost pleasure," His Excellency acceded. "Will it please you, sir, to treat this as a very informal visit and join me in a cigar?"

"Alas, Your Excellency," the latter regretted, "cigars are not one of my weaknesses, but cigarettes from one of my own plantations I smoke to excess. You permit?"

The Ambassador lit his cigar and Mirakel his cigarette.

"My visit of ceremony having been paid," the latter continued, behaving like a man thoroughly at home and at his ease, "may I now perhaps revert to the second reason for my intrusion?"

"Intrusion!" his vis-à-vis expostulated.

Mirakel bowed politely.

"You are very courteous," he acknowledged. "With your gracious permission I will withdraw that, and call this my second visit to your hospitable abode. I will admit that I had two reasons for making my appearance here to-day, Your Excellency. One was to make the acquaintance of the husband of the most charming lady it has ever been my honour to meet in any country of the world; and the other to make a casual enquiry as to a purely business affair."

The Baron retained for a moment the expression of an almost intellectual human being.

The word "business" recalled to him the possibilities of opening up a subject which had led him to send Charles, his distinguished nephew, hunting all over London earlier in the day. His very expression would have been a warning to a man of less astuteness than Mr. Mirakel. The latter, however, waited for what he knew was coming, with a dubious but courteous smile upon his lips.

"If I am not mistaken, sir," he went on, "you, the Baron Fernando di Gomez, are still the head of the famous banking house of di Gomez?"

"That is quite true," the Ambassador admitted. "It is, of course, a somewhat unusual position for a person with Ambassadorial rank, but my Government have waived the irregularity."

"You are still interested in the financial operations of your great firm?" Mr. Mirakel enquired.

"I am still interested—in fact, I might say I am still intimately connected with them."

"Then I must confess," Mr. Mirakel continued, "that as I am a man who has devoted a great part of his life to the study of finance, you and I should find a subject of mutual interest. I am interested in your latest issue of Portuguese Bonds. Can we, perhaps, discuss the subject for a few minutes?"

His Excellency's self-control was faultless. He glanced across towards his nephew.

"Charles," he said, "this is a matter which will not greatly concern you. You might join the others in what the Princess calls her 'bar' for a short time. Mr. Mirakel and I are going to talk finance."

Charles, too, played the game perfectly. He rose without any undue haste to his feet.

"Certainly," he assented, "I am almost ashamed to confess it, but high finance bores me stiff. I shall probably see you before you leave, Mr. Mirakel."

The latter smiled. Charles left the room.

"God bless my soul," he muttered to himself as he mounted the stairs leading to his wife's sanctum.

* * *

Through an open door on the first floor a woman's gay voice was heard peeling out into the hall. There was a waft of exotic perfume, the rustle of feminine clothes and Rosina's voice.

"Charles," she cried, "tell me at once, who is the official visitor who is closeted with His Excellency? Why are you looking as though you were suddenly struck dumb? What is it that has happened?"

"It is Mr. Mirakel," he announced solemnly.

"Mr. Mirakel?" she repeated incredulously.

"I left him with His Excellency not thirty seconds ago," Charles told her solemnly. "He was seated in the chair of state, and my revered uncle had all the appearance of having settled down for an hour's talk."

"And you left them?" Rosina exclaimed. "Nincompoop!"

"But, my dear Rosina," Charles expostulated, "I had no option. He and the Chief have now plunged into the subject of high finance. We had already had some light conversation. He spoke of you as the most divine thing in London, and he looked at me with pity in his eyes, pity for you. The fellow had the impudence," her husband confided, "to tell us that he only came to pay his respects to the representative of the Portuguese Government because his secretary told him that he ought to!"

"And to think that I was downstairs myself talking to my uncle only a few minutes ago!" Rosina wailed. "I could only just have missed him."

"Mr. Mirakel indeed!" Charles exclaimed scornfully. "You know, I have taken rather a dislike to the fellow. I think that he is a fop."

Roderigo, turning round from the bar, shook his head.

"I do not think so," he disagreed. "Mirakel is a man if ever there was one, even if he does like to clothe himself in a little mystery, and play the dandy. I know nothing about him myself, but I would not mind betting that he succeeds in everything he attempts."

"He is a marvellous dancer," Rosina observed. "He does not talk much, but he told me that he still drives a four-in-hand on one of his estates and also that he was one of the first to drive a car or fly one of the big new planes."

Charles poured himself out a whisky-and-soda at the bar.

"The matter of these small accomplishments," he suggested, "is of very little account. What I should like to know is something definite about the man. Why should we trust our womenkind to go to these wild parties? Why should Myra, one of the most admired young women in London, want to go? Remember that Rosina is taking all the responsibility, having introduced him into our little circle."

"Yes, you must not forget that, Rosina," Roderigo put in.

"You too, Roddy!" Rosina sighed. "Well, then, I will tell you why. It is because I have the utmost confidence in him. It is because I am perfectly certain that he is a famous man."

"But that is all surmise," Charles pointed out. "You have had a letter of introduction from a very famous man, but that is not everything."

"Anyone who talked to him for a few minutes," Rosina argued, "would have faith in the man."

"Anyhow, let us leave him alone for a minute or two," Myra suggested. "Commander Rushton wants to know if you have any rum. We all want him to make us a Planter's Punch."

"Gorgeous!" Rosina exclaimed. "Ring the bell from behind the bar, there's a love. Sidney knows where all the drinks come from."

But the footman, who had hastily donned his white linen coat and who came hurrying in a moment or two later, shook his head regretfully.

"No Jamaica rum, Your Highness," he reported. "I have some Bacardi, if the Commander can make that do."

"Of course I can," Rushton assented. "You had better watch me carefully and you will be able to make the second lot. I shall need some limes, sherry, plenty of ice and some grated nutmeg."

Proceedings commenced.

* * *

"I wonder what on earth has become of Charles!" Myra exclaimed. "He seems to have disappeared."

Rosina glanced at the clock. "He usually comes up here again for a drink before he goes out," she remarked.

Sidney, the assistant barman, who had been watching the results of Commander Rushton's performance closely, looked up.

"His Highness may have returned to His Excellency, Your Highness. They have a very important visitor. An hour ago His Excellency sent out for an international lawyer."

Rosina's eyes were large with surprise. "They have really been doing business all this time down in that dump of a bureau?" she asked. "Who is the new visitor, Sidney?"

"His name, I believe, Madame," the man replied, "is Mr. Mirakel."

Rosina threw up her hands.

"You do not mean," she demanded, "that Mr. Mirakel has been here all this time with His Excellency?"

"Certainly he must be still there, Madame," the man replied. "I saw him arrive myself, and his car is still waiting outside. Some time after Mr. Charles left us, His Excellency rang the bell and told me I was to refuse audience to anyone who came. I have already sent away the Colonial Secretary from the Free French establishment, and also a messenger from the Spanish Embassy. Mr. Mirakel has been with His Excellency the whole afternoon."

"Sidney," Rosina begged, "make some more of these wonderful drinks quickly. His Excellency always brings visitors up here if they stay long enough."

"We will turn this into a carouse, if you like," the Admiral suggested.

"I might try a song," Rushton suggested tentatively.

"It appears to me," Myra remarked smiling, "that you are all frightened to death. Mr. Mirakel has probably come to present a few more invitations to the Enchanted Land."

"Then he is probably having a dispute with my husband," Rosina declared ruefully.

There came the sound of opening and closing of doors below. There were footsteps on the stairs. Two men made their appearance arm in arm: Mirakel, calm and dignified as usual, walking with an air of quiet distinction, and His Excellency, the Baron di Gomez, his double chin plainly showing, and his face wreathed in smiles.

"Rosina, my dear," he called out. "Your friend here, and I think I may call him mine too now, is doing us the great honour of staying to dine with us *en famille*. I have told him what to expect in these hard days, but he is reckless! He asks for one favour only, that he be permitted to return to his rooms, don a dinner jacket, which I have told him is quite unnecessary, and fetch a small parcel which I rather gather contains a gift to my very much favoured niece?"

"I am overcome," Rosina cried, beaming, as she held out her hand. "My dear Mr. Mirakel," she went on, "only one thing could have made me happier and have given me more real pleasure than to entertain you at dinner to-night."

"And that one thing, Princess?" Mirakel demanded as he released her fingers.

"To know how many of us are to receive those invitations."

There was a faint shadow on Mirakel's face. It had been obvious when he entered the room that he was unduly thoughtful.

"The significance of those invitations," he sighed, "may possibly have undergone a slight change since my recent conversation with His Excellency."

"And the gift?" she asked, puzzled.

"Remains a slight offering for Your Highness," was the grave reply.

CHAPTER X

Rosina was herself a little stupefied at the sheer beauty of the picture, a finely painted water-colour which Mirakel, unfolding from its silken wrappings with almost tender fingers, presented to her a little later in the evening. It was an exquisite panorama of sunlit shores, of gay colourful stretches of country beneath the far-off background of silvery mountain peaks. The canvas was queerly shaped. It was very much longer than it was deep and rather resembled, as Roderigo remarked, a serially seen vision of an earthly paradise. Mirakel was besieged with questions concerning it, which he answered at his leisure and with very little detail.

"The painter's name," he confided, "is unknown, neither is there any certainty about the latitude and longitude of the country where it was painted. It does not, as a matter of fact, appear upon any modern atlas."

The Baron grunted.

"It is fair to assume, then," he remarked, "that this is an entirely fanciful production."

"I would not admit that," Mirakel answered thoughtfully. "You will see that there is a material side to it. There are roads which were made by the hand of man, a railroad up in the mountains there with which an engineer must have had something to do. The cult of forestry has brought to perfection those marvellous forest trees. The ground, too, in many places has been tilled, and there are cattle in the meadows. The place must have a name. I have no urge to make it public."

"What are the people like who live there?" Roderigo asked.

"Like others in other parts of the world," Mirakel replied. "They are, and have become, what they make of themselves. Some climb, some fall. Some lie in the sunshine, warm themselves with its caress and breathe happily the spicy winds. They are lovers of nature, these people; but there are many ways of living. There are towns behind the hills there. Markets where money is made or lost. There are even one or two casinos. It is like other places, I suppose. There are women who tempt and men who yield. Young men who seek fame and older ones who seek only rest."

"I should like to know," His Excellency observed doggedly, "the name of these people and their nationality."

Mirakel smiled very quietly. He had an air sometimes of curious abstraction, as though he were looking far away from the spot where he was. It had taken hold of him at that moment. Somehow they all felt it,

seated at that round table—that he was seeing further than they did, seeing something outside the range of their vision.

"Your uncle, Princess," Mirakel said, "is a man of the earth. He is very wise. His feet will not often leave the earth—but heaven will probably come to him as it probably has done many a time before?" Rosina looked across the table and there was a sweet humour in her tone.

"Charles," she demanded, "what do you do when heaven sheds its rains upon you and its winds caress you?"

Charles turned complainingly towards his neighbour.

"Myra," he asked, "how can a man reply to a woman who asks her husband such questions?"

"Sit up and look sympathetic," she advised. "It's really very pretty poetry, you know."

"It doesn't scan for me," he confessed.

"Bright little man," Rosina scoffed. "Now for a serious question, Mr. Mirakel," she continued, laying her hand lightly for a moment on his: "Why are you making me the magnificent present of this picture?"

"It is really a sort of common present," he replied. "It counts for all of you who I am hoping will come upon this cruise with me. For Lady Myra, for my friend the Admiral, and for the Commander, and for several others who may not be in your immediate circle."

"You will end your days in a bad place, Mr. Mirakel," the Admiral warned him, "if you try to seduce fighting men away from their job."

"Yours will always remain nevertheless an open invitation," Mirakel assured him.

"Cook's would fit me up with travelling accommodation at any time, I suppose?" the Admiral asked with a grin.

"I doubt whether any tickets Cook's could offer you would bring you to my Lotus Land," Mirakel regretted.

"As for me," Rushton sighed, "I start out on convoy work within a fortnight. I cannot try climbing up fairy ladders until my time for work is over."

"Your decision is entirely reasonable, Admiral," Mirakel said quietly, "also yours, Commander. I wonder if I am going to make an enemy of you if I admit that the person amongst all others to whom I offer the hospitality of my imaginary land most eagerly is the lady who has earned for herself such wonderful popularity in all quarters of the world, the Princess."

The Baron was thunderstruck.

"You want Rosina!" he exclaimed. "The Princess would never leave her husband. Besides, how could I manage here at the Embassy without her? Absurd!"

Rosina kissed the tips of her fingers in his direction ironically, and looked curiously for a moment at Charles. Mr. Mirakel sighed as he lit a cigarette without emotion, apparently undisturbed.

"In social matters," he admitted, "I will plead guilty of an ignorance which is in a sense appalling. I listen always to what others say, however, and I know that the Princess is the one person in the world to whom mothers would entrust their daughters, even their sons, and perhaps even their valuable selves, without a moment's hesitation."

"But where is this enchanted place, Mr. Mirakel? And why do you want to run a house party on a gigantic scale at a time like this?" Charles di Gomez enquired pertinently. "English girls, and Americans too, are busy working. Europe is in the midst of a terrible war. My wife is a neutral, as I am. All the same we could not drop out of life in the manner you suggest. It would not be seemly or possible."

Mirakel regarded his questioner with a thoughtful air for several moments. He had the air of one engaged in a mild speculation as to whether his vis-à-vis was quite as much of a fool as he sometimes appeared.

"You must expand your ideas of myself and my offer a little, Prince," he enjoined. "It is not so much a house party that I am offering as a change of existence. The atmosphere in this hemisphere at any rate is soaked and drugged with the pernicious war-fever. You must look upon me as one of those philanthropists who are trying to smooth for certain chosen people a comelier fashion of day-by-day life."

The young man shook his head.

"Above my comprehension, as usual," he commented. "The atmosphere here suits me all right so long as the clubs keep open and my job remains going."

"Alas," Mirakel sighed, "I perceive that I must eliminate Prince Charles from my list of possible guests. What do you say, Lady Myra?" he added, looking at his next-door neighbour.

"May I ask you one question concerning the country in which your estates are situated?" she demanded.

"You may," he consented.

"Are there coupons there?"

"The word is unknown amongst my people," he assured her. "Furthermore," he continued, "all that you saw in that rolling panorama of pictures, and that you see represented in still life in the picture that I have brought, and all the country to the bases of the mountains, exists as you see it. You can travel for many miles, in any direction you like, from our landing place, and you will not arrive at the frontiers of my property."

The Baron stared at his guests for several moments from his place at the head of the table.

"The man is mad," he muttered to himself almost under his breath and in Portuguese argot.

"You had a different opinion of me an hour or so ago," Mirakel rejoined smiling. "You were accusing me of being too hard a man of business."

The Baron very nearly dropped his wineglass.

"You understood?" he gasped.

"Perfectly."

"How many languages do you speak?"

"All European ones," was the bland reply. "Never mind, Baron, yours was a perfectly justifiable remark. It is the reason why I never write articles or make speeches. No one would believe a word I say.

"Can you wonder at it?" Rosina asked smiling, as she pointed across to the picture.

"I really do not know that I can," he admitted with an answering light in his eyes. "Yet you believe, Princess?"

"I have great faith in you, Mr. Mirakel," she confessed.

He bowed slightly and turned once more to his other neighbour.

"And you?" he reminded her. "You have not answered my invitation."

"Oh, I accept," she exclaimed eagerly. "I warn you, though, I shall spend most of my time for the first month shopping. The place where the shops have no coupons is as near heaven as any place I can visualize for the moment. The only trouble is, how can I come without Rosina?"

Mirakel turned to his hostess. There was a faint twinkle in his eye.

"You see how necessary you are to my whole scheme," he pointed out. Her eyes answered his eloquently.

"It will be necessary for you," she declared, "to convince me of that."

For once in her life, however, there was a shade of uneasiness in her expression as she pointed to her husband and afterwards to the Baron. The latter opened his mouth and suddenly closed it again...He was back in his bureau below with the transatlantic lawyer, and sheets of rustling paper. He had visions of a great financial coup successfully accomplished. He remained silent. It was his nephew who spoke.

"I don't see how the Embassy can get along without you, Rosina," that young man pointed out. "I do not think, either, that I could possibly permit your departure for an unknown country in company with—forgive me, Mr. Mirakel—a comparative stranger."

He glanced at his uncle for support. Very much to his surprise, the latter remained silent.

"We know nothing about this hidden land," Charles continued, making a more or less good-humoured appeal. "Will you show me where it is, Mr. Mirakel, if I produce an atlas of the world?"

"I certainly will not," was the softly spoken, but very definite, rejoinder.

"Then I will be damned if I let her go."

In losing his temper the young man had somehow accomplished the unusual feat of gaining dignity. He made no apology, calmly refilled his glass from a carafe of Portuguese wine and continued his dinner. There was a brief strained silence. The only person who appeared absolutely unembarrassed was Mr. Mirakel. He was the first to speak and his tone as he addressed Charles was almost sympathetic.

"A very natural and proper decision, if I may say so, Prince," he admitted. "I could not conceive of any man who had achieved the supreme happiness of having married your wife being willing to part with her even for the briefest period of time imaginable. I can see that I must resign myself to the unhappiness of her absence from my little party."

"I have not said so," Rosina pronounced quietly.

Everyone looked at her in momentary surprise. It was very seldom indeed that any of her friends heard her speak so tonelessly. For the moment the Baron seemed more perturbed than his nephew.

"My dear Rosina," he protested, tugging at his Imperial a little nervously. "Let us continue our very interesting conversation about this El Dorado of Mr. Mirakel's and postpone for the moment the personal element. Our friend has shown himself very amiable as regards questions; might one venture upon a few more?"

"Up to a certain point," was the mildly spoken reply, "you would find me even eloquent in conversation about my domain. I love to talk about it, just as I love to think about it, and as I love to loaf about there, basking in my own particular brand of sunshine. On many subjects connected with what you are pleased to call my El Dorado, I am at your service. But remember this: whilst I give you free permission to ask me as many questions as you like, I reserve the right to refuse to answer them."

"How many guests are you inviting to go with you on this particular pilgrimage?" the Baron enquired.

"I could accommodate easily," Mirakel told him, "a thousand; but on this occasion I shall limit myself probably to one hundred. Needless to say we are not all huddled together in one house."

"But Mr. Mirakel," Lady Myra exclaimed, "I am consumed with curiosity. How can you possibly keep an organization, a perfect debauch of hospitality such as you must be exercising, a secret? Why have we never read or heard about it? Are you crazy with the spirit of hospitality, or what constrains you to spend millions, as you must, in entertaining people with whom you are not in any way connected?"

"A very clever question, and very aptly put," Mirakel acknowledged. "I fear that my reply will scarcely satisfy you, but I will hedge a little by confessing that it scarcely satisfies me, myself. I warn you that my explanation will sound clumsy. I think you will find somewhere in a very ancient book, seldom read nowadays, called 'the Bible,' author's name unknown, publishers anonymous, that every man is born with one gift inherited from the angels. That one gift sometimes develops almost into a passion? With me it began with a longing to find food and clothing and what I must call 'entertainment' for people in adverse circumstances. Through continual brooding upon this, I began to apply that desire to the contemplation of the mental and spiritual anguish now being caused to half the world through the disastrous holocaust, this tempest of horrors in which we are dwelling. Fate has made me a wealthy man yet I have built no million-pound hospitals, nor have I flung my surplus money into the cauldron of the consuming fires of life in the attempt to set things straight by economic efforts. It is the mental and spiritual side of life, its lighter side, almost its frivolous side, that my spirit seems to have urged me to keep alive. Therefore, I look to right of me and to the left, as I pass on my way from country to country, and wherever I go and find people, whether they are moral or immoral, lazy or energetic, who seem to me to be war-poisoned, I invite them to come to a clearer atmosphere, to pass with me sane days or weeks or months in the sunshine which is sometimes allowed to filter its way through the tempest-riven clouds."

The Baron tugged a little harder at his Imperial. The Admiral whispered something in Rushton's ear which no one heard. Rosina's eyes were glowing. Myra was gravely interested. The butler for the third time brought round coffee. The clatter of the spoons, the mechanical voices of the servants did something to dispel the almost unnatural silence. Mr. Mirakel looked around at his fellow guests kindly, a little apologetically. He helped himself almost reverently to the brandy whose label he had paused to scrutinize. Then, leaning a little back in his chair, he recommenced his monologue.

"There are times," he went on, "when strange lights flicker about one's understanding and strange words come unbidden to one's lips. Cicero—or was it perhaps Saint Paul?—once told his chronicler this, the

prophet who was begging for his secrets. We all have our rare moments of this fashion, generally in the night when fortunately there is no one about with a notebook and a pencil to take down one's ravings."

Rosina rose to her feet.

"Myra, my love," she called across the table. "I have forgotten my duties. You and I will lead the way, we will drink more coffee and find liqueurs in the lounge."

"And, Princess," Mirakel invited as he walked by her side down the room, "in begging you to excuse my early departure, might I at least solicit the pleasure of your company at a small farewell supper on the roof of the Milan at nine o'clock on Thursday evening? There will be no other guests, but my secretary will be in attendance. The larger party for those coming on the cruise will follow."

She dropped him a little mock curtsy.

"With much pleasure, dear sir," she accepted.

CHAPTER XI

Rosina, who had climbed the circular ladder from the twelfth floor of the huge hotel with the grace and swiftness of a young girl, threw up her arms with joy as she stepped out on the carpeted space of the roof, looked upwards at a starlit sky, downwards to the long serpentlike curves of the Embankment—then back again close at hand to where a shaded lamp was burning dimly on a small round table, on which silver and glass were gleaming. A great bowl of roses occupied more than half of the table.

"What is this new surprise, dear host?" she asked of the man who had risen to his feet to welcome her. "I came because you bade me make this little farewell, but I confess that I have something of a heartache. I would too that I were a man and could find all the joy in life that was necessary in doing my duty."

"You would not be a happy woman," Mirakel said calmly.

"I am not a happy woman to-night," she confessed.

He drew the fur cape she was wearing a little closer round her neck.

"The winds are cool here," he warned her. "That is the worst of your European cities: when the heat should rise and be carried away on the bosom of your night breezes, it lingers heavily here and strikes downwards. The clay soil is caked with it. I like better the burning sands from which the heat flickers away so gracefully in spectral shapes and wisps which melt away as though with imaginary heat in the moonlight. And there," he added as he held her chair, "is the moon shining very thinly just behind that cloud, and to the left—let me show you"—he pointed, guiding her finger—"there is my star."

"She shines brightly to-night," Rosina sighed.

"She is a sympathetic planet," he murmured. "You said if you came to supper with me this last night I should commence a Spartan diet, for to eat would be difficult. What do you see?"

"Chiefly roses," she admitted, her fingers caressing one of the blossoms. "Ah, but there is orange-coloured tinfoil pointing upwards!"

"Our supper is simple enough," he warned her. "A glass of champagne, chicken sandwiches and peaches. It is a sad evening, dear lady."

"Must it be?" she asked.

"You know the answer. You have taken leave of your friends who are going on the cruise. Soon you will be taking leave of me, who am also your friend and your servant. You have bound yourself with cords, even though they be silken ones, to a duty which may be a fantasy."

She nodded and sipped her wine quietly.

"It is true," she admitted. "I have done this, and I do not know why. I am saying farewell to you, and I do not know why. Tell me something, Mr. Mirakel: are you wholly, entirely a human being?"

"Painfully so," he assured her. "Acutely as I can live, I can also suffer more acutely still. I can feel more than others feel. I can climb the mountains where many fail, but there are times when I cannot save myself, when I must suffer like others, and more, and stretch out my hands feverishly for the ropes which would draw me up, and find them ropes of sand."

She leaned forward earnestly. Her eyes in the faint moonlight were marvellous. They seemed to be tearing at something that lay behind his own suffering.

"Yet you have not been with me all the week," she reminded him. "You have not sent me a line, and the others have all received invitations to the cruise as well as to the party."

"It is true," he acknowledged.

"If I only knew," she murmured to herself. "Listen to me—all of you, those eyes of yours, that line of pain which comes so seldom—listen to me. Why have you not asked me again to come with you on this strange journey that you and the others are taking? Let your eyes open too, please. Now answer me."

"Because you do not know," he answered, "whether you care for me as a woman should care for a man or not; and because you do not know, neither do I. How dare I, then, ask you to do a thing that, if you once slip—a little way back into the old atmosphere, would spoil your life?"

She gripped his hand.

"What is it that I feel for you?" she asked, wildly. "I cannot tell. You freeze me up inside. Yet you make my heart beat, my pulses sing. I burn with happiness, and life is a joy. I am distraught when I am with you. Oh, my dear, dear man, explain it all to me. I cannot conceive of myself and you in different countries, and yet I let you go. I do not believe that they care, these others. My uncle has pride. What is that? My husband would forget me in a month. Yet I hold to them. I stay here to go on with the puppet show. All the time I am gay. They all call me the happiest creature that lives, and I am not, I am not, I tell you! You go and I shall stay here in hell."

"You are late in making this discovery, Rosina," he said sadly.

"And you are late with your words, if your words come from your heart!" she cried.

For a single moment—it was the first time—she met him halfway and lay in his arms, as he leaned towards her. He held her whilst their lips met and there was silence. When he placed her once more in her chair he was a different man.

"Rosina," he said, "will you trust me now? There is time. You shall know without any word from me the second reason why I never sent you any message."

"I will trust you anywhere, anyhow. What can you do?"

"Wait," he begged.

He touched a bell and walked swiftly across the carpet to where the little trap-door opened out through the roof. Soon he came back again. He slipped quietly into his place by her side. For several moments he held her hand tightly in his, then he filled her glass.

"Drink to our happy voyage," he whispered.

"But it is too late!" she gasped.

He laughed almost scornfully.

"Never believe it, sweetheart," he whispered. "It depends upon you, and then, if your heart can answer the riddle you have been asking, all will be well."

"But for whom are we waiting here?" she asked anxiously.

"The arbiters of your destiny," he told her with an encouraging smile.

CHAPTER XII

They talked together in low voices and the minutes galloped on. A cool breeze drifted in from the river. He wrapped her cape around her and held her cold fingers.

"It will not be long?" she begged.

He listened intently.

"They are here," he told her.

Homer Bayes appeared through the trap-door. He held out his hand to help his companions up the last rung of the ladder. Slowly they stumbled into view. First, the Baron di Gomez presented himself, flushed and disconcerted. He was followed by his nephew, whose expression was certainly not an amiable one.

Rosina half-rose to her feet with a little exclamation of astonishment.

"My revered Uncle—and Charles!" she exclaimed. "Is it for them we have been waiting, Mr. Mirakel?"

"It is for them," the latter agreed. "Homer, will you place chairs? Gentlemen, my apologies for disturbing you, but a situation has arisen between the Princess and myself which requires a few words of explanation."

"But surely not at this hour of the evening?" the Baron declared angrily. "You may not be versed in English customs, Mr. Mirakel, but it is a most unusual proceeding, I can assure you, to send an imperative message to a man in my position, demanding his immediate presence."

"A piece of damned impertinence, I call it!" Charles spluttered.

Mirakel, for a moment, was silent. His eyebrows were raised just a little as he glanced across at Charles. Rosina was altogether too bewildered for words.

"I regret very much, Your Excellency," Mirakel said without the slightest note of anger in his voice, or any sign of disturbance, "I regret very much that it should have been necessary to disturb you at an unpropitious moment. The matter, however, was urgent. Your wife, Prince Charles, has asked me to explain to her why I have not urged her to join the party of my friends whom I am proposing to entertain on my estates. I thought it best that explanation should come from one of you."

"Why on earth should we be called here to explain?" the Baron demanded. "I have said before that my niece is the official hostess of the Embassy over which I have the honour to preside. She is not to be spared from here."

"So far as I am concerned," Charles intervened, "the Princess Rosina is my wife. It follows that as I am unable to leave the country, having also an official position here, it is her duty also to remain."

Rosina seemed on the point of speech, but Mirakel's hand was gently stretched out towards her. She remained silent.

"Your Excellency," Mirakel continued, "and you, Prince Charles, have given excellent reasons for refusing your consent to the Princess's departure, but your explanation does not help me in my present trouble. I had done everything possible to encourage your wife, Prince Charles, in the idea of joining my party. The Princess is perfectly justified in asking me, as she has done, the reason for my change of attitude."

The Baron spoke out frankly.

"I am damned if I understand what it is all about," he declared.

"Then I must imitate Your Excellency's somewhat plain speaking," Mirakel continued. "At a certain date not very long ago I kept an appointment you asked me to make, and after a conversation with you and your nephew, I purchased a rather large quantity of Portuguese bonds which you, Baron, were selling through your bank on behalf of the Portuguese Government."

"What, may I ask, has all this got to do with Rosina's joining your party? Why bring it into the discussion at all? Rosina knows nothing about business," her husband protested.

"You have not mentioned the matter to the Princess then, I presume?"

"Certainly I have not," the Baron agreed. "Why should I? She would not have an idea what I was talking about."

"Nor you, Prince Charles," Mirakel continued, turning to the younger man, "you do not happen to have mentioned this affair to your wife?"

"It is not her business," was the curt reply.

"This is all quite strange to me," Rosina declared, laying her hand upon Mirakel's arm. "My brain, I fear, is confused."

"But, my dear lady," he explained, "cannot you understand the hesitation I have felt in persuading you? I see that I must speak very plainly indeed, although it may sound uncouth. Your uncle, His Excellency, and your husband, Prince Charles, have taken every opportunity, especially during the last few days, of declaring their intention of preventing your leaving the country with my other friends. If I repeat the invitation, you can imagine the result. The Baron's bank will, I believe, benefit to the extent of several hundred thousand pounds in the transaction I have just concluded with them. Prince Charles's share, if I am rightly informed, is to be at least a hundred thousand. The whole world of London will say that after having studiously opposed my proposals, I have bribed His Excellency and your husband to allow you to join my guests."

The Baron rose from his chair and glared across the table.

Now, indeed, fear had entered into his soul.

"Are we to understand by all this rigmarole that you want to back out of your transaction with us?" he demanded furiously.

"Your Excellency has strange ideas," was Mirakel's icy reply. "The signed documents and the money were handed to your treasurer on deposit yesterday."

"That's right," Charles put in reluctantly. "The money is there all right. It is only awaiting Mr. Mirakel's release."

The Baron wiped drops of sweat from his forehead with a highly scented handkerchief.

"Then what's all this damn fuss about?" he demanded.

Rosina, who had been looking a little panic-stricken for some time, caught at Mirakel's arm.

"You are a dear man," she cried, "but you are a Quixote."

"Rosina can go so far as I am concerned," the Baron declared grumpily.

"I give my consent," Charles echoed.

Mirakel summoned Homer Bayes from the background.

"Show these gentlemen out," he directed.

They both made tentative approaches towards Rosina. She turned her back upon them.

"Mr. Mirakel," she asked, looking up at him earnestly, "will you take me in your party, please?"

He held out his hand.

"As my honoured and valued friend," he replied.

PART II

CHAPTER I

Rosina, blissfully happy in her cushioned chaise-longue, which had sunk deep into the yellow sands, stirred her head slightly, moved her parasol and pointed upwards to where a dark spot seemed suddenly to have appeared in the deep bowl of blue sky. It was the fourth morning after their arrival in the blissful land of Mirakel.

"Roderigo, my beloved cousin," she begged, "tell me, am I dreaming, or has this glorious sky overhead broken out into some form of measles? Is that not a dark spot there above my head?"

The young man lounging by her side glanced upwards carelessly at first, then with more concentrated attention. Afterwards, he arrested the attention of a passer-by, a tall man of elderly appearance who wore exceptionally thick orange-tinted sun glasses, a suit of irreproachable white ducks, and although he possessed very little of the atmosphere of Pall Mall, was, without a doubt, Sir Horace Markham, the secretary of that austere club whose chilly reception of Roderigo di Cordovina was partly responsible for driving that young man away in search of a more frivolous atmosphere. Sir Horace, under this tropical sky, certainly presented a vastly improved appearance both in health and demeanour.

"Sir Horace," Roderigo announced, pointing upwards, "the châtelaine of this amazing domain has discovered what she believes to be a blemish in our faultless sky."

The elderly gentleman addressed gazed steadily in the direction indicated. Then he changed his glasses and resumed his scrutiny.

"The Princess is without a doubt right," he agreed. "The sky is disfigured by a moving object at a great height. It is most interesting. I shall at once return to my room for a telescope."

The young man shook his head.

"I am afraid you will not be able to do that, Sir Horace," he objected.

Sir Horace, who had been in the act of hurrying off, turned back on his heel.

"What do you mean," he demanded, "not able to get my own telescope? Rubbish!"

Roderigo shrugged his head firmly.

"We were invited upon our arrival here," he reminded the other, "to hand over field glasses, telescopes, fire arms and even shot-guns to Custody House. I parted even with my private revolver!"

"My cousin is quite right, Sir Horace," Rosina remarked, leaning a little forward in her chair. "I even parted with my lovely, jewelled opera glasses."

"I thought that was only a matter of the Customs," Sir Horace expostulated. "There is surely no sense in depriving a man of his private possession in that manner. I have never heard of such a demand."

"You were never in such a unique position before, Sir Horace," Roderigo reminded him, with a little shrug of the shoulders. "Besides, there are no Customs."

Sir Horace looked wistfully at that strange brown spot in the sky.

"All the same, I wish I had my telescope," he grumbled. "Abominable idea taking it away! Damned impertinence, I call it!"

"I would not use that word, if I were you, Sir Horace," Roderigo advised.

"Why not?" the other demanded, with a considerable portion of his former truculence lingering in his tone.

Roderigo threw away his cigarette and lit a fresh one. Rosina helped herself from his case and listened to his words approvingly.

"For one reason, because we are the guests of the person to whom you refer," the young man pointed out. "Furthermore, because we are something more than his guests in a manner which you ought to be one of the first to appreciate. He's giving us a touch of the inconceivable. He is even lifting for us a corner of the curtain behind which there lies, perhaps, the explanation of that little brown object. What right have we to quibble at trifles? Can you not realize, Sir Horace, that there is something in our surroundings far more wonderful than the superabundant hospitality of the multi-millionaire to which we may be, more or less, accustomed? I, myself, am beginning to believe that there might be something more than ordinary mystery enveloping this land—that it might even be a veritable suggestion of the Rosicrucians."

"Rubbish!" Sir Horace scoffed.

Rosina lowered her parasol for a moment. There was a curious note of contempt in her scornful word of advice.

"Leave him alone, dear Cousin," she advised. "I am beginning to fear that the Professor—I beg his pardon, Sir Horace—is one of those hopeless people who have brain but no imagination. Leave him alone and I believe that you will find that he will go slowly mad if Mr. Mirakel permits him to remain long enough."

It seemed to them both a curious fact, but Sir Horace made no immediate reply. He remained in his place, but he had lowered his umbrella, rolled it up, and was swinging it gently backwards and forwards in front of him. His eyes had left the skies and were fixed on a certain break in the broad boulevard with its stately rows of arbutus trees.

"What is this monstrosity which I see approaching?" he demanded in a tone of mild but restrained eagerness.

Rosina was shrinking back now in her chair; her eyebrows were raised, her beautiful eyes distended, her lips slightly parted. From the under cover of her sun umbrella she was gazing down the boulevard. Winding its way amongst the crawling automobiles and mule-drawn lorries came flashing something which had the appearance of a huge, mechanical bird, moving as straight as an arrow along the middle of the boulevard with nothing but the measured pulsations of a softly beating engine to indicate its source of propulsion. It was a vehicle which seemed hermetically sealed, passing close to them with a soft throbbing of subdued air, and heading for the wooded line of hills a little on the inland side.

Sir Horace indulged in a half-stifled exclamation; Rosina rose lightly from her chair, a slight breeze toying with her silk scarf and flimsy skirt, endowing her, for the moment, with the similitude of a beautiful young Bird of Paradise.

"Roderigo!" she exclaimed. "I have had enough of what they call in English 'spooks' this morning. I go to drink one of those heavenly brown concoctions in which the limes float and the ice chinks."

"Planter's Punch!" Roderigo exclaimed.

She nodded.

"You must come with me," she insisted. "I do not know what you do when you ask for a drink."

"Everything except pay for it," Roderigo assured her. "Are you joining us, Sir Horace?" he added with an effort at politeness.

Sir Horace neither answered nor moved. He was watching the great bird, which seemed to be raised a few feet above the boulevard, flying inland.

Roderigo, very debonair in his brown silk clothes and white topee, indicated to his companion the little semicircle of buildings in the distance.

"The aerodrome," he told her. "I passed it this morning on my way down to have a bathe in the real sea."

"Delicious!" Rosina sighed, clinging to his arm. "But quite unnecessary. We are going to be made weak with luxury, I fear, Roddy. There was hot and cold sea water in my own bathroom this morning, fresh-water sprays and needle baths in opposite corners. The sea-water swimming bath is at least thirty yards long."

"The place possesses ceaseless wonders," Roderigo declared. "I have been wandering about since soon after daylight, intoxicated with surprises at every turn. See what happens when you even look thirsty."

"I am very curious," Rosina confided.

Almost as though they had been overheard, chairs were placed at a small table in front of them. They gave no order, but a little, dark-complexioned, smiling man with dazzlingly white teeth and a humorous mouth stood bowing before them. He favoured them each with an almost abject salute.

"Washington Mo, my name," he explained. "I mix all cocktails and all drinks for Mr. Mirakel. You drink what I have made there? Tell me if it pleases. If not, I make change."

They sipped from the glasses already awaiting them, and exchanged glances of silent ecstasy.

"No change at all, if you please, Mr. Washington Mo," Rosina begged him.

"I was once in Jamaica and once in Trinidad," Roderigo confided, "but I have never tasted anything better than this."

"Nor I anywhere," Rosina assured him. "You are a genius, Washington Mo."

The little man bowed his respects and compliments and almost as though he had produced them from some secret hiding-place behind his back, two fresh glasses, still foaming, awaited them. They accepted them with a faint demur.

"Not every day," Rosina begged.

"Not every morning," Washington Mo agreed. "I make that rule for you. It is Mr. Mirakel, the Great Master's, habit. One in the morning, two before dinner, a third before dinner perhaps, but a second before luncheon not often."

"An amazingly good arrangement," Roderigo agreed.

"And where do we pay?" Rosina enquired.

Washington Mo looked at them in horror.

"Pay?" he repeated. "But this is the land of the Great Man, whose guests pay nothing! I fill your boxes with cigarettes if you wish, but there must be no payment here."

"I must go and look at the shops," Rosina declared hopefully.

"You will feel ashamed of yourself if you do," Roderigo told her. "A small boy will detach himself from a row of others with something that looks like a doll's carriage and follow you around."

"But why?" she asked, bewildered.

"None of the ladies of this land," her cousin assured her, "are permitted to carry a parcel even a yard, and another thing which might interest you," he added, "is that no one is allowed to pay for anything."

"All that I simply decline to believe," she declared.

"Come and try," he begged.

They strolled down a broad avenue and entered a most attractive-looking emporium.

Rosina bought recklessly a dozen handkerchiefs of the finest quality linen. She produced a pocketbook and exhibited its contents. The assistant looked at it vaguely and smiled. The handkerchiefs were already in a box and deposited in the *bijou* carriage.

"I feel that if I try to leave this place I shall be arrested," Rosina declared. "Do you understand it, Roderigo?"

"Not a bit in the world," he admitted cheerfully. "We came here realizing that our host was practically the richest man in the world, and that nearly everyone on the island, or peninsula, or whatever it is, is either his guest or his servant, but I have never in my life heard of an estate which possessed shops like these where everything was free."

"It is the economic side I cannot understand," Rosina declared. "Mr. Mirakel may be the richest man in the world, but how is it arranged that no one pays for anything even if he finds the money?"

"Ask me something easier," Roderigo begged. "I myself, you know, dear Cousin, discovered, especially during the last few years, that I have very little brain, there are so few things that I really understand. I know nothing about economics, and, in any case, I should not know how to apply them to a situation like this."

She smiled at him.

"No brains, my dear Roderigo," she protested, taking his arm as they left the place where they were escorted almost to the pavement by the little company of assistants. "No brain, you declare, and you were very nearly assassinated and kidnapped in London because you were the only man who could be trusted with the mechanization of a new army in a certain country of Europe."

He paused and lit a cigarette.

"Who told you that wild story?" he demanded.

"My dear, I read it in one of His Excellency's very secret papers," she answered coolly. "Charles left a whole despatch box full of them open one day, and I had a lovely time. It was the day that horrible young man, Manuel di Gomez, arrived in London from Madrid searching for you."

"No more," he begged, "no more, please, Rosina. That is a subject taboo. Do not think of it. It never really existed. Tell me, do I take you sailing this afternoon, or do I play tennis with you, or how do we amuse ourselves till the light fails and the Great Man presents himself?"

"What will happen when the light fails?" she asked curiously.

"Well, my dear," he confided, "I have more wonderful things to tell you. Do you remember where I first gambled with you?"

She sighed.

"At the Casino at Lisbon," she reminded him. He nodded.

"You did not come inside, though. All the same," he went on, "you told me that you were interested in roulette and baccarat. There are here two roulette tables, a baccarat table and four chemin-de-fer tables. As soon as the insects get troublesome and the night falls, all the people in this strange part gamble. Now we are really up against an umpire," he declared cheerfully.

"You are not going to tell me, Roddy, that the Great Man pays all the winners out of his own pocket?"

Roderigo smiled cheerfully.

"Thank heavens," he replied, "we have arrived at a reasonable phase of pleasure-giving. Fifty per cent of the winnings go to the Red Cross and the other fifty per cent are returned to the losers with the compliments of the Administration!"

She sighed with relief.

"Well, there is a certain amount of common sense about that, anyhow," she admitted.

"Except," he pointed out, "that if a philanthropist arrived here with huge sums of money he could gamble so high that the Red Cross would automatically become one of the richest establishments in the world."

She sighed despairingly.

"I am very hungry, Roderigo," she declared. "Let us go back to lunch. What is the name of our palatial abode?"

"Government House," he told her. "We arrive at it in five minutes through that little gate."

They crossed the boulevard and mounted the slight ascent through the flower garden.

"I wonder," he reflected, "whether our marvellous host will be present at luncheon."

As though by accident she had lowered her parasol; her face was invisible.

"Why not?" she asked.

"I spoke to the great factotum this morning when I left. Senussi, I think his name is. I asked him at what hour the Master was expected."

"Tell me what he said," she begged.

"He spread out his hands," Roderigo confided.

"He bowed his head as he spoke. It was as though he were speaking of God Almighty himself.

"I do not think," he told me, 'that the Great One will return before the hour of the Fireflies.'"

CHAPTER II

Later in the day Rosina, with a little start, woke from the luxurious depths of her bamboo couch, drawn to a shady corner of the balcony outside her suite of rooms, to find Senussi in a position of obeisance standing by her side.

"The lady permits this most presumptuous visit?" he begged, bowing low. "The Great One has arrived and he has matters of importance to discuss. He sends me to beg that Her Highness will bring her cousin the Marquis di Cordovina to him with as little delay as possible. They await Her Highness's arrival. It would be my privilege to escort them."

Rosina swung on to her feet.

"Mr. Mirakel is here then?" she asked eagerly.

Senussi lowered his eyes.

"The Master is here," he admitted. "It is necessary that we seek the Marquis."

Roderigo, who had just arrived, rose to his feet from the depths of a chair a few feet away.

"That is not a matter," he said, "which should give you much trouble. I am here, Senussi."

The man bowed. In his spotless white raiment with his dark complexion and the faraway gleam in his eyes, he had the appearance of an Oriental servant. He bowed low.

"If Her Highness and the Marquis will be so kind as to follow me..." he invited.

"Her Highness," Rosina said as she rose to her feet, "would prefer on all informal occasions here, Senussi, to be addressed as 'Madame.'"

"And I," Roderigo added, "as either 'M'sieur' or 'sir.'"

Senussi bowed. He indicated that they should follow him, and he led the way out of the open lounge across a portion of the flower-wreathed garden into an avenue of cedar trees. Here he opened a gate, crossed a grassy plateau, opened another gate, and knocked respectfully at the door of a strange-looking, spreading bungalow around which a clearing in the surrounding cedar-wood had been made. He tapped at the door. A familiar voice answered him. The door was opened and the two young people were confronted with a great surprise.

Mr. Mirakel himself sat behind a very beautiful but lightly fashioned writing table of sandalwood. A girl was seated on his right, and a young man on his left. They held out their hands. There was a hub bub of welcome.

"Anne Strangeways!" Rosina exclaimed. "Anne, of all people in the world!"

"And the Commander!" Roderigo cried. "The man who was broken-hearted a day or so ago because he dared not ask for leave."

"Our two young friends," Mr. Mirakel said calmly, "have found it possible to join us. I do not wish to see a distinguished member of the British Navy blush, so I will only tell you what a high official at the Admiralty told me himself: that a new type of craft, especially designed for operations in Eastern warfare, is being built, and leave has been given to Commander Rushton, who is to be in charge of the operations, without his asking for it until the first of the—I am not a Naval man but I believe they are called 'sloops'—is on the water."

"And so far as I am concerned—" Anne commenced.

"I shall take the liberty of explaining you also," Mr. Mirakel interrupted, with a polite little bow.

"I came to the conclusion that I needed, for my domain here, a social secretary who possessed brains. It is one of those facts which are never alluded to afterwards, but I came across Miss Strangeways in Geneva. I know her capacity. I cabled her that if she could obtain quick transport to England from where she was in Geneva, the post was hers. She arrived here, rather to my own surprise, about the same day I arrived myself. I ventured on a little trip on my own account and I went out to seek these two young people and found them. I hope you will all be happy together, that Miss Strangeways will not find my work too irksome, and that this wonderful war vessel which is being built, I understand of a type to suit the Commander's special gifts, will be long in building; but as regards the Commander's future and as regards Miss Strangeways' work, I must remind you two young people of a certain fact in connection with your presence here. The subject of the war and all conversation concerning it is taboo. Either the war is over or it does not exist, whichever you like, but there is no war."

"We have already promised," Rosina said quietly.

"Mr. Homer Bayes has drilled it into me pretty well," Rushton declared, indicating the young man who was seated alone at a desk some short distance away.

"As regards their arrival here," Mr. Mirakel concluded, "I will spare you any undue curiosity. I am told the Princess noticed a strange spot in the sky this morning. That spot was my private plane which contained the four of us. She noticed also the conclusion of its journey passing along the boulevard. Let that be

enough, please. To you two newcomers, I may just repeat what Mr. Homer Bayes, my secretary, has made clear to the others. Questions here are not asked...Our friend Rushton has hinted that after a somewhat arduous journey he would enjoy a bathe, and if it is not too soon after lunch for you men, I shall hand him over to you, Marquis. Mr. Homer Bayes will spend the next hour in instructing Miss Strangeways as to the A B C of her work. I myself venture to ask that the Princess will spare me an hour or so of her time."

Rosina dropped a little curtsy.

"The Princess, whose Christian name her honoured host should remember, is entirely at his disposal," she answered. "I want to sit in the shade of your cedar trees, Mr. Mirakel, to look around me and take in my surroundings, asking no questions."

"You have made a good choice," her host remarked, rising to his feet and reaching for his sun hat. "I will tell you a great deal without the need of your asking a single question, and I will show you a great deal more concerning which you will probably have to remain curious."

She passed her arm through his.

"You have killed curiosity, dear host," she declared. "When I woke this morning I was aching to ask questions. The wonder of the place has spent itself. I am content to absorb my happiness."

* * *

Anne Strangeways and Lady Myra, with Roderigo and Rushton in attendance, made their way out of the wood and crossed into the stately pleasure grounds of Government House. Lady Myra, who had been almost silent in the bureau, was the first to attack the newcomer.

"Anne Strangeways," she demanded, "now that we are really alone, tell us how on earth you got here. You never even mentioned having had an invitation."

In Roderigo's remark there was a distinct note of pique.

"I think, considering all things," he complained, "you might have given me some idea that you were coming."

Anne was duly penitent.

"My dear friends," she explained, "I am the servant of the man who, I feel more and more every day, was brought into the world by Miriam the Priestess of Secrecy. You, Marquis," she added, turning towards Roderigo, "ought to have remembered that I was once a secretary at Geneva where Mr. Mirakel could have held a great position if he would have accepted it."

"I remembered that all right," Roderigo assented, "but what has all that to do with your turning up here in this unexpected fashion?"

"It follows as a matter of course," she replied. "Mr. Mirakel is one of those men, as you all should know by this time, who will have nothing to do with anything that is not the best of its kind; at any rate from his point of view. He wanted a private correspondence and social secretary for this place, who spoke most of the usual languages. Naturally he flew over to Geneva and interviewed the present secretary of the League there. The secretary told him all about me but warned him that I was in Lisbon waiting for a passage to America, and he added that he feared it was impossible to get me into England. However, by some

accident," she concluded with a faint smile, "I got there, and naturally I reported to Mr. Mirakel. We even, as you have doubtless forgotten, Marquis, were fellow passengers."

"As a matter of fact," he observed, "it was entirely through my strenuous efforts on your behalf and several complete falsehoods which have been on my conscience ever since that you arrived in England."

"I said thank you for everything in that draughty shed at Lisbon," she reminded him. "As you seem to have forgotten that, I say thank you once more. I got to London in time to see Mr. Mirakel, and I think I am going to find my post very interesting."

"We are all delighted," Roderigo observed, "but I think I ought to have a commission."

"You will probably find," she told him, "that the commission has already been paid to the office at Geneva."

"Anyway," Lady Myra declared, taking Anne by the arm, "we are all very glad to find you here. It seems to me that at least we can get a little sensible information from a sensible person about this extraordinary place we are in."

Anne Strangeways' manner was, to say the least of it, unpromising.

"I am afraid that you won't get very much information from me," she declared coldly. "It seems to me that in this part of the world everything is given away except information."

"But you, as Mr. Mirakel's private secretary," Lady Myra reminded her, "must know so much. Surely you can be a Christian, and enlighten us as to the ordinary A B C of the place."

"Well, ask me a question or two," Anne suggested, "and you will very soon find out how much I can tell you."

"Very well, then. First of all, what is the name of this place?" Lady Myra asked.

"It has no name," was the calm reply.

"Is it an island or a peninsula?"

"I have no idea," was the steadfast reply.

"Which of the great continents are we nearest?" Roderigo enquired.

"Alas, I must reply again that I have no idea," was the regretful response.

"What I should like to know," Lady Myra expounded, "is exactly how long it took us after we stepped on board that extraordinary, glorified raft which we boarded soon after we left Liverpool on the voyage here. We have all compared notes and it is perfectly clear that every watch, every clock in all the public rooms was tampered with. For some more subtle reason every calendar was treated the same way. We have been kept entirely ignorant except so far as our memory is concerned of how long we were on board. The morning we sailed into this glorious paradise—for it is a paradise—left me, at any rate, absolutely ignorant as to how long it had been since we had left England."

"What does time matter when you consider our position here? To judge from my experience on the journey, and the short time which has passed since, I cannot help realizing that we have had wonderful

food, wonderful service; no tossing about—we just glided in here as though the whole place had been made purposely for us. I should not have minded at all if it had taken me another month, and I was almost alone except for the Commander."

"That is all very well," Roderigo observed gently, "but it isn't going to be good enough for a man like the Professor—or Sir Horace, if you want to use his title. He is going about already with his watch in his hand, challenging everyone to tell him the time, and declaring that his watch and the little clock he has in his vast bedroom have been tampered with. He has gone down to the wharves this afternoon simply to find out what has become of the craft which brought us here. If he runs across Mr. Mirakel while he is in this inquisitive frame of mind, I am really afraid that something might happen."

"I should say that it certainly will," Lady Myra agreed. "I cannot think what made Mr. Mirakel bring him. He is nothing but a nuisance all the time with his inquisitiveness and his questions."

Roderigo drew out his long, thin cigarette case and handed it round to everyone. Afterwards he very carefully lit a cigarette for himself.

After a while he admitted: "But there is another point of view. The Professor, I beg his pardon, Sir Horace, is a very famous man. He has a strictly scientific turn of mind. Things have happened since we left London which have given a very curious flavour to our little adventure. Nevertheless, Miss Strangeways, we will now give you a little information. Do you realize that no newspaper whatever is published upon this peninsula or island or whatever it is, and that there is not a single public installation of the radio, nor any private house which possesses one except Mr. Mirakel's own radio chamber?"

"Of course I believe it," was the indifferent reply. "The publication of a newspaper, or the installation of the radio, would simply mean that all the millions Mr. Mirakel has spent in preparing this place, and making it impregnable to all war influences, would have been spent in vain."

Roderigo subsided into the seat near which he had been standing, and for a moment his face was buried in his hands.

"You none of you seem properly to understand," Anne Strangeways presently remarked, "what Mr. Mirakel's real idea was in bringing you all out here."

"That is a new point of view," Lady Myra conceded; "perhaps we do not understand. Tell us about it in your own words, Miss Strangeways."

"It was just to get you and the other people in whom he might become interested—who possessed brains and common sense, a natural shrinking from horrors, and a perhaps too emotional frame of mind—away from an over-emotional world, a country convulsed with fresh news of loathsome disasters by sea and land given out at every hour of every day. A country where the thoughts of everyone are focussed upon the daily disasters by sea and land; happenings which wrung your nerves and weakened your brains every time you were forced to listen to them. To offer escape from this holocaust was surely a great philanthropic action. I will go further than that; I consider the escape arranged for us here to be the greatest act of philanthropy which the world has ever known. Why you do not all of you just sit down, bask in the beauty of this place, and revel in your freedom, instead of asking stupid questions, is more than I can imagine."

They exchanged doubtful glances. An atmosphere of argument seemed to have been created.

"That is all very well up to a certain point, Miss Strangeways," Rushton conceded. "But I put it to you that Mr. Mirakel is a little too absolute. Granted that we are content to put the natural philosophy of day-by-

day life before patriotism, it is asking a great deal to imagine that a body of human beings such as ourselves should be perfectly content to remain here, absolute Lotus-eaters, without a single word of news as to the great changes that are taking place in the world which we have deserted."

"I am content to see the matter from Mr. Mirakel's point of view," Anne said calmly. "It is better to be completely outside a maelstrom of new ideas and new principles such as the world is being deluged with at the present moment."

Roderigo indulged in a long and mirthful chuckle.

"I cannot help it," he confessed, apologetically. "I feel that I would give anything in the world to be present when someone explains to the Professor that there is not a radio in the place nor a European newspaper which is likely to reach him."

"Hand him over to me," Anne suggested. "I think that I should rather like your Professor. He seems to me to be one of those thoroughly unreasonable people who tie themselves up in a knot of words and lose their way hopelessly in their efforts to extricate themselves. Have I perhaps caught a glimpse of him? Does he loiter about in a very new tropical suit, a West Indian pongee, heavy glasses and a white panama hat too large for him?"

"That is the fellow," Roderigo cried. "You have had a bout with him already, have you?"

She indulged in a gentle smile of reminiscence.

"I had him turned out of my office just before you all arrived," she confided.

Roderigo chuckled.

"He very nearly turned me out of his office in London," he observed. "Just a trifle short-tempered, isn't he?"

"A very pleasant gentleman, no doubt," Anne Strangeways remarked, "with a rich vocabulary of adjectives, and a wonderful flow of speech. As a matter of fact, here he comes. Now we are for it!"

Sir Horace made his appearance around the corner. He paused, and bowed to them all. He certainly did not give one the idea of an irascible person. As a matter of fact he removed his hat with great gallantry and raised Lady Myra's fingers to his lips.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "A very agreeable meeting. Lady Myra, I am delighted! My friend, the Marquis di Cordovina, a fellow student, I may tell you, is, I am glad to see, making himself at home. I have news for all of you. By the by, this is our new young lady secretary, is it not? A trifle short-tempered I was this morning, I am afraid," he went on, beaming at her. "I offer my apologies. It is a little confusing for a stranger to get to know how this place is run. You yourself, Miss Strangeways, I fancy must acknowledge that. In your capacity as secretary to—what do we call him—the Governor?—you must occasionally have to deal with strange problems."

Anne was a little taken aback; as to tell the truth, they all were. The only person who seemed to be entirely at his ease was the Professor himself.

"In England, curiously enough," the latter went on, swinging his green linen-lined parasol gently in front of him, "I had sometimes a reputation for being a little hot-headed. Out here I do not believe that anyone

would imagine I possessed such a thing as a temper. There is something soothing about this climate, as I remarked just now to our friend, the Great Man, Mr. Mirakel. What an amazing personality, my friends!"

"Have you seen him this morning?" Lady Myra asked, a little dazed.

"I left him only a quarter of an hour ago," Sir Horace confided. "He had just made his adieus to the Princess, I fancy. We had a most agreeable five minutes' conversation, in what might have been a bar attached to his study at Government House. I went in to ask him a single question, and whilst we were discussing it, his secretary, a very well-informed young gentleman, Mr. Homer Bayes, was looking up a few facts for my edification. Mr. Mirakel prepared for me a wonderful beverage, a small tankard of which we shared between us. It is a potation in great favour amongst the inhabitants here, I understand: amber in colour with a distinct flavour of some little-known spirit. It might be rum. I cannot say for certain that I have ever tasted rum. In any case, it was a most delectable beverage. It is nonalcoholic, Mr. Mirakel assured me, but its effects are most invigorating."

"I hope," Anne Strangeways asked, taking her courage in both hands, "that you took the opportunity of asking Mr. Mirakel the reason why he preferred to have no radio communication with other countries."

The Professor continued to swing his parasol gently in front of him. The pleasant smile which had so altered his expression still lingered around his lips.

"To tell you the truth, my dear young lady," he confided, "I did not think of it. It never entered into my head for a moment. I did not feel just then that the radio mattered at all. After all, what is happening, is happening. Here we are, and whatever the radio might have to tell us, we could not possibly interfere with the course of events."

Lady Myra whispered something about a bathe to Rushton and they left the office together. The Professor remained alone with Miss Strangeways.

"I hope you will not think, my dear young lady," he said, "that I have, in any way, lost my interest in this strange place of abode to which Mr. Mirakel has brought us. On the contrary, it fascinates me. I am filled with hopes and doubts and fears."

She led him to the seat outside and they looked over that deep expanse of blue sea.

"Talk to me a little about your voyage, Professor," she begged. "You are always so interesting about the place when you can really drag yourself down from the clouds."

"Talking is such a waste of time," he sighed. "If I talk to you here in this delicious pine-scented air, what I say will be very brief."

"Well," she said encouragingly, "I have come to the conclusion that you and I are the only two people of intelligence upon this fragment of cosmos. What you know, and what you think, you have either made up your mind to keep to yourself, or you are under a contract in an unknown quarter not to divulge. Why do you not tell me the truth, please?"

"You are talking," he declared, "even more like a fool than upon my first visit to you."

She rose to her feet.

"At precisely the same moment," she assured him, "I had come to the same conclusion!"

"Since we are here, though," he said, grasping her by the wrist, "tell me where Mr. Mirakel keeps a little piece of aurist mechanism which he came all the way to Munich to purchase."

She laughed in his face.

"Is that all you are after?" she exclaimed. "It is in the second drawer of the bureau in the big library, and he has used it exactly once since he bought it. I will ask him to lend it to you any night you like."

He looked at her closely, but it was perfectly obvious that she was telling the truth.

"On the first suitable occasion," he confided, "I shall remind you of that promise. In the meantime, I beg that you will not allow that major-domo—I think he calls himself Senussi—to fool about with it too much. It is a very delicate piece of mechanism and it would be difficult to replace."

"I will do my best," she promised, "to keep Mr. Senussi away from it."

CHAPTER III

ROSINA, a little later that same evening, wandered away from her companions and discovered a small bamboo kiosk which commanded a view of the whole of the pleasure grounds of the amazing domain in which she found herself. She sat there for a time steeped in a sort of ecstasy, watching the strangely tangled web of fireflies darting here and there in all directions around her and in and out of the clumps of exotics whose leaves had slowly opened to the caress of the night breeze. Beyond her was a vista of the deep blue sea, behind the plantation of cedar trees in which, earlier in the day, they had found Anne Strangeways; and on the sloping hillsides were masses of rock amongst which every now and then she caught a glimpse of white-clad figures passing back and forth. There were night birds singing in the distance; one, she was convinced, was a species of the nightingale of her own country. It was all just a little too wonderful.

A soft and pleasant voice, by now almost a familiar one, broke in upon her reverie.

"Madame approves of her night garden?"

Rosina, after her first start, turned her head almost lazily. For several moments she remained silent. She was studying intently the tall, graceful figure by her side. All the evening since he had been called away from the dinner table she had been expecting him, but his footsteps had been noiseless upon the soft, yielding turf. He was watching her now with a faintly enquiring smile upon his lips.

"Your night garden is a small paradise," she told him. "The perfume of those white blossoms stealing through this heavy twilight is almost stupefying. And then the fireflies! I have never seen anything more beautiful. They carry with them every colour of the rainbow. They are entrancing. Mr. Mirakel, I think I shall change your name. I shall raise you to a peerage in the Kingdom of Nature. Instead of Mr. Mirakel I shall call you the Lord of Mirakels!"

"My name is a strange one," he admitted thoughtfully. "If the Queen of this domain says that it must be changed, why not? I might remind her, though, that I have a baptismal name like most other human beings, which she would honour me by remembering. I was christened Sebastian!"

"Sebastian."

She repeated the name thoughtfully. Evidently it pleased her. She laid her fingers upon his arm, drew him inside the small kiosk and flattened out a silk pillow for him.

"I like to sit down," she confided. "I am in a new world and it exhausts me a little. I am a little tired, Sebastian. Talk to me of the wonders of your life."

He bowed his acknowledgments.

"You are not unhappy, I hope?"

"I am very content," she told him. "As to happiness, that is a different thing. I am like most of the others who wander here in a new paradise. I am bewildered. There are so many things which I do not understand."

He smoothed her hand gently.

"A world in which everything was understood," he suggested, "would be a very grim place. There must be room for fancy to exercise her delicate limbs, an atmosphere also in which the imagination can expand. The immoral and too easily comprehended world is a place which breeds the diseases from which we are all suffering, or rather, I will say, were all suffering before we left upon our magic cruise."

"Such as?"

"Languor, spiritual and mental," he suggested.

She nodded sympathetically.

"Something more material, please," she begged; "give me a more concrete example."

He hesitated. His hand was still upon hers and it seemed to him that he could feel a faster beating of her pulse. He was reluctant to break the silence. For a few seconds they watched a new company of the fireflies who seemed to have found their way from a lower part of the garden.

"The disease of which I was thinking," he went on after a brief pause, "was only a finger-post on the way. It leads to a derangement of the senses; it leads to a disordered world."

His reply had been a little hesitant. It was not exactly a refusal but it was scarcely an enthusiastic reception of her invitation.

"You would find very little to interest you, my dear, in my permanent abode," he told her, "if I could be said to have one at all; less still to admire. You will probably come away with the idea that I am only a poseur."

"I could never think that of you," she told him quietly.

"At any rate you will admire the simplicity of my taste," he observed, rising to his feet. "I see our guests have left their places and are wandering about like lost sheep."

She rose to her feet with a slight reluctance.

"What perfect manners," she complained.

* * *

It was a very cheerful and happy group by which they found themselves surrounded on the broad piazza and lawn in front of the dining salon. Roderigo, with a beautiful red camellia in his buttonhole, swung Myra in his arms to meet them, dancing for the last few yards in a step which he declared was entirely of his own invention. Lady Myra's slimness was almost fantastically accentuated by the daringly cut white silk gown she was wearing. Her eyes were aglow like mischievous stars—as Sir Horace had just assured her across the dining table. Homer Bayes, a little gloomier even than usual, with a despatch case under one arm and a pile of papers with a notebook protruding from the pocket of his white dinner coat, lingered in the background. Mirakel summoned him reproachfully.

"What did I tell you, Bayes?" he asked with unusual severity.

"I had not forgotten, sir," the other replied; "but there have been movements in the East which I think should be brought to your notice."

Mirakel turned towards Rosina with a little shrug of the shoulders. Bayes himself was probably the only one of the company to appreciate the rebuke conveyed by that gesture.

"The explanation contained in the latter part of your sentence," Mirakel said coldly, "was quite unnecessary. It was even mischievous. I am entertaining this little company of my friends purely as a country house party. It is not my wish that they should be reminded of anything that is passing in the outside world."

"It would make it easier for me, sir, if you would explain that to your guests," the young man observed.

"It is not my concern to make things easier for you," was the calm reply.

"Our host is by way of being sarcastic to-night," Roderigo whispered to his cousin.

"It was a little tactless of the young man to come and hang round our kiosk," Rosina observed, watching Mirakel's retreating figure. "No one gets a chance to talk to Mr. Mirakel for more than a few minutes—and I do not like to be disturbed."

She beckoned to Senussi, who seemed to be always within call.

"Do tell me," she begged. "The music? It comes from where?"

"Madame," the man replied, "it is the ordinary people and the workers on the domain. They are dancing in the gardens which overhang the sea."

"Someone makes beautiful music for them," she remarked.

"They make it for themselves, Madame," he confided. "The instruments are all fashioned by the musicians themselves from our own trees here upon the estate. I am not sure of the European names of some of them but the oboes and the violins and the 'cellos have a great reputation even so far as Vienna and Budapest. Our Master here is a great musician. Some of the famous performers of the world have played for him, when they have come to visit Mr. Mirakel, in his little orchestra."

"How often do they come, these musicians?" Rosina asked eagerly.

"They come whenever the Master invites them," was the grave reply, "which is not often—for until the war came, the Master was not fond of company. Strangers come here rarely. Except for the two or three villa bungalows on the domain which have been a present from the Great One to his satellites, visitors come here rarely. The present one is the largest party the Master has ever entertained."

"Do you hear that, all of you?" Rosina cried. "We should be flattered."

The man bowed. He waited for a moment. They asked him no more questions, and with a little regretful gesture of farewell he withdrew.

Sir Horace and Roderigo, who had been listening to his conversation about the musicians, watched him as he hurried up a narrow path in rear of the house. He mounted from a rocky eminence in a far corner of the garden until he stood out, cleanly built and stark, against the darkening sky. His head was a little bent, his body absolutely motionless. Sir Horace pointed him out to Rosina.

"That man interests me," he confided, speaking in a subdued tone. "It seems to me," he added, "that I have met with others of his type before."

"Asiatic," Roderigo suggested.

Sir Horace declined to commit himself.

"He comes from a faraway corner of the world," he reflected. "He has that queer trick of speech which I have listened to many times in the markets of Damascus. The natives there find it almost impossible to get hold of the European articulation. Watch him now. What is he doing?"

"Praying," Rosina suggested softly.

"I am not sure," Sir Horace meditated; "his attitude is in a sense devotional, but there is something else. He troubles me. Di Cordovina, tell me your idea, you have been a traveller. From what race does he come?"

Roderigo jerked away the cigarette he had been smoking.

"I will tell you what I think," he said. "He is not clean-bred. He has an admixture of several races in him. None, I should say, would be European at all."

Rosina rose up and passed her arm through her cousin's.

"We walk that way?" she suggested.

"I'll come too," Myra announced.

Sir Horace gave evidence of an entirely new side to his character and outlook.

"Be careful," he begged them. "That man is of a strange race. He is engaged in some species of reflection. Do not break in upon it too ruthlessly. It would perhaps be more discreet not to disturb him at all."

Rosina laughed softly. There was a note of mockery in her mirth. It seemed somehow rather as though it might be the echo from the warbling of the night bird who had just commenced his song from the denser part of the distant forest.

"Sir Horace is becoming more interesting," she confided as she led the way to the confines of the garden. "I should love to have known him in those days when he was a Professor at an English University."

Roderigo's eyes were twinkling. He was remembering his own first impression of the Secretary of the Parthenon Club.

* * *

They crossed the smooth, broad strip of grassland and mounted the rock. The figure at its summit was still there, still immovable. There was little to be seen of him now but his outline. The darkness all around them was growing like a shroud of jet-black velvet.

Rosina paused.

"I believe," she confided softly, "that I am a little afraid."

"It's this darkness," Roderigo murmured sympathetically. "It certainly is a little overpowering—the darkness and the curious mixture of perfumes and the silence. I believe nicotine would be a help. I shall light a cigarette."

"Please don't," she begged. "I should hate the suddenness of the match. He may be praying."

They followed the winding path which led always upwards, but when they arrived within earshot of that still motionless figure, he was certainly not praying. He was bent forward, almost kneeling, and one side of his face was bent always towards the ground. Rosina clutched at her companion. He took her hand encouragingly.

"What are you doing up there?" he asked Senussi.

Slowly the man relaxed the stiffness of his attitude. He drew himself upright.

"I am listening, sir," he answered.

"Listening for what?" Roderigo enquired.

"I am one of the four Listeners who spend the night always in the gardens and grounds of the domain," the man explained. "I thought that perhaps the Great One would have explained our presence here. It is our duty always to listen, from sunset to sunrise, when the earth is still; to listen to what goes on below."

"Below?" Roderigo repeated. "Where do you mean?"

The man continued as though he were explaining to an ignorant child.

"Do not move forward, please," he begged, "and be careful that Madame does not. You are at the edge of a deep bowl, I think the word is 'pit.' You might not hurt yourself if you fell, but there is no telling where you would stop, and it would be uncomfortable. I should be blamed for your presence here. The Master told me to warn all wanderers, though at nighttime one sometimes forgets. He does not Like loiterers inside this ring."

"Why not?" asked Roderigo at last, with increasing curiosity.

"It disturbs the vibrations of sound," was the quiet reply. "Will you kindly cease talking to me, sir? I fail to carry out my duties. It is not permitted that I talk during my vigil."

"Tell me one thing," Roderigo begged: "For what are you listening just at this moment?"

"I listen," the man answered carefully, "for a sound that never comes."

Roderigo passed his hand through Rosina's arm and found, as he had suspected, that she was trembling. Her fingers were cold. She drew closer to him.

"I am being very foolish," she whispered.

"Not in the least," he assured her. "The fellow's giving me the shivers. Anyhow, it is all over now, for we cannot ask him any more questions after he has almost demanded to be left alone."

"We will not," Rosina agreed. "I have a sort of feeling that we are trying to pry into something that is not our business, but that Mr. Mirakel could clear it up in a moment if we asked him."

"These servants of his are all like spooks, anyway," Roderigo concluded, drawing her gently away. "Let us hurry back to the lounge."

She clutched his arm and they turned around.

"What a comfort you are, dear Cousin," she said almost under her breath. "We will find Mr. Mirakel who will tell us all about it."

"Personally." Roderigo confided, as they started on their downward scramble, "I am going to search for Washington Mo, as they call that interesting little bar man with the divine squint."

But just at that moment Rosina, and Lady Myra too, felt that Washington Mo for once might fail in his mission of cheer.

"I think that we will try to find Mr. Mirakel," Rosina insisted.

CHAPTER IV

The very potent but artistically concocted beverages, dispensed within a very short time by that great artist, Washington Mo, succeeded in their object nevertheless. Rosina almost immediately recovered her poise. Roderigo, too, completely escaped from his fit of depression. With the return of the main body of the musicians, they all commenced to dance.

"Our host returns from his labours," Commander Rushton remarked, pointing down the path to Mirakel, who was on his way up from his bureau.

Rosina, with whom he happened to be dancing, stopped short at once.

"You will excuse me, Commander," she begged, as she slipped away. "The dance was lovely, but I have been dying to ask Mr. Mirakel a question. I cannot wait a moment longer."

"Flit away, dear Princess," he assented readily, "but come back again as soon as you can tear yourself away. This is better music even than the music of Jamaica."

"In a very few minutes," she promised.

She met Mirakel as he stepped on to the terrace and led him at once to a distant corner of the balustrade. She pointed to the rocky crag, now almost invisible.

"Mr. Mirakel," she began.

"Sebastian," he interrupted.

"Sebastian then," she corrected herself. "Can you make out the outline of that rock on the further side of the pit in the Park?"

"Certainly I can," he answered, "but then I knew it was there, of course."

"What is that man doing there who stands on the other side of the pit with his head bent always towards the ground?" she asked.

"Listening."

"Listening for what?"

"A sound which, under certain circumstances, might find its way up from the shadows beneath."

"What sort of sound?"

"How could I know what he is listening for? How could he know himself until he heard it?"

"But I want to know what sort of a sound he is expecting," Rosina pleaded, her beautiful lips curved into something that was suspiciously like a pout.

Mirakel pointed into the library, through the open windows of which they could catch a glimpse of Sir Horace with a student lamp before him struggling through a heap of books.

"So does the Professor, apparently," he observed.

"I do not care about the Professor," she answered impatiently. "It is I myself who wants to know. I am a very curious woman. Tell me, Sebastian, please, quickly. What is a Listener?"

"Amongst the Arabic races, I believe," Mirakel explained, "it is the term applied to a man who wanders out from a lost party in the desert and with his ear to the ground listens to sounds below the earth. Usually it is water he wants to hear. Does that satisfy you, my exquisitely attired little lady?"

"It helps," she admitted laughing. "I am glad that you like my frock. It did come from Paquin. Tell me then, is that what your Listener is doing there, listening for the sound of water?"

"Not particularly water," he replied.

"How provoking you are," she declared, stamping her foot.

"Forgive me," he begged. "I will be a little clearer. My steward, Jacopo, also, who is now lying on his stomach on the other side of the pit there, is listening for a sound which comes from the earth below, but it is not necessarily the gurgling of water. There are four, at different points of the compass: Icaro, Senussi, and Albertini, also Jacopo; and they are called the Listeners. They are the sentinels for the safety of this place, and they are chosen because they have wonderful aural nerves, and they use in turn an instrument which I bought in Munich, which is supposed to magnify sound something like one hundred thousand times. As a matter of fact, I believe that the instrument is a fraud. I can hear rather better without it just as I can see better without spectacles."

"And what are they listening for?" Rosina asked with an air of sublime patience.

"To know if anything unusual is going on in the earth below, or the waters under the earth."

"But what would there be likely to make the sound?" she persisted. "There isn't anybody down at the bottom of the pit, is there?"

He shook his head.

"Any living creature from whom the sound might come is very much farther away from us than that," he assured her. "His listening, in fact the listening of all of them, is very much on a par with the watching of Mars at certain seasons of the year by thousands of astronomers all over the world. They too are listening to the unknown."

"But this is extraordinary," Rosina declared. "Sebastian, I am tremendously thrilled."

"It is quite interesting," he smiled suavely. "The trouble is, of course, that it is all futile and rank speculation with the odds a million to one against it. At any rate, it will give Sir Horace something with which to occupy his spare time. I can see that I shall have very hard work to keep him away from that aural headpiece, although he ought to be scientist enough to know that it is not likely to make the slightest possible difference...We dance, yes?"

So they danced. Mr. Mirakel and Rosina...In the open-air room attached to Government House in an unknown world whose shores were lapped by an unknown ocean. They moved with a slow, graceful swing, of which they were both perfect exponents; and the soothing rhythm of the music quieted, as he had known that it would, her ruffled nerves.

"Someday soon you will tell me more about this underground world?" she begged. "I want to know exactly what it is that keeps those men listening, keeps the Professor poring over that instrument, and brings that curious hopeful look into their faces."

"I will sometime explain all that I know about it myself to you with pleasure," he promised. "I shall choose a night when the perfume from the garden and the sound of the sea plays less havoc with the senses. Some night, perhaps, when the clouds roll up, the face of the moon is hidden and the fireflies stay at home. There are odd nights here when these things happen. I shall choose one of them to tell you fully about my little company of Listeners. I believe before then, however," he went on, with a glance at the dimly lit room, the open windows of which they were passing, "Sir Horace may have mastered the whole mystery."

"It is true, is it not, what your cousin tells me, that before Sir Horace took up his occupation as secretary to a learned club, he occupied a Chair at an English University and took several remarkable scientific degrees?"

"I believe so," she assented.

"He has been chairman of the Archaeological Society—it is a great thing in England—and president of a famous German fraternity?"

"I believe so," she admitted. "Roderigo himself, you know, is extraordinarily clever. He is a Professor of one of the sciences. I forget which, but it has something to do with metallurgy."

"A most attractive young man," Mirakel pronounced. "Where did you say that he took his degree?"

"In Lisbon," she answered. "He was also at Munich and Cambridge. He took Honours in one of them in the subject he liked least—Military Science."

"Really?" Mirakel reflected. "We might have to go to him for advice then, if one of these wild and wicked countries were to descend upon us."

"You do not fear that, do you?" she asked.

He smiled at her pleasantly.

"I fear that less even than the Ghosts who tread the floors of my underground kingdom," he answered lightly.

* * *

Sir Horace came bustling out from the library a few minutes later. His hair was more dishevelled than ever, his eyes were bright. He had pushed his spectacles back on his forehead and he had the air of a man completely in his element.

"Mr. Mirakel," he asked, "would there be any objection to my sending a small quantity of the soil of your land here to a friend of mine in England for scientific analysis?"

"Indeed there would be," was the firm reply. "I do not wish my soil analysed, Sir Horace. I am perfectly satisfied with it. It is very good stuff indeed. Look at the fruit, the flowers, and the trees here, and look at the people, how they thrive."

"They have not been living here very long," Sir Horace reminded the speaker.

"How do you know that?"

Sir Horace was a little taken aback.

"Well, I thought you said yourself that all the service was imported, and so far as I can see, the population upon this estate consists chiefly of your servants, a few fishermen, a few tillers of the soil and a certain number of shopkeepers."

Mirakel nodded gently.

"You may be right, I suppose," he agreed, "but there are a certain number of those whose fathers and even grandfathers were born upon the place."

Sir Horace withdrew grumbling.

Lady Myra, who in Rushton's temporary absence had been engaged in one of her favourite lighter occupations, namely practising dance steps alone, came flying over to them.

"Mr. Mirakel," she exclaimed, "I have been driven crazy. Rosina is almost in the same condition. We have both suddenly remembered that we drove off from the docks on the night of our arrival here, and received all our luggage directly we arrived in Government House—but there was no address upon any of our things, and there is not a soul in England, not even my mother or father, who knows our address."

There was a twinkle in Mr. Mirakel's eye.

"Well," he commented, "that is very sad, but it gives you quite a free hand, doesn't it?"

"Even for the soberest of week ends in the dullest corner of the world," Myra continued, "my mother has always insisted upon an address."

"Why do you worry your poor host with these questions?" he asked. "I have a secretary who is always at hand. Mr. Bayes is in his office even now—the little building in the woods there—hand him your letters and they will be forwarded. He will also Send your address to anyone whom you would like to have know it, and he will hand over to you any letters they may wish to send."

"Can't we know it ourselves?" Myra persisted.

"Why should you?" he asked. "You are not proposing to sit down and write a letter to yourself tonight, are you?"

"But we must know where we are," she protested.

"I am not sure that I see the necessity," Mr. Mirakel objected thoughtfully. "Any letter addressed to you, or telegram, will be delivered straight into your hands without any delay. In the same manner any letter you send, or any telegram, will be delivered precisely as it is addressed in any corner of the world."

"Well, I should like to know where we are, anyway," Myra protested.

Mr. Mirakel passed his arm around her waist and as usual when Mr. Mirakel moved to music the person next to him glided off into the dance. She threw her head back with a little gesture of content.

"You are an amazing man," she cried. "Where do you get all this music from? I have never seen you play on any instrument. I have never even heard you whistle a tune, and yet when you move, you are like rhythm itself. Do you pick it up in the air, I wonder, or where does it come from? You are the last man in all the world I should have expected to dance like an inspired faun."

"You flatter me," he murmured. "The only explanation I can give you is that I love music, I love movement, I also like melody. I like to fly. I like to ride and I like to dance. What I do not like," he went on, with something almost like a boyish grin, "is being asked questions by inquisitive little girls who should be content to know that they are being very well taken care of by highly respectable and dependable elderly gentlemen."

"I have no guarantees as to your respectability," she laughed, "and I am not at all sure that I should value them in any case. I am inclined to believe in your dependability, but I doubt that you are elderly. You have sometimes the air of being the youngest of our little company. How old are you, Mr. Mirakel?"

"I shall call down the saints to listen to you," he threatened. "Here you are asking questions again. My child, you cannot go on like that; I shall have to tell Homer Bayes to open up the inquisition chambers."

"I do not believe that you have any inquisition chambers," she scoffed.

"You have not looked down to the bottom of the four pits," he reminded her. "Fathomless they are, dark, and the only illumination that is ever seen there are my fireflies. When the wind blows and their fur is ruffled they dart down into the bushes for safety."

"You are making fun of me all the time," Myra declared with an air of offended dignity. "Now I am going to ask you this question once more. Rosina, come and listen! Roderigo, you come too. Picture to yourself my aged and anxious mother. She has completed an eight-page letter to her affectionate and very charming daughter to whom she is devoted and with whom she has parted very reluctantly. The letter is there in an envelope on her desk. There is only one thing left to be done. It has to be addressed. The envelope is blank. She dips her pen in the ink. How does she address it? Listen you others!" she cried out, waving her hand. "Gather around me. I have asked Mr. Mirakel a question and he cannot evade it. You will have to answer it now. I have described the letter lying on my mother's desk, written to me, with only the address blank. *How does she write that address?*"

Mr. Mirakel lit one of his famous cigarettes and blew the first little cloud of smoke thoughtfully away.

"Well, I can't get out of this, can I?" he ruminated.

"You cannot," was the firm reply.

"Very well then. She...Oh, by the way, does your mother use a fountain pen?"

"What on earth has that to do with it?" Myra asked impatiently. "No, she does not."

"Well, I just wanted to know," he replied mildly. "She dips her pen in the ink, shakes it for a moment over the blotting pad to make sure that it is not overfull, and addresses the letter to the Lady Myra Huddleston, care of Mr. Mirakel, G.P.O., London."

They all regarded him with varying expressions of stupefaction.

"Is that all?" Rosina asked at last.

"Nothing more is necessary," he assured them.

"The letter will be delivered in due course."

"But it doesn't say where Mr. Mirakel is," Lady Myra pointed out.

"It is not necessary," he answered with a reassuring smile. "Every hour during the twenty-four hours of every day the G.P.O. knows that."

CHAPTER V

At eight o'clock that evening, six perfectly contented and elegantly turned out young people were seated at a round table in the open-air bar of the dining salon of Government House, submitting to the pleasant ministrations of Washington Mo, the smiling barman.

"Best afternoon's tennis I have ever had in my life," Commander Rushton declared enthusiastically. "I never felt fitter."

"Nor I!" Roderigo declared. "I played like a poop at first but I began to see the ball all right towards the end!"

"We always thought in the old days," Lady Myra declared, "that our courts at Queen's were, after Wimbledon, the best kept in the world, but these are the very pink of perfection. I can't imagine where Mr. Mirakel found such an expert as his groundsman here."

"Hour by hour," Roderigo declared, "this place seems to me to become more amazing. We play perfect tennis according to our lights on perfect courts. Everything is of the best; the balls and nets, the surface, everything. I believe that if one of us had come without his racquet he would have been supplied with Slazenger's latest production. If we are content to submit to the indignity, we are whisked back to our rooms in spotlessly clean rickshaws. Our baths are prepared for us by perfect servants; the sea-water is stronger of ozone than any sea-water I ever plunged into; the bath salts are the most exquisite mixture of pine and cedar-wood I ever inhaled."

"And the perfume," Lady Myra put in, "which the maid brought me for my massage afterwards was divine."

"Such a de luxe weighing machine too," Rosina reminded them all. "It looked as though it were carved out of solid ivory—and I have lost two pounds!"

"I have put on half a pound!" Myra confessed.

"My dear, if you do not put on a little weight," Rosina told her, "you will be blown through a keyhole or something even more awful will happen to you."

"I am too thin," Myra admitted sorrowfully, "but I never felt better in my life."

"Mr. Mirakel," Anne Strangeways observed, "would be enchanted to find you all so enthusiastic, for the tennis courts are a special hobby of his, and he himself is a wonderful player, I believe. We have two excellent tennis professionals, you know, if ever anyone wants to make use of them, but you people seem to me all to play too well to need much in the way of tuition."

"I think that I am the worst player," Rosina confessed a little dolefully, "but before I came to England we had so little practice."

"I think that there is very little to choose between you girls," Roderigo decided. "Lady Myra is the quickest about the courts. I never saw d'Alvarez even in her prime move at such a pace, but Miss Strangeways' drives are tremendous."

"I have a bad habit," Anne confessed, "of hitting the top of the net very often!"

"And to think," Rosina declared as she sipped her second cocktail with a long-drawn sigh of complete content, "that we are going to spend another of those long, delicious evenings. The fireflies are coming

already and the arch-priest of the Listeners, as I call that man Senussi, who was the nearest to us last night, has already taken up his position."

"I will tell you the man amongst our male guests," Anne declared abruptly, "who is going to benefit most by this amazing change of climate and surroundings. It is Sir Horace."

There was a little murmur which seemed to indicate a divided opinion as to the Professor's popularity. Anne continued unperturbed.

"I shall never forget him when he came round to the office after his little chat with Mr. Mirakel. I saw him this afternoon with half a dozen books, a dozen pencils and several volumes of reference, all spread out on a table in front of him at the end of the acacia grove, at the top end of the garden. He was absolutely steeped in happiness and the figures were streaming from the point of his pencil. It is a long time since I was at college, but I am certain that I recognized some algebraic signs...Wouldn't you hate to go back to the higher education, Rosina?" she demanded with a little shiver.

"Loathe it!" was the emphatic reply. "I have forgotten everything about the sciences I ever knew."

"I am not sure," Anne continued thoughtfully, "that there is not plenty to be learned here. Between them, I believe that Mr. Mirakel and Sir Horace—or the Professor, as I like to call him—could lecture upon any subject we chose to select."

"Who," asked a quiet voice in the background, "is taking my name in vain?"

They made room for their host at once with a little chorus of welcome. He took his place amongst them next to Rosina, accepting a glass from Washington Mo and a light for his cigarette.

"My dear young friends," he said, "I am happy to judge by your expressions that you have passed a pleasant day. To-morrow, if I am permitted, I shall join you at tennis. The Princess and I will, if she will honour me," he added with a little bow in her direction, "challenge any other couple."

"Lady Myra and me," Rushton suggested.

Anne Strangeways smiled.

"Alas," she bemoaned, "I would be willing to place a bet, but there is no currency upon the island."

"As a matter of curiosity," the Commander demanded, "were you wishing to bet upon us, Miss Strangeways?"

"Why should I give away my secrets?" she enquired.

"It is only a question of tennis prowess," Rosina reminded them.

"Nevertheless," Anne Strangeways decided, "I shall not tell a soul who will win."

Sir Horace, looking very smart in his white dinner clothes and carefully arranged cravat, elbowed his way into their midst.

"You speak of games," he observed as he accepted Washington Mo's offering and a chair. "It is of tennis you speak. I will join you one day, but it will be some long time and I shall not venture any money upon

my own prowess. I have many cups upon my sideboard at home, but I fear I shall not add to them from here from what I saw of that last set from my bedroom window."

"I thought you were far too busy, Sir Horace, with your dictionaries and books of reference, to engage in these light pursuits," Lady Myra chaffed him.

"My dear young lady," was the somewhat solemn reply, "I have set myself a task in calculations which I have just discovered will take me, even with the help of logarithms, trigonometry and the higher branches of algebra, some hundred years to bring to a conclusion. At that period of time I fear that I may find my banking account depleted and my possible opponents probably adorning other spheres."

"It seems rather a long time to ask us to wait," Rosina complained.

"In any case," Mr. Mirakel remarked, "Sir Horace is a little gloomy in his prognostications of our early decease. I myself, having just completed the translation of a Persian manuscript compiled after a long study of my horoscope which I shall commend to the Professor's notice, expect by that time to have mastered all the principles of longevity and be putting them into practice!"

Rosina shivered.

"You may find it a lonely world," she reminded him.

Mr. Mirakel shook his head.

"Those whom I love best in this transitory period which we call life," he answered, "will walk with me hand in hand along the path indicated by my Persian prophet. I have no fear of solitude."

Rosina summoned Washington Mo to her side. He hurried to obey her summons, his face convulsed with smiles.

"My benefactor," she murmured, "you will mix me another of your wonderful cocktails; it appears that there is a long promenade before me."

* * *

The service of dinner, which seemed heralded always by increasing streams of the fireflies, took place within the next few minutes. They had established a custom of changing places most evenings, except that Mr. Mirakel remained always in one particular chair with Rosina on his right. On her other side she found, this evening, the Professor.

"Do you feel, Sir Horace," she asked him, "in the humour to grant me a favour?"

"Princess," he answered, "it is already granted."

"How gallant all you men are growing in this marvellous atmosphere," she laughed. "Listen then, this is the favour: I have been told that you have secured the loan of an instrument which intensifies—I hope that is the right word—the hearing power of a human being a hundredfold. May I try it for a few minutes to-night in your place amongst the little company of Listeners?"

"Princess," he replied, "I have no proprietary rights over the instrument. I have seen it. I have worn it. I have tested it. I will willingly place it at your disposal, but I must tell you that to listen at all, to join that sacred company of four Listeners, I think it is necessary to have the sanction of your host."

"I want to be a listener to-night for a few minutes, Mr. Mirakel," she confided, turning towards him, "and the Professor tells me that I may use the instrument with which he has been experimenting."

Mr. Mirakel's hesitation was brief but it was, nevertheless, distinctly obvious.

"It is at your service with great pleasure," he assured her. "At the same time, I must tell you that Sir Horace's report concerning it is not very encouraging."

"I will try it for myself," she decided. "The Professor is a little hasty in arriving at conclusions. Men with great brains are something like that. Slow, deliberate judgment, with a more ample gift of patience such as a woman possesses, might yield a larger amount of success."

There was a little crinkle at the side of his eyelids which, in the case of the Professor, generally indicated internal mirth.

"The nervous susceptibility of a woman," he admitted with a slight bow, "is a very valuable asset to her in these delicate experiments. It will be interesting to hear your report, Princess."

She looked at him distrustfully.

"I have an idea," she complained, "that inside you are making fun of me."

"My inside could be guilty of no such impropriety," he assured her. "We must meet afterwards and compare notes."

"But you have already listened with it," she reminded him.

"Conditions change," he pointed out. "You may hear more or less than I did. The fireflies are flying high to-night, which is a sign of dry weather. Conditions may be altogether different."

Mr. Mirakel smiled at Rosina from his place.

"Dear Lady," he begged, "do not fix your hopes too high. There is one shock which I trust may never come near any one of my guests during their stay with me."

"And that shock?" she asked banteringly.

"The penetration of one of the mysteries with which this world is brimming," he told her gravely.

"That would not be a shock at all," she declared laughing. "There are many mysteries about the place I should love to penetrate and understand."

"But as a guest," he reminded her, "you are, of course, far too well-bred to do anything but keep such a longing to yourself."

Her acquiescent grimace was pleasant but a little untranslatable.

"You are determined to remain a man of mystery," she sighed.

"Quite involuntarily, I assure you, dear guest," he regretted. "Nothing would make me happier than to take you into my entire confidence and explain many things which no doubt at present rather puzzle you."

"Such as how we arrived here, for instance?" she suggested.

"Maybe."

"And how you are going to get rid of us when the time comes?"

"Another problem," he admitted.

Her lips were parted, she leaned towards him. This time, however, she had the obvious intention of remaining unheard by the rest of the little company. Her fingers rested upon his shoulder. She whispered in his ear. What those few words were no one heard, but that they were words of vital import everyone felt. Everyone began to talk loudly. Roderigo emptied his glass, and refilled it, with unusual haste. No one heard, yet everyone recognized the fact that those few words—they sounded like a question or at least a suggestion—were pregnant with a sort of mystery. Mr. Mirakel's only answer was that faint unusual flush in his cheeks and the fact that he took her hand in his and raised her fingers to his lips. It was left to one of the others to break the silence. Rosina accomplished it, almost gaily.

"Well, I have succeeded in one of my purposes," she laughed softly, "even if I am answered mutely...Who knows but to-night that marvellous instrument may not recognize a woman's touch and be kind to me? Perhaps it is better attuned to my hearing than to Sir Horace's. I may hear sounds which have been rumbling through the earth for centuries but which no one has properly understood."

Sir Horace moved a little uneasily in his place.

"If I thought so," he confessed with a touch of his former ungraciousness, "I should beg Mr. Mirakel to withdraw his promise. I have always preached that the mightier secrets of nature are not meant for woman's comprehension."

There was a moment's silence.

Everyone realized that Sir Horace had spoken with a new and impressive vein of seriousness in his tone. Mr. Mirakel changed the atmosphere with a little wave of his hand.

"My word cannot be taken back," he said smiling. "The Princess is our Listener-in-Chief to-night—she takes the place of Senussi—but I warn her that she is courting disappointment. She has set herself out deliberately to solve one of the possible mysteries of life. This listening at my pits has sent some of the greatest scientists in the world tired men to their graves without the slightest gleam of success."

Rosina recognized a note of banter in his tone. She understood perfectly well the hidden meaning behind those words, and there was a flash of defiance in her eyes.

"I believe," she complained to her host, "that you and Sir Horace have both made up your minds that I must be frightened out of my intention to-night."

"I haven't a word to say against it," the Professor declared. "You may fail to get any thrill out of it, but there is certainly no shock coming to you that I can conceive, except a numbed hearing for a day or two. I held the thing to my ear for seven hours and all I got was deafness for the whole of the next day. I can scarcely hear myself speak now."

Mr. Mirakel raised his eyebrows.

"That sounds a little odd," he remarked politely. "It sounds as though something had been tampering with the nerves of your hearing."

Sir Horace sipped his champagne.

"I never heard a single distinguishable sound of any sort from that instrument," he pronounced firmly.

Rosina sighed.

"I don't suppose that I shall either," she acknowledged, "but still, it is something to stand on the threshold of undiscovered scientific secrets, is it not?"

"Most thrilling, I should call it," Homer Bayes sneered. "All the same I should like to feel a little more conviction that there are still some undiscovered scientific secrets about."

The Professor's smile was a little contemptuous.

"Ever been down in a submarine, Bayes?" he asked.

"I went through the course for a year when I was in the American Navy," the other replied.

"Then you ought to know better than to suggest that there are no undiscovered secrets in science," the Professor grunted. "The floor of the sea should be a lesson to you by itself."

"It nearly was," came the grim reply. "Some crawling beast bit right through my boots and pretty nearly got my leg."

Myra screamed.

"What did you do?" she asked.

"Cut its throat and pulled the danger cord!" Bayes answered. "I was only just in time, anyway, for half a dozen of the same sort of creatures came from the back of a rock which was pretty well as high as a mountain. Fortunately we were lying on the bottom and were able to bubble up all right."

"It doesn't sound pleasant to me," Anne Strangeways observed. "Tell me, Professor, what do you suppose is directly underneath us?"

"Soil," was the suave reply.

"And deeper down still?"

"More soil."

"And then?"

This time Sir Horace shrugged his shoulders.

"To be able to answer that question, one would need to have a laboratory here, possess a complete diving outfit and a marvellous set of scientific instruments which it has never yet been of sufficient interest to the

world to invent. Even then, the reply would probably be nebulous. I sometimes believe that the reason we are allowed to live so long is because it helps us to realize how ignorant we are."

They strolled out of doors presently with their coffee and liqueurs and watched the fireflies. Senussi, Chief of the Listeners, was standing behind Mr. Mirakel's chair. The latter nodded assent to the man's request.

"Senussi wants to be allowed to fasten your aural device himself, Princess," her host confided. "You are to take his place to-night at Number 4 station. It is the nearest to here. He has had a chair fixed there for you and I suggest myself as an escort."

She pressed his hand gladly.

"Sebastian," she confided, "that horrible Professor has quite upset me. I shall be delighted to have you near. I shall fancy that I hear a wild beast of some sort barking up from the ocean or crawling out of a forest of seaweed or something of the sort."

"Perhaps you will feel a little more secure," he replied, "if I tell you that for the sound to penetrate even so far from the nearest possible ocean you would need an instrument able to record sounds several hundred thousand times more powerful than the one you are going to wear; and, furthermore, that no sea beast of the kind Homer Bayes was describing could come within a thousand fathoms of your chair."

"I feel relieved," she confessed. "I do not wish to hear ugly sounds or to see ugly sights. The night is too beautiful."

He pointed silently over the tops of the dark cypresses where a quarter of the moon was already visible.

"I shall share your vigil," he told her.

CHAPTER VI

Anne, for the first time since their meeting, threw off her reserve that evening as she strolled in the gardens with Roderigo and talked to him frankly. He stopped her first formal approach and laid his forefinger gently upon her lips.

"If you please," he begged, "there is not a soul here who calls me Senor the Marquis. I refuse. We have all reverted here to the more primitive life. Even Sir Horace, except that he once gently put me in my place and told me that he was a baronet and not a knight, is known to us all, unless we happen to forget, as the Professor and not Sir Horace. Mr. Mirakel is anything we choose to call him. My cousin is Rosina to all of us, and I am Roderigo. Is that understood?"

"Willingly," she answered smiling. "Roderigo by all means, although you are a very stand-offish gentleman in your own country and amongst your own people. Roderigo it shall be, certainly, but for a moment think of me back at Geneva; or think of me under the control of a Nazi-loving regime, tormented and worried all the time by that terrible cousin of yours, the Spanish friend of every German in Madrid."

"Manuel di Gomez?" he interrupted. "Well, why think of him at all, my dear Anne? He was a disgraceful fellow anyway. My only regret is that I did not hit him a little harder."

"I will have no more of any of them," she declared firmly. "It is through you I have escaped. It is through you that I am here in this perfect country, living this glorious life. I should never have reached London in time to have had my chance with Mr. Mirakel but for you. I will tell you what you want to know, and anything more you choose to ask. I was in your rooms that day because I meant to shoot Manuel Gomez."

"Shoot him? Why?"

"Because my orders were to give him every help in the scheme which had brought him from Portugal, and incidentally to make your acquaintance, and they treated me as though I was their slave. They absolutely ordered me to assist Manuel Gomez to get you into Germany."

Roderigo stared for a moment and lit another cigarette.

"I suppose you know," he told her, "that I definitely refused to be associated with the Nazis or German militarism in any shape or form."

"Yes, but don't you know," she reminded him, "that Germans take no notice of a refusal? They refused to listen to me when I told them that I was not a German, that I was not going to work for them in any way except as a typist and a linguist. It made no difference. They pestered me just the same. The fact is that that precious cousin of yours had deceived them. You were supposed to be very susceptible to intrigues with anyone of my sex, and particularly with me. I was to lure you across the frontier under any pretext at any cost, and they would see to the rest."

"Daylight!" Roderigo exclaimed. "It breaks around me. I begin to understand. You were double-crossing the Gestapo and all the time they were trying to believe that you were one of their trusted members. You were to start an intrigue with me; and as I had worked your passage over on the Clipper to England, which in a fashion I suppose did help you to escape from them, you decided instead to punish the man who was trying to lead me into trouble."

She drew a little sigh of relief.

"My dear friend," she exclaimed, "how intelligent you can be when you try! Marvellous! I was watching him, and I saw him enter your room. I decided that it was time to act. I followed him in. I sat at your table and began to write you out a complete exposure of the whole plot. He came out of your bedroom where he had been hiding, recommenced all his hideous proposals to me, read a portion of my letter and I really believe decided to strangle me. Perhaps I was a little too clever at trying to get him in a position where I couldn't miss—then you came. With that caretaker turning up I certainly should not have got away with it or been established here in this marvellous paradise as the social secretary of the famous Mr. Mirakel."

"Why did you ever get mixed up in this sort of business?" he asked curiously.

"Sheer love of adventure," she told him frankly, "and an Austrian girl friend who let me down rather badly. However, I am out of it, thanks to you, and I shall take good care that I never get near that sort of trouble again."

"Bless you, my dear Anne Strangeways, for being a sensible girl, and do believe this from me, I beg of you. Neither the brute force of my wily cousin, nor all the intrigues you have ever been taught in your interesting career as a highly trained international spy, would ever have got me alive into Germany. I should have preferred to remain in my own country, but I travelled over to England simply because I was weary of being pestered to continue my military career. The moment I met Mr. Mirakel and came again under the spell of my entrancing cousin, Rosina, my future was fixed. Mr. Mirakel's invitation had no more enthusiastic acceptor than I. We are perfectly happy here. I have no ambitions in life except to live

from day to day in dignified, and I hope, seemly fashion. I have joined this little happy band of Lotus-eaters willingly and cheerfully. What I love most in life now is the glint of the fireflies at night, this glorious out-of-door existence, the sun bathing, the mystery of it all, the calm patronage of Mr. Mirakel, Myra and you chaffing one another, and Rushton's sense of humour. Boccaccio could never have created a pleasanter little circle."

"Well, we are rather a mixed bag," Anne Strangeways acknowledged with a smile.

"Never mind, we all love one another," he insisted. "I never thought that any word except a curse would pass my lips concerning the Professor, or shall we call him Sir Horace Markham? Now I have positively grown to like the man. I really like him, Anne. I love his curiosity, although I am always afraid that he will do something to break up our calm little life here. Otherwise, I regard him as one of the most agreeable gentlemen of my acquaintance. I never fancied English sailors very much, but that naval fellow Rushton is one of the best, and I only hope that his sloop is never ready. So far as our dear friend, Mr. Mirakel, continues to extend his hospitality in the same judicious directions, I feel that we shall remain absolutely and entirely happy."

Anne herself echoed ecstatically her companion's little sigh of content. Frogs from a pond in the lower garden began their hoarse, but not unmelodious, croaking. From the gardens on the far side of the boulevard came the pleasant melody from the homemade instruments. From behind, where the trees grew thicker, came the glorious heart-throbbing song of the nightingales.

Suddenly, like a jagged interpolation of these waves of melody, tearing to pieces the calm beauty of the night, a harsh and pitiless interruption, came the pitiful sound of a mad shriek—the cry of a woman's voice shaking and quivering with hysterical terror. Then again silence, a hideously unnatural emptiness of sound. It was as though all sound once more, human or animal, had suddenly ceased. There was a ghastly unanalysable emptiness of sound—then a fainter but even more terrifying repetition of the cry in a lower key. After that, the silence was for many seconds unbroken.

* * *

Roderigo reached the wide-flung doors of Government House just in time to see Mr. Mirakel, with Rosina in his arms, disappear into her suite of rooms upon the ground floor, where her maids were already gathered together calling to one another in hysterical terror. He followed them without a moment's hesitation. Rosina was lying unconscious on one of the great couches which lined one side of the apartment. She was absolutely colourless, her eyes were closed and there was no sign of any movement. Mirakel was upon his knees, leaning down and gazing into her face without any signs of emotion, but with his fingers firmly placed upon her pulse. Lady Myra was leaning over her friend bathing her forehead with a sponge soaked in Eau-de-Cologne. Mirakel, his voice scarcely raised above a whisper, spoke very quietly and without any particular emotion. Every word he said was distinctly audible.

"Her Highness is unnerved," he announced; "she fancied that she heard strange noises from the Professor's instrument. It was a malicious effort of the imagination."

"Was such a thing impossible?" Roderigo asked.

"Quite impossible," was the firm but gentle reply. "The pit is empty. No voice, even through an instrument a thousand times more powerful than the one she was using, could possibly have reached her."

The eyes of the two men met. Roderigo felt a sudden wave of sympathy. He realized what his host was suffering. There was a certain amount of kindly concern in Mirakel's face, otherwise it was almost free from expression, except that there was also a deep line of pain. The battle was going on within.

"The Princess's pulse," Mirakel continued, "is becoming quite steady. She will recover in a few minutes."

Roderigo was then, for a moment, ruthless.

"There is no sense," he said firmly, "in letting a nervous woman attempt that sort of experiment."

Mr. Mirakel's voice had faded away until it seemed almost inaudible, yet everyone in the room heard every word.

"It was scarcely an experiment," he protested. "The Princess wished to try the instrument. It is the same instrument which the Professor held to his ears for seven hours, I think it was last night. No definite sound ever reached him. No definite sound ever reached the Princess. I have taken her temperature as well as felt her pulse. She heard nothing."

Roderigo leaned down and touched her fingers. They were cold, but not unnaturally so. Even as he stood there he saw a faint gleam of colour return to her cheeks.

"Why not some wine or brandy?" Roderigo suggested. Mr. Mirakel half-filled a wineglass with brandy from a decanter which one of the servants was holding. Rosina hesitated for a few moments, then she raised herself a little and drank a few drops of its contents. She glanced at the instrument which lay by her side and turned away with a faint smile.

"Horrible thing," she whispered.

Mr. Mirakel glanced round the room; her eyes were fixed upon his and there was a glow of appeal in them.

"I would suggest," he said, "that I escort the Princess to the couch outside in the portico, and that you all leave her for a little time."

"I should like that," she murmured gratefully.

She passed her arm round Mr. Mirakel's neck, and they led her out to a sheltered corner upon the flower-hung veranda. The sea breezes blew softly into her face. She pushed back her hair with a little murmur of relief, and smiled up at the Professor, who was lingering in the background.

"I am disappointed in your instrument," she confided.

He raised his eyebrows slightly.

"It made no music for me," he answered.

She shivered and waved him away.

"It was all madness," she said half to herself, half to Mirakel and almost in a whisper. "I had an idea—it was a very foolish one—that I could hear the sound of footsteps and tumbling of earthquakes in another world."

"It is just as well that you did not," the Professor, who was still standing in the background, observed a little grimly. "You were badly enough scared as it was."

She inclined her head gently.

"*Touché*," she admitted. "Would you have let me listen, though, if it had been more powerful?"

"Mr. Mirakel is the man to answer that question," he replied. "I have not the honour of being your host. I should have taken good care, if I had been, that the instrument in question never left my possession. I can assure you, though, that you might have listened for a score of years and never have heard a sound worth recording with that thing strapped around your head, and again, on the other hand, the unexpected might have happened, as it did."

"You think that I really did hear something, then?" she demanded eagerly. "You do not believe that that cry which sounded as though it might have come from the depths of hell itself is imaginary? You do not believe that the rumbling really was a chorus of voices, animal or human? It sounded as though the whole world had slipped from its axis and was descending upon us."

He smiled contemptuously.

"What I really believe," he told her, "is that it was a wildly exaggerated fancy of your own, multiplied into an unearthly-sounding echo by your hypersensitive brain."

"An echo..." she repeated thoughtfully. "I never thought of that."

"Well, if you take my advice," he concluded, "you will leave off thinking about it altogether. It doesn't lead anywhere. But if you think that you have been permitted to hear something from another world, I can tell you frankly that I do not believe you have, because I do not believe that there is another world. Without an intensifier of enormous power, you could never have heard anything even if there was anything to hear. That apparatus you had on was little more than a child's toy. I ought to know, for, to tell you the truth, as Mr. Mirakel is I fancy just out of hearing, I do not mind admitting that I have taken it to pieces and examined every part of it carefully. Go and have a dance or two with your cousin and get this thing well out of your mind before you go to sleep. Good night, Madame. Good night, everyone."

Rosina watched him disappear. She turned back again as the door closed. "You notice that he has taken the instrument away with him?"

"Perhaps that is wise of him," Mr. Mirakel remarked, lighting a cigarette after a tentative glance at his guest and placing it in her holder. "It is just possible if he had not walked away with it then that he might have looked for it in vain during the morning."

"Stoop low and tell me why, dear friend," she begged.

He glanced around. They were alone on the terrace and she made a place for him by her side.

"I think," Mr. Mirakel confided, "that he might never have found it again."

She drew him a little nearer to her.

"Please treat me like a grown-up woman," she begged. "I have been to college, you know, and taken a degree myself, although I will admit it was only in Lisbon. I think if you saw me in my gown you would have a little more respect for me. I once wrote a paper on the formation of the earth and got marks for it. I have forgotten all about it now, unfortunately, but it left ideas in my head."

"Tell me about it," he begged. "I am pitifully ignorant of everything to do with geology myself."

"It is a long time ago," she acknowledged doubtfully. "I was nineteen years old and I do not even remember what I did know then. I had a sort of idea, though, that if for any reason the ground we were treading on were to open under our feet in this hemisphere, if we could survive suffocation or crushing to death or drowning or half a dozen other calamities, we should come out in an altogether different hemisphere, perhaps in an uninhabited world. I know that I found that idea very fascinating some nine years ago, and I know that the first time I have ever thought about it since was when I saw your strangely attired, strange-looking servants each one gazing down into what seemed like a pit of the earth and listening—well, I suppose that brought back a gleam of memory; it brought back an idea, at any rate."

He smiled very pleasantly and very soothingly. It was a very quiet night and even the music from the *plage* below seemed to have come to an end. The night breeze, which still stirred the leaves of the exotic shrubs, rustled almost lazily in their ears. She let her hand rest on his.

"I think," she whispered, "that we will forget the Listeners for this evening."

"For all time," he agreed.

CHAPTER VII

Mr. Mirakel was gifted, as every one of his *en tourage* knew quite well, with very rapid and quickly-serving perceptions. Homer Bayes realized, before he had been in his presence for thirty seconds on the following morning, that the ugly fact which he had resolved to keep a secret for at any rate a greater portion of the day was fated to remain his own secret a very short time longer. He had given himself away, as a matter of fact, from the first moment of entering Mr. Mirakel's private apartments. He was nervous, ill at ease, with great news to disclose and a violent antipathy to disclosing it. Mr. Mirakel discovered this from a single glance into his face. No lie could have saved him. The truth had to be told.

"The radio?" Mr. Mirakel demanded calmly.

"I have brought the sheets," his secretary assented.

"This morning's news?"

"Last night's."

Mr. Mirakel leaned back in his chair. There was no glimmer of apprehension in his manner. He waited for what was to come with a gentle mixture of curiosity and interest.

"First of all the markets," Homer Bayes began. "The war news was indifferent, as a matter of fact it was bad. It was worse perhaps from the States than from England. Markets all over the world flopped."

Mr. Mirakel heard that portion of the bad news at any rate with indifference.

"Who could expect anything else?" he observed, lighting a cigarette and changing to a more comfortable attitude. "Our own interests in current prices are practically exterminated."

"Your own position, sir," Homer Bayes remarked in a tone almost of awe, "is an extraordinary one. There is little more for you to gain, for you already command the markets of the world. There is very little that

you can lose. You have only to say the word and the gold beggars, wherever gold is needed, are your slaves at your own price."

It was all so true, so thoroughly established by a long series of brilliant coups, that it was hard to exhibit even a superficial interest in a position so clearly defined, so absolutely established.

Mr. Mirakel waved his hand slightly.

"I will amuse myself with a few figures shortly," he decided. "In the meantime, I think I gather by your manner, Homer, that something portentous has happened. One of the two great men of the world has perhaps come to an untoward fate?"

Homer Bayes shook his head.

"It is not that, sir," he declared. "There has been a great night raid upon London. A portion of the West End has been destroyed."

"The Milan?"

"Untouched, sir."

Mr. Mirakel understood then what was coming. He asked no further questions. He waited for his secretary to continue.

"Manderley House, sir. The whole of the Embassy has been blown to pieces. His Excellency died at his desk transcribing a code message. Prince Charles was discovered in his own apartments with the young lady who has been his constant companion lately, neither of them really recognizable. A supper party and dance was proceeding at the time. Her Highness's apartments are completely shattered. There was at least a score of victims in the small cocktail bar."

Homer Bayes mopped his forehead and for the first time in his life took a liberty—he subsided into a chair and mopped his forehead again—a liberty which his chief excused with a little wave of the hand.

"It is not a pleasant story," Mirakel remarked thoughtfully.

"Both the British and the American press have seen that, sir," Homer Bayes acknowledged. "Some of the more respectable papers have glossed over the details, but as you have remarked, sir, it is not a pleasant story."

"Give me the keys," Mr. Mirakel demanded.

The young man handed them across the table.

"There is the key of the radio bureau, sir. I will take the instrument into the shooting gallery. To tell you the truth, sir, I have noticed Sir Horace hanging around the radio room very often lately, and I have kept the premises locked."

His chief rose to his feet.

"You have been well advised, Bayes," he said.

"Bring me the instrument into the shooting gallery; if you meet any one of my guests on the way, you will not depart from my usual instructions. The tongue of the radio is sealed for ever."

Calm and unhurried, Mr. Mirakel, followed by his secretary, made his deliberate progress towards the shooting gallery which had been built as an extension to a billiard room. Arrived there, he unlocked a gun case, took out a shot-gun and filled his pockets with cartridges, highly charged with a famous powder, and filled with Number 3 shot. He then placed a heavy chair on the platform, which had a metallic background and some sketches of men walking, standing and running. Not a word passed between the two men. Mr. Mirakel pointed to the chair raised up upon a small dais, and took up a position a score of yards behind.

"Bring a rifle or a shot-gun, whichever you can lay your hand upon first," he directed. "We will make an end to this radio as quickly as possible."

Homer Bayes selected a gun and waited. Mr. Mirakel, with six perfectly directed shots, reduced the instrument to an untidy mess of broken springs, metal and splintered mahogany. His secretary swept the remains into a sack. Half a dozen servants came running in from the garden at the touch of the bell, received a few words of brief instruction and the affair was over. Not a single record remained in Government House of last night's raid upon London.

"What about the sack, sir?" Homer Bayes enquired.

"You are quite right," his chief said calmly. "My work of destruction was perhaps a trifle too hasty, but I had reasons, very definite reasons. By a most unlucky chance I had promised Her Highness that for just this once she might listen in to the radio."

Large and strongly built though he was, Homer Bayes shivered slightly.

"It would have been terrible hearing, sir," he remarked.

His chief pointed out of the window.

"You see that line of wheelbarrows? They look like wheelbarrows but they are really propelled by a small motor."

"I see them every morning," Homer Bayes replied. "They start at 6:30."

"Fetch two of the strongest men in charge of them here," Mr. Mirakel directed. "If you blow your whistle they will probably come more quickly."

The young man did as he was directed. Out in the flaming morning sunlight, his hair seemed to be struck with fire. The men, natives from some Oriental country running to do his bidding, gaped at him as though he were some creature from another world.

"Take the whole cavalcade into your keeping," Mr. Mirakel directed his secretary. "See the sack put on one of the motor barges and dropped in not less than forty fathoms of water. Then come back to your garden seat in the cedar-wood. I can watch you from there, and I shall be waiting."

In half an hour the young man was back with perspiration streaming from his forehead. His chief glanced at him indifferently.

"You are fatigued?" he asked.

"Not in the least, sir," was the quick reply. "The radio is at the bottom of the bay."

"Come with me to the cable room now," the other directed, "and I will give you some instructions."

Homer Bayes did as he was directed. At his master's bidding, he introduced three of the operators. Mr. Mirakel looked them over with satisfaction.

"I may telephone as well," he confided. "I must be in direct touch with London as well as New York within the next half an hour. Bayes, you will have my coffee and fruit brought into the Oleander House just behind the winter garden. Bring the codes with you and some pencils. When we have sent the cables off I shall ride. Tell them at the stables to have Hassan II saddled and sent round to the winter garden. Then take word on to Her Highness that if she cares to ride at eleven o'clock, it would give me great pleasure to ride with her before lunch. If Madame decides to come, see that the Arabian mare which came over with Hassan II is saddled for her, and get an extra groom; also have a lunch prepared by the chef and given to Senussi, who will bring it in our train towards the northern part of the domain, where the heather beds are thickest, together with a choice of wines and an extra man to wait upon us."

"Everything shall be attended to according to your orders, sir," the young man promised. "Supposing that by any chance, Her Highness is still indisposed after last night and prefers not to ride?"

"In that case, Homer," his master said with one of his rare but very delightful smiles, "I shall place the matter in your hands. It is my desire, my very strong desire, that Her Highness should ride with me this morning. I shall ask you, therefore, to use your powers of persuasion to let her understand how strong my wishes are upon the subject."

The young man picked up his linen hat.

"I think I can promise you, sir," he said, "that Her Highness will be there."

* * *

Mr. Mirakel, at the end of a brief, inspiring canter, swung his horse round at the top of the long, grassy slope and laid his hand gently upon Rosina's fingers. Her mare plunged for a moment but on the whole behaved very well. She recognized perhaps Rosina's delicate hands, almost as perfect in their way as her graceful and secure seat.

"This is the view which most of my friends prefer to any on the domain," he told her. "I am not sure that I agree. I like more sea. I like rocks which stand out like stranded pyramids on the other side, and those fierce, curling waves that lick their bases. Still, this is very beautiful and the ozone is Heaven's own perfume."

"It is beautiful," she admitted, "but I am with you, Sebastian, I like the views from Government House side. I am like you too, I like the rougher, more turbulent seas...Now, tell me, what were you and Mr. Homer Bayes doing around the place so early this morning? You were so occupied," she continued, "that you would not even turn your heads and see me watching you from my balcony."

"I saw a dream in white, something floating over from your bougainvillaea terrace," he admitted. "I should have known that it was you. Nothing else could have seemed so—"

"Well, so what?" she asked as he hesitated.

"Sometimes you empty my vocabulary," he told her. "You keep the words from my lips. That is when the wonder of you, Rosina, creeps really up from my heart."

She looked at him with delight in her soft, velvety eyes but with a shade of wonder there too.

"It is not yet midday," she murmured, "and yet you make poetry to me. I can see that we shall have a happy day. You do not talk to me often enough like this, Sebastian. I know so well what a poet you are, and yet you keep everything so locked in your bosom. I have wondered sometimes what was the matter, whether it was you or I who kept the key."

"What could be the matter, sweetheart?" he asked. "Since you have been here I have been happier than at any time since I decided that I would earn for myself a sanctuary in life. You have made my sanctuary a paradise. There are times when I have felt, as I felt this morning, that I must take you off by myself and have you all to myself so that I might try to tell you how wonderful I feel it and how grateful I am."

After the shock of last night, she had started the morning a little pale. The disturbance of the evening had reached over almost until the waking hours, but his words, that quiet, soft diction of his, the tenderness which seemed as if it were really flowing up from his heart, were both so wonderful and unexpected that she felt herself almost deprived of speech. She could make no reply. She was conscious of the tears in her eyes as she turned towards him.

"I am very happy," she confided.

"Could you, could anything make you happier, Rosina?" he asked, his voice lowered almost to a whisper.

A light flashed from her eyes which was an answer by itself.

"Yes," she told him, "one thing."

"You give me courage," he told her boldly. "What I have had in my heart to say to you, Rosina, I shall now say without any further delay. That it is my hope and my prayer that the thing which you need is what I am praying to give. That will be the perfect creeping of joy into these almost perfect days."

"Soon?" she whispered, and her voice shook almost as though with fear. "You will tell me within a few hours?"

"I will," he promised.

She leaned over and patted the neck of her restless mare. They cantered off again into the wood and out into the salter atmosphere of the incoming evening breeze. He caught a glimpse of her and it seemed to him that her lips were framed to their coming happiness, that he could almost hear the whispered echo of his promise.

"To-night!"

CHAPTER VIII

There were two empty places when Albertini announced the service of dinner that night. The rest of the little company, strolling in from the lower terrace with its gaily-lit cocktail bar and small orchestra, looked around them with surprise.

"Where is our host this evening?" Roderigo asked, forgetting for a moment that Albertini, the dour maître-d'hôtel-in-chief, answered no question except from his master.

"The Princess too is missing," Sir Horace pointed out.

Albertini emerged from the shadows of the room and broke the custom of a lifetime.

"You will pardon me, if you please, that I make the announcement a little late," he begged. "Her Highness and Mr. Mirakel beg that you will excuse them. They will probably join you later in the evening."

"The Princess has had no relapse, I hope, from her indisposition of last night?" Sir Horace asked inquisitively.

"Her Highness is completely recovered," was the prompt reply. "She has been riding with Mr. Mirakel ever since the middle of the morning."

"Does Mr. Mirakel know that there has been a strange plane around at twilight?" Sir Horace enquired officiously.

"Nothing happens in the neighbourhood of this domain which is not known to Mr. Mirakel," Albertini replied. "It was Mr. Homer Bayes who was piloting the plane for the last half an hour of its journey."

"What an amazing man!" Lady Myra sighed.

"*Hm!*" Sir Horace grunted. "I should like to know what has become of the Princess."

"Her Highness perhaps rode a little farther than she intended," Albertini replied.

"The question often puzzles me," Roderigo observed, "as to how far you can ride in any direction on this island or peninsula or continent, whichever it may be, without falling off the edge."

"Someday I am living in hopes of knowing that," the Professor grunted. "I should like to start from Government House gates as a centre and ride just as far as I could go in every direction. More especially I should like to make the trial trip in that white-winged bird of Mr. Mirakel's. He must have quite a collection of curiosities in the way of planes."

"He has several very interesting ones," Roderigo interposed, "but his guests as a rule think it better taste, knowing his idiosyncrasies, not to talk about them too much."

"Are you trying to be offensive, young fellow?" Sir Horace asked.

"I am doing my best," Roderigo replied, "but I'm finding it rather difficult."

"What do you mean, finding it difficult?" the Professor demanded.

Roderigo sipped his wine for a moment.

"If you would really like a serious reply to that question—" he began.

"Oh, be quiet!" the Professor interrupted him. "Of course, I don't want to be offensive. I don't want to make an enemy of you. I want to live here in comfort and quiet with everyone."

"You would succeed more perfectly," Roderigo assured him, "if you left off asking questions of his servants upon matters which you know quite well Mr. Mirakel prefers to keep to himself."

Roderigo laid his hand firmly upon the Professor's shoulder.

"I'd stop it if I were you, Sir Horace," he begged. "Mr. Mirakel is our host and a very generous host too, and he has expressed his wishes clearly enough to every one of us. It is only in his absence, Sir Horace, if you will excuse my saying so, that you venture so far as you have done this evening."

The Professor drained his glass of wine.

"Forget it, every one of you," he begged. "I am in the wrong. I apologize. I am an inquisitive fellow, but I can't help it. Next time I see Mr. Mirakel I'll ask him one or two questions outright and then I'll leave it alone."

"It will give me great pleasure," Roderigo replied, with a little bow, "if we leave it like that. Mr. Mirakel may feel inclined, considering your great reputation, Professor, to allow you special privileges."

Sir Horace bowed to everyone, had his glass refilled, and remained silent for the rest of the meal. The orchestra played fragments of their strange music just when the humour took them, and Rushton and Lady Myra danced assiduously.

"What an annoying old gentleman Sir Horace is," the girl observed to a group standing in the garden after a dance. "I should scarcely be surprised if he did not get a time-table in place of his bill one morning."

"Serve him right if he got both," Roderigo declared. "He really is an extraordinarily clever old boy, you know, but he is as tactless as they make them. I sympathize with him to this extent—I find it terribly hard sometimes, considering all the conflicting clues, not to ask one or two simple questions myself."

"Such as?"

"Well, the secrecy here about all outside life," Roderigo pointed out. "The idea of not having a radio is perfectly wicked, and an English newspaper is a thing unheard of."

"But, my dear," Anne pointed out, "hasn't Mr. Mirakel tried to make it clear that he wished to entertain people in a very secluded retreat where the war was never even mentioned? If we had the radio going here what would the conversation be like afterwards?"

"You are quite right," Roderigo agreed. "You cannot keep off the war when you begin to talk about it. I have never been so happy as the last few days, or weeks—whichever they are; I am beginning to forget. I hate the war. I never dreamed we should get on so well without news, but I am getting perfectly to love the idea of never hearing anything. After the first few days, it seems wonderful how one leaves off worrying."

"It does not seem exactly patriotic, though, does it?" Myra observed. "I try to set my conscience at ease because I was really ill with overwork before I came away and my people were making me stop, anyway. What about you, though?"

"But I am not an Englishman," Roderigo reminded her.

"Heavens, of course you're not!" she exclaimed.

"We are rather a mixed-up crowd anyway," Roderigo pointed out. "Half the residents here, or natives or whatever you like to call them, might belong to any one of the Latin or Asiatic races. As a matter of fact, I don't suppose that one of us really knows exactly what our host's nationality is."

"I don't fancy myself asking him," Myra observed.

"Nor I," he agreed. "But then, I came determined not to ask a single question, and I have not broken my word yet. Let us go back and deal with the rest of this excellent meal, shall we? These fellows won't play again for half an hour at least. They have just had two or three of those delightful jugs of wine sent down to them. They grow their own *vin ordinaire* here somewhere on the estate; I only wish they would serve it for luncheon."

They threaded their way up the paths between the thickly growing exotic shrubs, crossed the terrace, and entered the dining room. Sir Horace's place was vacant.

"Have you buried the Professor?" Myra asked, pointing to the latter's empty place.

"He is fiddling about at the Listeners' chasm," Anne Strangeways told them. "For a scientific man he really is very illogical."

"In what way?" Roderigo asked.

"Well, he lays down the law that that instrument which gave Rosina such a shock last night should be a hundred thousand times more powerful to be of any practical use, and yet he buckles the thing on every night and morning with the most meticulous care. There he stands now on the top of the north pit with his ear cocked on one side listening as though he were expecting to hear the voice of a prophet!"

"Well, I don't think Rosina will ever want to listen for prophets or wild animals again," Roderigo observed smiling.

"I don't pity her in the least," Myra declared ruefully, "I never saw her look more beautiful than when she came in riding this afternoon. Her complexion was exquisite and, of course, her seat was always perfect. I think the shock seems to have done her good."

"Mr. Mirakel is a very restful person," Anne Strangeways declared. "One can imagine him facing the greatest crisis in the world without turning a hair."

"I will tell you what I feel about him," Rushton declared earnestly. "He ought to have been one of the three or four great men who are trying at the present moment to rebuild the world. He would face either the greatest catastrophe or the greatest victory without turning a hair."

"I believe you are right," Roderigo agreed. "I do believe that he probably possesses the most complete self-control of any man with whom I have ever come into contact."

"I wonder where he has been all day," Myra asked. "Riding with Rosina?"

"Not quite all day," Roderigo replied.

"Whereabouts did you see him?" Anne Strangeways asked curiously.

"Well, I had the fancy for a rough scramble after lunch to-day," Roderigo replied. "And I had a rest about halfway up that steep hill to the west of us with the mountain road leading to the aerodrome. I saw a man riding a beautiful Arab horse at a great pace up that road. Naturally I stopped to watch it, and I can tell you, in a way, it was a sight. He was sitting his horse like a centaur, grim, without a flicker of interest or excitement in his face, but he was riding at what I should call a reckless gallop up a very steep road with every now and then great bushes of bracken and gorse and masses of splintered rock. Three times his horse—a good deal out of condition, I should think, and very much under-exercised—had his foot in one of those deep clefts and each time it seemed to me amazing that any man could keep his seat. He never even swerved, patted his horse gently on the neck after they had recovered and then went on, still at a gallop, through another wretched piece of country. I could see what he was doing, taking a short cut to the aerodrome, but although I have done some rough riding in my time, and had all I wanted once in Albania, I'd never have faced the road he was on."

"He got there all right?" Myra asked breathlessly.

"Yes, he got there," Roderigo admitted. "Rode in at the gates, took the salutes as though it were the sort of thing he had been used to all his life. And that was not the only time I saw him to-day either."

"Tell us the other time," Myra begged.

"You have seen him in his white plane?"

Roderigo asked.

"I have not," Rushton answered. "I have heard about it. Rosina told me that he crossed the harbour in it once and was still in the air when he passed along the boulevard on his way to the aerodrome."

Roderigo nodded.

"Well, it is a lovely little car and not so small at that," he declared. "But I saw him drive out of the aerodrome this evening. I saw him land, a wonderful landing, timed to a moment, saw him jump out like a boy, help his companion who was a slightly older man to his feet, jump into a car that was waiting and drive down somewhere in this direction. Again Mr. Mirakel was driving himself. He held the steering wheel with his left hand and his right hand was on the other man's shoulder. The other man's expression was wonderful. He looked like that old picture of Dante that hangs in the library, only, of course, a little older. They just flashed by me. I caught a glimpse of Mirakel's smile and he was gone. But I could not help thinking he had the air of being master of his fate whatever it was; master of what he was doing whatever it might be; master of his life. They saw nothing of me, either of them, but after they had passed I took off my hat; that was just how I felt."

CHAPTER IX

It was in the dusk of that evening that Rosina, secretly trembling in every limb, was led by Albertini along many passages and one more stretch of flower garden into the place which she sometimes afterwards called the "holy of holies." It was a very small apartment but exquisite in shape and adornment.

"So this," she exclaimed very softly and with a curious sense of repression which had passed quietly from her thoughts and her movements to her very voice, "is where you really live?"

Mirakel half-turned towards her, but his fingers still lingered on the worn ivory notes of the piano on which he had been playing.

"It is where I live," he acknowledged, "and in these few rooms—some corner of them—I expect one day to die. Albertini, the guard is removed."

With a low bow, the major-domo of the household, who having performed his mission was standing silently in the background, slipped out of the door and disappeared.

"It is a kind of cottage dwelling," Mirakel went on, rising to his feet and taking her gently into his arms. "It is attached, as you see, to the main building behind, and in front I have my private gate and entrance and what they call the chapel. I am halfway between the two."

"It is here where you make that music which I fancy that I sometimes hear in my dreams," she went on, speaking if possible even more quietly. "How strange that I should sometimes have felt you near me. The night that I was frightened, not many hours ago, I fancied that I heard your music and saw your shadow outside my window."

"It was true," he admitted. "I stood there because I always think that Beethoven is the great quietist amongst all the musicians. I played a little of the Fifth Symphony and I moved out into the lane by the side of your window. It was a queer sort of expedition," he went on, "but I believed that you knew I was somewhere near."

"I did," she assured him. "I felt that aching in my head grow less. I felt as though Heaven were somewhere around. And there?" she asked, pointing to a door at the farther end of the quaintly shaped room.

He drew from his pocket a little gold key and passed it to her.

"It is yours," he told her.

She touched it with her lips and handed it back.

"I think," she whispered, "that we will share it. It is all so beautiful, especially this hiding place that you have chosen, Sebastian. I can scarcely believe that I am so near our little everyday life. You have treasures here?"

"Yes," he acknowledged calmly. "The small Madonna is a genuine Perugino. The latticework there came from Fra Angelico's first cell. The picture of the Magi was traced by even greater fingers. Andrea del Sarto painted that little oil upon the south wall for Philip of Spain, but, alas, it fell into bad hands. Since then it has been purified, but I have other treasures I must show you. They are in an Italian corner—in my other room—you might think beautiful. This is where I sleep. In this corner, because the birds love it and they sing in the early morning, and it is through that eastern window that the morning sun creeps in."

"It is so like you, Sebastian," she said. "It is just the hiding place which you would choose. That is your own little wood outside?"

"My own," he told her, "and presently there is a great deal I have to tell you about that."

"You have the night flowers as well as the day roses here," she went on, "and you make music when the birds are weary. Do you know," she went on quite naturally, "I have often wondered where you slept. I have always been so sure that you were somewhere near. I am afraid that I have asked them all in turn what this queer building was, but no one has ever told me or mentioned your name. They said it was the music house of a hermit, and some of them, the house that led to the chapel that held the Picture.' As soon as they had answered my hesitating questions, they hurried away for fear I should ask another. Tell me, did a priest really live here? And that extension, in the corner of the woods with the wicket gate and the green paths from your front door, is that really a chapel, that is what they call it?"

"Yes, in a way it is a chapel," he answered. "It is part of what I call my refuge corner in life. I receive no visitors here. I allow no callers. It is my small home when the time comes that I feel I need rest. The little wood is a place of silence. The little chapel here has an almost sacerdotal tranquillity."

"Is it consecrated?" she asked a little timidly.

"By a famous Cardinal," he replied. "It is holy ground according to your own religious feeling, Rosina, and it has a history."

"I shall not ask what that is," she promised him.

"A bishop once lived here in the old days," he went on. "He was expelled from a Latin country and he lived and died in these two rooms I now call my own. In the annals of the few people amongst whom he dwelt he was a holy person. At any rate his name was known throughout the world as a famous one. He is buried on the other side of what is still called the chapel and there is a little stone cross, a miniature crucifix, and many flowers about the spot. In the midst of these he sleeps, but of his history I can tell you nothing. It does not belong to us. It scarcely belongs to our world."

"But 'the Picture,' tell me about that," she begged. "Some people still call it 'the Picture house.' Is it one of these Madonnas that you guard so carefully? The Madonna of Perugino for instance, or the one Madonna which Velasquez is supposed to have painted and which disappeared?"

"Who knows?" he answered, with something of the usual Mirakel in the doubtful shake of his head.

"Could we go into the chapel, please?" she begged.

"Very soon, dear Rosina," he promised. "First, though, I have something to say to you."

"Something very serious?" she asked with a little quiver of uneasiness.

"Something very serious," he acknowledged. "Let me tell you after my own fashion, if I may."

She gripped his hand suddenly. Her fingers were icy cold. He threw open the window and established her in a chaise-longue within reach of the setting sun.

"I am a little afraid," she confided.

"You should have no fear," he assured her. "Let me now remind you, Rosina, of one of my modern weaknesses. In fitting up this estate as a refuge for any of my friends I chose to invite, during the period of war, it was also meant to be established for purposes of escape."

"I know," she acknowledged. "It was a wonderful idea. I had never realized until I came here how possible escape from the great cities might be."

"So far with you, then, it has been a success?" he asked gently.

"It will always remain a success," she insisted.

"I was compelled," he went on, "to make certain rules which seemed arbitrary, and to insist upon a certain mode of life which seemed unreasonable. Yet to my mind these were necessary. One of the first of these was that there should be no regular service of newspapers here, and I would permit no radio except my own."

"It was a wise provision, even if severe," she agreed. "But I think I know what you are leading up to. I can almost see it in those grave lines about your lips. There has been bad news—yes? Some grave calamity has happened in Europe. Tell me the whole truth, Sebastian. Believe me, so long as we are here together I shall be brave."

"I will tell you," he went on, drawing her gently a little nearer to him. "There has been one of the old wicked raids over London. The Portuguese Embassy was destroyed. Your uncle and your husband were both killed."

He felt the shivering of her body in his grasp, but he only held her the more tightly.

"But this is terrible," she moaned.

"They were killed outright," he went on. "They must have died without suffering, but it was altogether a very terrible business, and I think that you should know now, rather than be told later. It was a very dreadful affair. Your husband was giving a party that night, and half the lighter side of theatrical society in London seems to have been wiped out. They were, most of them, young ladies, some of them very famous in their way; a good many of them were American. References in the American papers as well as the English have been unpleasant. Some of the guests should not have been entertained under your roof."

"I understand," she whispered tremblingly. "Is there bad news for any of the others? The Duke and Duchess—Myra's father and mother?"

"Untouched," he assured her. "No one else who was connected here at all was hurt in any way. I am going to tell your cousin because I know him to be a person of discretion and because of his connection with your family. Otherwise, no one will hear the news."

"There is no reason why they should be told," she admitted. "We all understood that your radio was entirely a private affair."

He withdrew his hand gently and rose to his feet.

"I think," he suggested, "you will probably like to be left alone for a time. I will take you back to your own apartments, or, if you prefer it, you can remain here. Or this little key," he added, drawing it from his pocket, "will give you entry to the chapel."

"I do not wish you to leave me," she insisted. "I should like to stay here in silence alone with you."

"It is as you wish," he answered. "If I spoke of departure, believe me it was not through any lack of sympathy. A tragedy like this must be a great shock."

"You are a very understanding person," she said. "I do not need to tell you that there was no very great affection between my husband and myself."

"I have always been happy to believe that that was the case," he answered quietly.

"We were so far apart," she went on, "even from the earliest moment of our marriage...Ours was a large family, and I had always been accustomed to much affection. My husband had none to offer me of the sort I desired. He was a difficult person to live with, an impossible person for a sensitive woman to care for. These are hard things to say of the dead, Sebastian, I know, but they are the truth."

"You were very unsuited to one another," he reminded her gently. "Perhaps I am prejudiced by my great affection for you, but I felt this always."

"You knew nothing of Charles," she reminded him.

"Not personally perhaps," he admitted, "but no one could be a frequent visitor in the capitals of the world without learning of your husband's reputation as a lover and a seeker after beautiful women."

She looked at him steadfastly. There was no doubt in her eyes, but she was a little puzzled.

"But you knew nothing of me until you presented yourself in London and brought me that card and note from our dear friend." She smiled bravely.

"Do you feel that you can walk with me so far as that little building?" he asked, pointing to the chapel.

"Willingly," she answered. "You must not think me too cold-hearted, Sebastian. If Charles had been like many of the other men I have known, like Roderigo for instance, it would have been very, very different, but between Charles and myself there was no scrap of affection, not one iota of sympathy. We go now? Yes?"

She rose to her feet and they walked slowly down the grassy path and through the gate which led to the entrance of the chapel. He opened the door with his small key and closed it behind them.

There was nothing particularly ecclesiastical about the interior. There were neither pews nor chancel and only one small, exquisitely designed stained-glass window. There were a dozen chairs only in the whole small building. They were placed upon the white marble floor in strict, almost prim, order; and they were fashioned of dark red damask, worn and faded with age. The only picture upon the wall was concealed by a wrought-iron grille, covering which was a curtain of rich, but faded, velvet.

Rosina pointed towards it.

"The Picture?" she whispered.

He led her towards it. First of all, he touched a spring and opened the grille. Then he pressed another small button and the curtain flew up. The Picture was disclosed. Rosina stared at it, breathless and speechless, for a moment. Then her little cry of astonishment seemed to echo like the clanging of silver through the tiny building.

"Is this a miracle?" she demanded.

He smiled.

"Are you taking my name in vain?" he asked. "I was never a painter, Rosina."

"But it is Lazzata's painting of me," she cried. "He came to Madrid to do it at the palace years ago. It was sent to New York for exhibition, because Lazzata needed money so badly, and bought, they told me, by a famous millionaire who paid the painter an extravagant price never to have his name disclosed."

"I was the guilty person," Mirakel admitted. "I was told of the picture by the painter himself and the man whom I have always considered the greatest critic of modern art. I went to see it, in the gallery where it was being exhibited, in their company. From the gallery whilst we waited I sent a messenger for my banker. I left with the picture."

"It was you who bought it?" she cried.

"It was I who bought it," he told her. "Lazzata, who sent the cable to Madrid, made all the arrangements. I refused, however, to leave the gallery without that picture and my bankers paid over a deposit which was considered adequate in case the Prince, your father, refused to sell—although it was understood that if a suitable offer was made the picture should be sold for Lazzata's sake, as he was a poor man. There was no trouble, however. The Picture and I have lived together since the day I hung it myself where it is now, and I have been faithful to it."

"What made you buy it?" she asked with the air of one still dreaming.

"I bought it because it was the most beautiful work of art I have ever seen," he said quietly. "I bought it because it is a picture of the most beautiful woman whose face I have ever looked into. I bought it because with all the great masters in my mind—and I know them all—it is the one which combines the spiritual sense and the exquisite portrayal of physical beauty most perfectly. I bought it because if I had left New York the memory of it still hanging in that gallery would have disturbed an equanimity which had never been disturbed by such things. It would have driven me crazy. I bought it because I loved the picture as I love the person, Rosina, whom it represents. So I found out a little more about you, my dear, and the time came when I asked for a line from my friend and sailed for London. That night we had dinner together. I have found in you, Rosina, everything the picture promised."

She sank into the the damask-lined chair. Her eyes were still misty with tears. She began to laugh, softly at first, then almost hysterically.

"Sebastian," she cried, "please do not think that I am going crazy; this is too fantastic for me. My father rebuilt a wing of our palace in Madrid with a quarter of what you paid him for this picture, and spent money at such a rate that even Charles, who loved money more than anything in the world, proposed for my hand. Confess that it is a strange world in which you have helped on my marriage to the most dissolute roué in Europe!"

"That is still how he presents himself to your memory?" Mr. Mirakel enquired.

"In no other way," she answered.

"Then I am very glad," he said firmly.

She seemed on the point of asking him a question. Suddenly she paused.

"You have shown me your chapel," she said, and there was a light tone in her voice, a flame in her eyes which half puzzled, half intrigued him.

He remained silent.

"What you have shown me has made me very happy," she continued. "I am fascinated, too, with your bachelor quarters. Show me more of them."

They locked up the chapel and he led her across the way into a typical man's room. Books crowded the shelves from the floor to the ceiling. Books bound in every description of sweet-smelling leather; books almost tumbling to pieces; others spick and span from the publishers' premises. He showed her manuscripts signed with famous names, verses written out on vellum "for the joy and delight of my dear friend, Sebastian Mirakel."

Here he paused and read a few fragments out to her; now and then in French, one in Spanish, a few in English. He turned to a manuscript album of sketches—little, fine-painted grey affairs by some modern French water-colour painters. Trifles which he had picked up at the Lycée or some of the lesser-known galleries.

Then they came to a closed door which he opened apologetically.

"My sleeping quarters," he explained

She looked around her curiously. For a man who loved beautiful surroundings, the Spartan cedar-wood bedstead seemed strangely out of place, although the dazzling whiteness of the woven linen sheets and the mingled perfumes of the linen and lavender stealing out from the pillows were virile enough in their suggestions. The walls were bare except for a few French water-colours. The mahogany box on a small round table by the bedside inspired her curiosity. She stroked the highly-polished lid with her delicate fingers.

"A terrible anachronism," he confessed. "That is the box which contained the duelling pistols of a famous Frenchman of ancient days. The pistols, however, have been replaced by a pair of small automatics of American design. You see what care I take of myself."

She leaned towards the small, circular bookcase, which stood on the other side of the bed next to a beautifully carved silver lamp, drew out one or two of the volumes and turned over the pages with interest. They were all beautifully bound and the type seemed as though it had been set up by a private printing press.

"A strange edition of *Marius the Epicurean*," she remarked, reading the title page. "So you study the modern English classics as well as old books? I love the vellum binding of your Thomas à Kempis and that single volume of Robert Browning."

"I had that made up for myself," he told her. "It contains only what I call 'The Lament of Andrea del Sarto' and two other short poems."

"I do not think," she commented, "that I have ever seen anything more beautiful than your exquisitely bound copy of the sonnets of Shakespeare."

He took the volume from her and picking up a pencil from the bedside wrote "Rosina" across the bookplate.

"It will serve as a memento of this most improper visit of yours," he said smiling.

She held up her lips and he held her lightly in his arms for a moment or two.

"One of the other doors leading from here," he went on later, "leads to my bathroom, the other, perhaps, if you had known about it, might have given you cause for some slight anxiety."

"Now I am curious," she observed. "Tell me about it, please."

"That leads into a secret passage," he confided.

"Well, go on, please! The secret passage leads where?"

"It is for the great lady of this domain when she chooses to step out of her frame and come to study her Picture."

"A riddle?"

He shook his head.

"Too easily guessed," he replied. "By the by, I was wondering whether I ought to remind you: you see the sun has fallen; we said that we might take our place amongst our guests later on."

"I am not sure that it pleases me to go and join those others to-night," she complained. "You are the lord of this happy land, and of all who sojourn in it. I should like to dine with you alone to-night."

"That will be to-morrow," he told her.

He drew the little gold key from his pocket and dropped it into the bag which she was carrying.

"To-morrow of all days it shall fly open at your touch. This evening is not wholly ours. To-morrow," he promised, as he led her back into the gardens, "you will not call me any more by these formal names."

There was something a little plaintive in Rosina's tone but the words were bravely spoken.

"My lord is to be obeyed," she murmured, looking out into the sudden twilight.

CHAPTER X

"You are not the only ones who are late for dinner," Myra observed as their host and Rosina entered almost as their guests had concluded the repast. "Our large young man is not here and I miss him very much."

"I am glad to find that Homer Bayes is still popular with you all," Mirakel observed, as he sipped his belated cocktail. "As a rule after the first week or ten days he contrives to achieve a certain amount of unpopularity with my guests."

"But why on earth should he?" Myra asked. "He may be a little abrupt sometimes, but I rather like his manner. He is so direct."

"He has, I fear, a difficult post to fill," Mr. Mirakel pointed out. "During the first few days of their visits, my guests find many things here to puzzle them, and they are continually asking questions which he is not

in a position to answer. Miss Strangeways will someday, I am afraid, find herself in the same position. I make use of these two gracious young people to avoid continually saying 'no' myself."

"Why should you mind?" Rosina asked.

"To say 'no' to a guest is one of the most difficult things in the world," Mr. Mirakel declared. "I discovered long ago that it is the surest way of making yourself unpopular with them. I therefore pass on my stern duty to them. They have learnt subtlety and they have cultivated a certain habit of evading a direct reply to embarrassing questions. For instance, one of the most difficult duties of Miss Strangeways is to explain to the casual enquirer why Mr. Mirakel does not allow a radio here. I suppose you answer them all in the same fashion?" he enquired.

"Every one," she assured him. "I simply say that Mr. Mirakel does not like the radio."

"And do you find that that satisfies them?" the Professor asked glumly.

"I do not enquire as to that," she replied. "I simply say it in such a manner that Mr. Mirakel's guests, who usually have been quite nicely brought up, simply drop the subject."

"And supposing they happen to have been badly brought up and persist?" Sir Horace enquired.

"Sometimes I pass them on to Homer Bayes," Anne replied. "I do not quite remember his method but it seems usually satisfactory."

"If that is not enough?"

"I am called away. If my refusal to give a direct answer is graciously received but the curiosity still remains, I point out that Mr. Mirakel is making a supreme effort to play the host magnificent and it is therefore rather bad form for them to remain inquisitive."

"Very well put," Mr. Mirakel approved.

"There is one question," Sir Horace observed as he set down a tall-stemmed wine-glass of faint green colour, "purely connected with sport, which I should imagine could be asked, and the reply to which would gratify me very much."

"I am at least a willing listener," his host announced.

"It was not until I found myself drinking a famous still Moselle wine," the Professor expounded, "that I satisfied myself completely as to the quality of the fish which we had been eating. I am convinced now, however, that it is the one fish for which an epicure reserves his choicest brand of Hock or Moselle. We have eaten it to-night. It is, in other words, a freshly caught salmon. I am right, I think?"

Mr. Mirakel's face was a little set and his expression was entirely blank. He raised his glass, drained its contents thoughtfully and set it down empty with a little bow to his guest.

"Sir Horace," he declared, "I begin to realize that you are a very clever man."

The Professor bowed slightly. He watched with interest the refilling of his glass.

"You flatter me, my honoured host," he murmured.

"Not at all," was the urbane reply. "The English world knows of you, of course, as a great scientist. You are also one of those rare people who, when they have the chance, make use of their cerebral attainments in another walk of life. If I were to tell you the name of the fish which you have just been eating you would probably search amongst my belongings for a small atlas. When you had found it you would lean back in your easy chair, light one of those long cigarettes of yours and indulge in a few moments of genuine self-satisfaction. You would have advanced another step towards the gratification of what I suppose I must call your 'geographical curiosity.' In other words, you would have advanced a step nearer knowing exactly in what quarter of the world you are being entertained by your, alas, too simple friend."

"A very fair conclusion," Sir Horace agreed.

"In plain words, if I admit that we have been partaking of a fully-grown and very wonderful salmon which, from its very pleasant flavour, denies any kinship to the tin or glass, you would be receiving a very tangible and distinct clue to the latitude and longitude in which you are at present situated."

Sir Horace, with a faint chuckle, admitted the fact.

"The salmon," Mr. Mirakel continued, "which is the king of all fish, has its own strange instincts and habits. It breeds in a manner peculiar to itself. It is to be found only in certain climates and certain waters. I shall admit that you have been eating salmon to-night. Therefore, however obstinate I may continue to be in my refusal to answer your question as to our exact locality here, the serving of this fish to-night will have made it very much easier for you to decide upon our approximate locality. You have worked it out very cleverly, Professor."

Sir Horace had the grace to look slightly ashamed of himself. He noted with some annoyance that Anne Strangeways, who had been particularly gracious to him during the afternoon, was regarding him now with distinct disapproval, and had edged her chair a little farther away.

"I hope you will not think, sir," Sir Horace remarked, turning towards his host, "that I have been taking any advantage of you in this matter. It is your fine wine which is largely responsible. The perfect assimilation of flavours was entirely convincing."

"I should have thought of that," Mr. Mirakel admitted. "One of those small points, for instance, that Homer Bayes was always looking out for."

"A young man of very keen perception," Sir Horace declared. "You are very fortunate, sir, if I may say so, in possessing a secretary with such a wide range of knowledge."

Mr. Mirakel shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Oh, you are not quite home yet, Professor," he reminded him. "You have found a clue to your whereabouts, you have probably been able to convince yourself that it is in one of three countries. I will admit that, but clues are not everything."

The Professor smiled in a well-satisfied fashion.

"No," he admitted, "that is certainly so. But if it was a matter of life or death to you to keep the locality of this glorious abode of yours a secret, I should recommend to you the destruction at the proper season of the year of a certain breed of butterfly which was very gay this morning in and out of your bougainvillea. I caught one after many unsuccessful efforts and found that my suspicions were correct. It was a genuine 'Painted Lady,' the tastiest flying butterfly in the world. I dissected one of its wings and there was no doubt

about it. A 'Painted Lady' and a salmon...One or two more little clues and if it was a matter of life or death for me to be convinced of my exact locality, I should be in a position to pack my bag for home."

"You are certainly asking to qualify for expulsion, Professor," Roderigo remarked. "Aren't you taking rather a risk? We others are all very happy here, you know. I myself, for instance, should hate to receive what I believe is called in England the 'Order of the Boot.'"

Sir Horace fidgeted nervously with his silk tie.

"Expulsion," he suggested, "would be rather an extreme penalty for my somewhat natural interest in my surroundings."

Mr. Mirakel agreed in modified fashion.

"There are many evidences," he recounted, "that this neighbourhood was once inhabited by a very savage race who left a few of their descendants in odd corners. Senussi is supposed to be one of them, and Albertini has some of their blood in his veins. They are not altogether pleasant people, but they are, at any rate, faithful. The only time you see them look really intelligent is when they hear the word 'expulsion.' By some accident or other, they understand the English meaning of the word and I have quite a little difficulty with them. They take to prowling around my guest houses trying to make up their minds about which of my visitors I can dispense with most cheerfully."

Sir Horace was not looking altogether comfortable. Rosina and Roderigo at the same moment happened to catch sight of Mr. Mirakel's expression. As usual it was obscure, but it was not exactly that of a genial host.

"I shiver," Sir Horace exclaimed, with an attempted bluster which seemed somehow to suggest a bluff. "But I remain puzzled, for Mr. Homer Bayes, your genial secretary, Mr. Mirakel," he continued, "and perhaps on occasion your lord high executioner, was talking to me only the other day of a new breed of man-eating alligators which are to be met with in some of the lonelier places here."

"Nasty-tempered brutes they are too," Mr. Mirakel remarked. "I could not help thinking the other night—excuse me, Princess, won't you?—that the howl which nearly upset you was very much like the noise they make when their young are being threatened, or when they are hungry."

"I shall at any rate make no effort to leave this domain surreptitiously," the Professor declared with a little shiver.

He rose to his feet and bowed to Rosina.

"If the Princess will excuse me," he begged, "I have promised to change my station to-night with the listening ground of Senussi. It involves my being on the spot half an hour earlier."

"Keep your eyes open for the man-eating alligators, Professor," Anne Strangeways begged.

"And if you should drop down the hill towards the people's small casino," Roderigo warned him, "look out for the breeding place of the 'Painted Ladies.' I saw some very dangerous specimens of that class about the other night!"

Sir Horace's glance was almost vindictive, but then, as most of the little company had already discovered, a sense of humour was not amongst his social assets.

* * *

Rosina and her host, notwithstanding their late arrival at the dinner table, were almost the first to leave it. It was a happily arrived-at understanding between Mr. Mirakel and his guests that there should be no formality in such matters.

"Forgive me if I am dragging you away," she begged as they strolled across the terrace. "It is really an unusually hot evening and the Professor was so boring. I am longing for this breeze," she went on, turning her face seawards. "Your climate here is wonderful! The warmer the day, the cooler the breeze that follows it."

Mirakel, whose eyes had been searching the sky, seemed to come to a sudden standstill. He was gazing fixedly upon one certain spot. Rosina, who was standing close to him, laid her hand upon his shoulder. She pointed suddenly upwards.

"Sebastian!" she exclaimed. "Do you see that?"

He nodded assent.

"I came out to look for it," he told her.

"A green star and a very beautiful shade of green, too!" she exclaimed.

"You should notice that it has another peculiarity," he pointed out.

"It is a shooting star!" she exclaimed. "It is coming almost over our heads. How slowly it moves."

"Not so slowly as you think," he assured her.

"Three hundred miles an hour, probably more than that."

"Sebastian!" she cried out. "It isn't a shooting star at all. It is travelling in a circle. It is coming down. Look, it is diving. It does not look like a green light now. It is almost a flare."

"Yes," he agreed, "it is coming down. You see those three red lights like pinpricks just on the left of the cork plantations?"

"The aerodrome!" she exclaimed. "They are lighting it up!"

"What intelligence!" he smiled. "That is just what they are doing. Soon our visitor will be here."

"Our visitor?"

He nodded.

"Perhaps I should say visitors," he admitted. "It is Homer Bayes for one, returning from his thousand-mile trip. He brings a passenger."

"How exciting!" she exclaimed. "I thought visitors, unless they were especially invited, were never welcome here."

"This one is welcome," he assured her, "because I sent for him."

"I am more curious even than the Professor," she exclaimed.

"This is not a very romantic personage," Mirakel confided. "At least he would not seem so in the eyes of the Professor."

"I cannot believe that," she replied, shaking her head. "A man who arrives here in a green star and falls out of the sky almost at our feet must be a romantic person. Why does he come?"

"Because," he confided, "I sent Homer Bayes to bring him. He comes largely on your account, Rosina, perhaps a little on mine. I don't suppose that he could really be called a romantic visitor, but I fancy that with a little latitude of the imagination he could become one."

"You will give me a headache," she complained. "Dearest of men, do not tease me as you tease the Professor. Who is he and why have you sent Homer Bayes on a journey of a thousand miles to fetch him? Look, he has disappeared behind those trees, up where we were this afternoon!"

"Homer is making, I should think, a perfect landing," Mr. Mirakel remarked. "He must be down by now. You see the red light has stopped blinking? Your suspense, my dear Rosina, will soon be over."

She clutched the lapels of his coat and drew him round to her. He answered the question he saw shining in her eyes.

"Yes," he acknowledged quietly. "It is our liberator, dear, or our jailer, whichever way you like to look at it. It is for this we waited."

"You can speak of a man who comes through the sky under a green star into this wonderful corner of Paradise, Sebastian, and you do not find him the harbinger of romance?"

"We have lived in very different worlds," he reminded her thoughtfully. "Your father was Portuguese Ambassador to Rome when you were born; he went on to Madrid and since you have grown up you have deputized for your uncle in London. You know all about the inner life of courts even though their glory is now passing. I have never wanted to shake hands with reigning royalty in my life."

"You may have to someday for my sake," she whispered.

"For your sake, dear one, with pleasure," he answered. "But it seems to me that unless we get back to Europe very soon..."

"Please do not talk about getting back to Europe," she interrupted. "The very thought makes me shiver."

"You are happier here?"

"I am happier here than I have ever been in my life," she assured him.

* * *

"This is where I have dreamed of being one day," Rosina confessed, as she stepped lightly into her cushioned seat by Mirakel's side and watched his fingers flash back and forth amongst the controls of his flying *White Swan*. They glided into the air with a soft, purring sound which seemed entirely in harmony with the melody of the night birds' song back in the woods.

"Always I have hoped," she confessed, half to herself, "that someday I could find myself here by your side, dear man, and mounting towards the promised places. Will I ever be able to make you happy, Sebastian? To bring the light into your eyes and make that fine forehead of yours relax? To ease just a little those firmly set lips? Sometimes, I am almost afraid, when I see you sitting amongst us, such a motley company we are, and you sometimes so far away in your thoughts."

"Believe me, I am not so far away as I seem, Rosina," he assured her earnestly. "And if it makes you happy you will be able to do all the things you speak of. You will give me something of fire. You will give me a new sweetness in the singing of my blood which no one has ever given me before...Hold my arm, dear, if you are giddy," he added quickly. "This last little sweep may give you a start. There! It is over!" he exclaimed, triumphantly, as they glided on to the turf. "We have arrived."

Rosina was barely conscious of the tall, grey-haired man in his long, dark coat, who carried himself with so much dignity, and from whose eyes was shining so much kindness, and whose outstretched hands were full of welcome.

"I come," he told her, and his voice itself was like music, "to the pleasantest task of my life. Please let me be very unconventional, because this is not an ordinary wedding, is it? Take my arm and let me lead you into the little chapel which I always believe that your wonderful man restored and made perfect for me. There, on this little slip of paper (take it into your hands, please), are just half a dozen words. No prayer book at all, you see. It is not necessary. That is all you have to say, and all you have to do is to think of them whilst you say them. Sebastian already has his. I think he has learnt them by heart. You see I have, perhaps, too great an authority in this free world. I can send you legally and happily with no effort save a little from your heart and another from your soul—let them be faithful efforts—and your marriage is solemnized as you both stand before me now."

There were two candles burning in the little chapel and some hidden lights. There was no music, nor other persons, and a few minutes afterwards they walked out through the gardens, the visitor between the two, one arm of each through his. In one small room of Mirakel's into which they stepped, there was a simple meal set upon the table. It was distinguished only for its exquisite china, its Florentine linen and glass and a mass of white flowers. The man who was standing there awaiting their arrival closed the door after them and their visitor handed Rosina to her chair.

Sebastian opened the piano, sat for a moment with half-closed eyes, threw open the window, resumed his seat, and music seemed to float almost at once from his finger tips.

"Sebastian is wonderful," her neighbour whispered in her ear. "He has never been married but I have never known anyone express the spirit of a wedding—a real wedding—as he does now through that marvellous music. It is the greatest wedding march of all time; and, notwithstanding the fact that the greatest composers and artists in the world have played it, there is no one who draws from it what he can."

Sebastian Mirakel was, perhaps, passing through one of the rarest moments of his life, for he never heard a syllable. His fingers were charged with some indefinable power, the last few notes grew slower and slower, fading away into the shadows under his fingers. His eyes for the first time left Rosina's as he came to the table. He laid his hand affectionately upon her neck.

"Our friend, His Eminence, has half an hour, Rosina," he said, "to make this scanty meal. He has come very nearly from the other side of the world on to-day's mission. He drinks but seldom, but he will drink to us now as we take it."

There was a short silence. The wine flowed into their glasses. They held hands. Tears were in Rosina's eyes but she drank bravely.

"Nothing has made me happier in coming, my dear friend," this dignitary said to Mr. Mirakel, "than to take away with me, as I shall do, this wonderful memory. I have performed no sacrament in my life which has made me happier."

* * *

Ten minutes later he was gone. They watched the green light grow fainter in the sky. They watched the plane until it disappeared, then they passed out to the chairs which Albertini had arranged for them. From the farther end of the wood the birds had begun their nightly concert. The sighing of the night wind shook out its fragrance from the tobacco trees. Rosina lay very close in Sebastian's arms.

CHAPTER XI

"By the by, Sir Horace is also amongst the missing guests," Rosina exclaimed, as with Mr. Mirakel at her side they both looked out at the scattered group upon the lawn.

Mr. Mirakel's smile was seraphic and certainly not apprehensive.

"I am at peace with the world," he murmured. "I can deal tenderly even with our lunatic friend."

"It seems to me," Rosina confided, leaning forward and watching a figure in the distance, "that you will very soon be put to the test."

Sir Horace was striding towards them. Before he could reach the confines of the huge veranda which surrounded the *salon*, he was pointing to the sky above his head.

"More miracles in this extraordinary domain of yours, Mr. Host," he exclaimed. "Follow my finger. No, Princess, more to the left."

"What is it?" Rosina enquired. "Have you discovered a fresh planet?"

"Planets," he replied a little irritably, "are not discovered with the naked eye. I do not, upon this occasion, think, Mr. Mirakel, that you can avoid bringing out such scientific instruments as you may possess in the way of telescopes. Your eyesight is at least as good as mine, I know that. Take the line from the corner of the house up to Saturn, almost three quarters of the way there. What do you see?"

"Stars!" Mr. Mirakel replied. "Heaps of them! A great night, I should think, for observations."

"Stars of course," Sir Horace admitted irritably. "But do not tell me that you have ever before seen a green comet sailing over your home."

There was a brief hesitation amongst the little group. Mr. Mirakel's confidence in his guests, however, had not been misplaced. The hesitation was only momentary.

"Green!" Lady Myra remarked incredulously. "I never heard of such a thing!"

"Green?" Roderigo exclaimed doubtfully.

"Green!" Rushton echoed in a tone of wonder. "I have kept many a watch through the small hours, but I have never spotted a green star yet!"

"Why, God bless my soul," Sir Horace exclaimed, "you were all staring at it a few minutes ago. You were all pointing it out to one another. You even dragged me away from my Listener's corner to come and see it!"

"A light we did not recognize, yes," Roderigo admitted.

"If *that* was a comet," the Commander remarked, "it is one which I cannot say that I recall just at the moment. I fancied there was a pretty clear field in that direction—but green! Who ever heard of a green star?"

The Professor looked from one to the other of the little company by whom he was surrounded.

"I think the Professor is trying to drive us all crazy," Anne declared.

The Professor's long talon-like finger pointed straight above his head. It neither shook nor faltered. A certain amount of truculence marked his speech when at last he opened his lips, but his finger remained steadfast.

"A brilliant and, so far as I am concerned, unrecognizable phenomenon has appeared to-night for the first time in the history of the heavens," he said solemnly. "It is passing even at this precise moment over our heads. It lacks in a great many conditions the smooth movements of the ordinary ones. It is my duty as a Member and Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society to report what I have seen at once to the President and Council and also to Sir Gerald Lakeson, the Astronomer Royal. I shall call upon you, Mr. Mirakel, to release whatever scientific aids you may possess and place them at my disposal. The world must be at once informed of this extraordinary happening!"

Mr. Mirakel lit a cigarette, whispered for a moment in his companion's ear and strolled towards the Professor. His manner was entirely that of the courteous and mildly protesting host.

"My dear Sir Horace," was the gentle reply, "do I understand you still to adhere to your remarkable statement that the comet which has passed over our heads, which we have all recognized of course as a newcomer, is green in colour?"

"Without a doubt it is, and was, and ever will be!" was the harsh reply.

"And you wish me," Mr. Mirakel continued, "to aid you in making this outrageous statement to the Royal Astronomical Society?"

"It is my duty to do so," was the harsh response. "I do not understand the attitude of my fellow guests, but I am not in any way responsible for them. And," he added, increasing the speed and vigour of his tone, "I will verify them myself so far as anyone can do so with the naked eye, and trouble you no further. It is evident that there is not a student of astronomy amongst you. I make this formal appeal to you to interview your secretary and instruct him to place in my hands everything that you have in the way of telescopes and also to permit my uninterrupted intercourse with a Member of the Committee of the Royal Astronomical Society."

Mr. Mirakel shook his head gently.

"I think," he decided, "that we will not continue a discussion which might lead to some unpleasantness. The phenomenon which has been responsible for this curious difference of opinion is now nearly out of sight. I propose that we let it go and when at last, Sir Horace, this pleasant party comes to an end—"

The Professor made two attempts at speech. The first was an utter failure, the second was rather a jumble of words.

"I gather then," he demanded, "that I am not to be allowed to announce my discovery to the world?"

"Make notes of what you have seen, or what you think you have seen, Professor," his host advised. "Obtain the signatures of your witnesses and wait until you return to London. Then I should go to an address, which I will give you before we break up, and have your eyes severely tested for colour-blindness."

The Professor gave a rather painful study of a man struggling against a passionate desire to speak his mind at any cost. He succeeded, however, in preserving silence and he turned away to take up his place once more at his Listener's corner.

Rosina was almost the only one in whose eyes there was a gleam of sympathy as he crossed the avenue and disappeared amongst the shrubs. He was stooping in a most unusual fashion. The lightness had gone from the swing of his body. He seemed to have become an old man. Twice he removed his hat and pressed his hand across his forehead.

"Were you not a little hard on him, Sebastian?" she ventured.

"I will tell you why I do not think that I was hard. For one thing, he has demonstrated that his knowledge of astronomical science is considerably less even than my own. He should have known that such a comet is an impossibility. He should have realized the difference anyway between a moving mechanical object and one of nature's phenomena. He should have known that the object at which he was looking was a great many thousands of miles nearer the earth than any star he has yet seen. If one had pointed out to him these scientific facts he would probably have been a great deal more mortified than he is now. It is better to send him away like that. He feels ill-used, but that is better than to have the mantle of ignorance torn from his shoulders in the presence of his friends. Albertini!" Mr. Mirakel wound up, summoning his major-domo, "collect my private band, and have supper for the fireflies arranged on the sheltered side of the veranda, with bowls of honey and rose-leaves dipped in wine. We will dance tonight."

Rosina clapped her hands.

"What an angelic thought!" she exclaimed. "But not too long, please, Sebastian."

He held out his hand.

"You have perhaps a little gift for me?" he whispered.

It was a dark corner of the veranda and Rosina was feeling very happy. Her fingers strayed for a moment in her little satin bag. She drew out a small gold key and slipped it into his hand. A few minutes later the music began and they danced.

* * *

It was an almost perfect evening; the nightingales were singing in the near corner of the wood with an almost unearthly sweetness. The fireflies were darting about, little streaks of almost human fire in their

uncanny speed and the twists of their voluptuous bodies. The full moon shining down through the grouping, flowering shrubs, stole the colour from their table lamps and gave to the bending forms, the pleasure-lit eyes, the gaiety of the women, a new and almost magical charm. Rosina's happiness was so apparent to everyone that Roderigo bent over her chair as he returned from a dance with Anne.

"I had to come across and tell you, Rosina, dear cousin," he whispered, "Myra and I, who have known you since you were a baby, both agree that we have never seen you look so beautiful or so happy."

"You should tell our dear host that," she suggested. "It might please him."

"It pleases me," Mr. Mirakel observed with a smile, "for many reasons."

"You are looking pretty fit yourself to-night, sir," Roderigo remarked.

Mirakel laid his hand upon his young friend's shoulder.

"There comes to every man, one of the most modern of the English poets says, a night, a day, a moment when he feels that he is treading the pathway at which he has gazed and of which he has dreamed all his life. The pathway which ends in the great places."

She leaned towards him.

"The Professor..." she whispered. "I cannot bear to think that there is an unhappy person so near."

He acquiesced without a word. Albertini leaned down for his message and disappeared. Then they danced again and when they returned a half-sulky, half-reluctant Sir Horace was seated in his usual place. Mr. Mirakel made another sign to Albertini and wine was served, so that every glass upon the table was filled brimful. Mirakel rose silently and graciously to his feet. He leaned a little forward, smiling in turn at every one of his guests.

"Don't be afraid," he begged. "I am not about to make a speech, but I think it is only due to our distinguished friend, the Professor, that I should tell you all, and him, why I did not put you in touch with the Royal Astronomical Society in England tonight."

The Professor dropped the hand which had been partly covering his face. He leaned forward in his chair.

"It is a story told in very few words," his host continued. "The green comet was no comet at all, but a very wonderfully built and very precious machine. It was built by the most famous designer in the world for my private use, and it holds but two people and a mechanic. It has great speed, some small amount of comfort, and it carries always, when it nears these waters, a green light, because that is the light which a certain body of people who are always on the watch recognize as being an indication of an important presence on board. The light has peculiar qualities which would puzzle a man who had done nothing else throughout his life but study the fusion of colours. That plane has just travelled a thousand miles, perhaps more than that, back from a famous capital city. It brought here the most famous Divine in the world. He is pleased to consider me as one of his greatest friends. He travelled here with the papers and permits which give him rights to perform any ceremony connected with the Church to which he belongs. This evening my dear neighbour, the Princess Rosina, here did me the honour to become my wife. A very happy event for me, as I need not tell you, which has become possible legally and in every other way through circumstances which I cannot for the moment divulge. His Eminence is now on his way back to the city of his residence. Mr. Homer Bayes, I hope, who is taking him, will be back with us shortly. I have felt it my pleasure to tell you of my happiness because you are all my friends and I felt it also my duty to acknowledge to the Professor that he was perfectly right in all that he said and surmised astronomically. It

was my wife's first request to me that I should let him know the truth and explain to you all that his scientific knowledge was in no way at fault. So now, my dear friends, you know the whole truth a little earlier than we had intended. You are all my friends. We raise our glasses. We mingle, I hope, our good wishes. We hope, my wife and I, that you will remain our honoured and welcome guests until the proper moment comes for you to depart. May that moment be long delayed!"

Mr. Mirakel resumed his seat and felt his wife's fingers clutching his hands beneath the damask cloth. Everyone wanted to make a speech, but they gave way to the Professor. When he was on his feet, however, he had very little idea of what to say.

"My dear Princess," he began, "and my dear Host, I fear that I have been rude on occasions to you and everyone else here. It is the most beautiful lady in the world, and the most charming, who makes me ashamed. I wish you what we all wish you, happiness!"

Which on the whole, the little company decided, was a very excellent wedding speech.

CHAPTER XII

Rosina paused suddenly in the midst of a half-uttered prayer. For a moment or two she held her breath.

Life in this strange new world, during the past twelve months and more, had grown to be so tranquil and calm a thing that anything in the least unusual was disturbing.

What had happened just now was strange, almost terrifying. The gorgeous morning sunshine seemed blotted out; there was a darkness everywhere—a sort of ugly twilight which gave to the very trees the shape and appearance of phantoms. The perfume of the flowers remained; as she hung out of her window the scent of the violets was almost stifling, but they were practically invisible. In the plantation of pine trees which sheltered the chapel there was a moaning wind, stopping and sighing, a sound such as she had never heard before. Sebastian had left her at dawn, called from his apartments by Senussi and Homer Bayes. They had all three disappeared together. She had listened to their voices half sleepily until a certain note of anxiety, a note almost of tragedy, in that deep bass voice of Homer Bayes had awakened in her a curious apprehension. She swung out of bed, and passed out on to the balcony. The semidarkness amazed her. She groped her way to a watch. It was long past the hour when the sun should have been shining into her room. Only a few feet away in the chamber where she was accustomed to take her early bath there was nothing but silence. She listened to the striking of the chapel clock. It was an hour earlier than usual and there was no sound of voices other than the low sobbing of the maid in the next room. She threw open the door.

"What is it that has happened, Lucilla?" she demanded. "Why is it so dark?"

The answer was confused, almost unintelligible.

"Not know, mistress. The sun, he never came. Thunder instead half the night."

Rosina, who was an excellent sleeper, shivered. She remembered now vague portentous sounds.

"Where is the Great One?" she demanded.

"Not know, mistress," the girl replied. "He climbed the hill an hour ago."

Rosina had plenty of courage and she threw back the wave of fear which had almost dogged her. Either some great news, she decided, had come through that hateful instrument—news of wild doings in the wilder world—or something perhaps had happened on the domain itself. She plunged into the bath, swam its whole length, rapidly dried herself and waited while the maid brought her perfumes and underclothes. Then she heard the opening of the little gate of which only she and Sebastian possessed keys. She heard the sound of soft footsteps and voices. Even Sebastian's seemed to have a new pitch of gravity. She threw open the door letting in a gleam of thin light and stood there looking out into the shadowy world. A little group of men were halted at the gate. Mirakel passed rapidly through to her side. The others remained there in dumb waiting.

"You heard our voices, dear Rosina?" Mirakel asked, taking her hands in his. "Dear wife, we are sorry indeed to awaken you early, but there is great news floating about in the world, bad news, I fear, although it comes to us from no human utterance. It is nature itself which is growling out its fears."

"Is all well with us then?" she asked anxiously. "It is the outside world where the trouble is?"

He smiled. It was the eternal selfishness of the dearly loving woman which spoke.

"We have, once more, good fortune," he told her. "Do not be afraid, Rosina. Nothing threatens the domain, though somewhere in the world there are earthquakes which are ravaging the land. Young Sebastian will be able to take his dip into the sea as usual, though later in the day."

The relief in her face was amazing. She threw on a cloak and joined them. Roderigo was there, smiling and self-composed, and the three passed into the chapel slowly together, and knelt for a few moments in the chancel. Mirakel sank into one of the high-backed seats. There was an air of great fatigue in his eyes. Rosina forgot everything else. She clasped his hands.

"You have already been up for hours, dear one," she faltered.

"They fetched me early," he admitted. "The Professor was the first to discover that unusual things were happening in the skies and underground and across the sea. It was necessary to let the news be known. Do not be afraid, dear. Hour by hour things have grown better. There is very little for us to fear here."

She recognized his fatigue and, still holding his hands, turned to Roderigo.

"You tell me about it, dear Cousin," she begged. "Sebastian is worn out."

Roderigo took a chair by her side.

"No wonder," he declared. "Mr. Mirakel has been toying with his instruments for hours. It was hard to make sense of them, though. A rest will do us all good. There has never been a time yet when this land has not been a shelter from all evils."

"But explain to me a little," Rosina begged. "What has happened?"

"It is what we might have foreseen," Mirakel told her. "But I must do him the justice to confess that the Professor himself was the only one who prophesied."

"Where is the Professor?" Rosina asked.

"On his way into the outer world," Mirakel confessed. "Starting him off was a great effort. It is with that we are so fatigued."

"Explain," she begged, taking his hand in hers and smoothing it.

"Homer Bayes is taking him back into the world," Mirakel admitted. "I have drawn him out a route. They are going towards England. We shall know before nightfall what is happening. That is to say, if they make the journey safely. This it seems to me is what is happening. The war on sea and land has lasted now nine years. All that time the earth has been trodden down and the seas have been ploughed, and the air filled with strange accumulations of that magical fluid—electricity I suppose we must still call it. We have had warnings, as you know, from our own scientific men, and from the Listeners here, although we never expected them to get near the heart of things—warnings of underground disturbances which at first we were ignorant enough to ascribe to animals or humans. They came, Rosina, from the falling to pieces of the solid earth. They came because the earth was not strong enough to bear the weight that has been thrust upon it—mighty armies and disintegrating explosions. They have grown in force and terror. Now for three days without cessation the whole earth has been in the grip of what it is simpler to call a gigantic, colossal, moving earthquake."

"I understand," Rosina said calmly. "Tell me, is it moving in this direction?"

"At one time it was," Mirakel assented, "then something—the suggestion is that it was the huge earth tremors from the thousands of factories in America—just diverted it. To-day, if the Professor is right in his theory—and let me tell you, we are all beginning to believe a great deal in the Professor—it is mounting upwards, and roaring and crashing its way up towards the skies, rather seeking to reach the planets and tear them into pieces than to travel along the surface of the earth, to destroy our towns and dry up our rivers and seas. There have been floods such as the whole history of nature has never known. There has been destruction immeasurable, but there are signs in the last hundred hours that the whole thing is working itself out."

"Bless you, my dear," Rosina declared almost passionately, as she clutched her husband's hand. "Forgive me if I am a little hysterical."

"My dear," Sebastian said as he smoothed her hand gently, "I have seen strong men amongst our little company here sobbing like babies just for what they have been told in scraps of radio news. I have had pictures drawn myself which have driven me almost crazy. Your cousin has borne himself with the best. He helped me to tell the people and that was difficult enough. For hours they lined the seashore and came trooping down from the mountains; an almost forgotten race climbed up from an underground village a few miles inland. There has been plenty, I can promise you, to drive strong people crazy; and with that let me add quickly that everything points towards the worst being over. We will go inside if it pleases you, Rosina, and drink coffee. These men, too, need to smoke."

Rosina's private dining *salon* had never held a stranger company. The latest addition to it was Rushton, who scrambled up with the help of two sticks, limping badly. His eyes filled with tears as he spoke to Rosina.

"My dear lady," he cried, "you and your husband have been our saviours. Whatever happens to us in life or death we have looked upon things which no other man or woman has seen. We have seen the rending of the earth, the tearing of the mountains, the seas flung into a heap, the rivers hissing as though with molten metal. We have seen nature itself gone mad."

Rosina proved, not for the first time, what a wonderful woman she really was. She laughed softly.

"My dear Commander," she replied, "you must all be waited upon. Take seats wherever you like. I have half a dozen maids here who have kept their nerve, and the chef can go on making coffee until you tell him to stop."

"And although it is rarely," Mirakel added, "that I suggest such a thing at this hour, bring brandy, Albertini. Bring things to eat too. There are others coming who are afraid of the seashore, some who have been up half the night."

Roderigo, with a roll in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other, was fast recovering himself.

"I am only thankful," he declared, "that nothing has driven us from the place of refuge. Here indeed there is some of the spirit of life left."

* * *

Later in the day Washington Mo smiled for the first time since the twilight of the early morning had passed. Rosina and Myra drank their first cocktail with him. In his excitement he spoke a sort of patois. Mirakel himself was the only person who understood him. Washington Mo stretched out his hands eagerly.

"If you, Great One of the Earth, would tell me what is wrong," he begged. "You alone remain unchanged, but you are weary with pain and fatigue. Madame, the Princess, smiles always. To-day she has eyes too sad. Is it because everyone is asking for news which does not come?"

"The news is bad all over the world," Mirakel told him. "There have been earthquakes under the seas as well as upon the earth. The world itself has been broken up with the smashing of great buildings and the concussion of the air."

"You are the sensible people, who came here," Washington Mo declared. "I have been in New York, China and many other places. Always they fight. For what, my lord?"

"Ah, now you ask a great question," Mirakel replied. "Generally, to get something the other person has got and which they want."

"But why not live in a place like this and be content?" Washington Mo asked with a queer look of almost passionate incomprehension gleaming in his eyes. "I am always content. My children obey me. The Master pays me well. I eat and drink what I choose. I am happy. I listen to the music and I am happier still. I take my little José down to the beach as the Great One and Madame take the little Princess Rosina. There we swim together at a respectful distance. I am brimful of happiness. I do not want anything that belongs to any other man. I want only what nature has given me, and what is my own."

"Perhaps," Anne Strangeways sighed, "that is why you are happy."

"Then why are other people not happy like me?" he demanded.

* * *

Anne made her way across to where Roderigo was drying his feet upon the burning sand after a quick dip in the sea.

"Washington Mo is teaching us all a new philosophy," she told him. "We can all be happy if we do not want anything that does not belong to us."

He stopped using his towel.

"I am not so sure about that," he objected. "I want something that does not really belong to me just now. I suppose I ought to be amongst the unhappy ones."

"It depends whether you have any right to that something," she replied.

"I would rather say," he told her, "that it depends upon whether the person to whom the other thing belongs cares to give it to me."

"Why not ask for it then?"

"I will," he answered. "Anne Strangeways, will you marry me?"

"I am not a millionaire," she reminded him, "with a magic Cardinal following in my footsteps."

"Come to think of it," he reflected, "I am not so sure that our great patron is quite the unselfish person I thought he was."

He finished drying his feet and walked across the beach. "Dear host," he said, "I want to marry your secretary."

"A perfect epidemic," Mirakel replied. "Myra has just been hinting that she is having a little trouble that way with Rushton. I guessed that it might come, and I am prepared."

He pointed to the boulevard. A large car was drawn up close to the kerbstone.

"All four of you," he directed, "get into the car. You will find that everything can be arranged. Come straight back, for soon there may be news."

They obeyed. They were driven to a little church at the back of the aerodrome. They found everything prepared including the priest. They came back looking very much the newly married. Mirakel and Rosina met them with hearty handshakes and they drank champagne with Washington Mo. Afterwards Mirakel led the way to the radio room attached to Government House. The luncheon table was already spread. Washington Mo and his two assistants paced to and fro and trouble seemed for a moment to have passed from the world. Their faces were wreathed in smiles. Mirakel for the first time that day laughed almost gaily.

"Rosina, my love," he said, "let us change our minds. We will lunch first. Afterwards we will hear what has to be told. There is too much happiness in this room to pour sorrow upon it."

"You dear philosopher," she laughed, kissing him boldly, "you always do the right thing. To your places, please, all of you. Afterwards you shall hear what the Professor and Mr. Homer Bayes have to tell us."

"They are back?" Roderigo exclaimed.

"They are back," Mirakel assented, "but they will wait until I give the word before they tell you what there is to be known."

They all took their places, Rosina, the perfect hostess, directing them, summoning the servants, and herself striking the row of silver bells. Washington Mo with his two assistants, who all three seemed to have forgotten that there was such a thing as trouble in the world, darted here and there with salvers laden with glasses. The newly married young people did a great deal of whispering to one another. Far up somewhere in the hills there came the faint chiming of bells, and Mirakel, on his way to his place at the

head of the table, lingered for a moment with his arm round Rosina's waist while a few bars of his favourite wedding hymn were played.

Luncheon was served. There was a queer sense of drama underneath it all, yet there was also a sense of gaiety. The sky had cleared and the sun was shining almost as usual. Not until the service of luncheon had been completed, and coffee served, did Mirakel rise to his feet. He pointed to a distant corner of the room where Homer Bayes and the Professor had slipped into inconspicuous places.

"Homer Bayes," he said, "tell us of your impressions, of what you saw and how far you got."

Homer Bayes did not hesitate.

"For the first time in my life, sir," he replied, "I beg to disobey an order. The Professor is the one who should speak first. He has a much more scientific understanding than I have of the meaning of what we saw."

The Professor rose to his feet. He looked years older and sterner even than in the old days, but there was a new humanity in his face. The droop had gone from his lips. He was like a man who had fought his way through the great places.

"There is not so much to tell you," he said. "Each time I think of it, it compresses itself still further. The earth has been visited by a great and terrible calamity. Nature has played us strange and wonderful tricks. We crossed the ocean in thunderstorms which would have smashed to pieces less perfectly made machines than ours. We watched men-of-war driven here and there like a boy's toy on the Serpentine. We passed islands where houses were roofless and the walls slipping into the world of absolute and complete destruction. This I must say at this point: Nothing made any difference to the greatest pilot who ever handled a machine. Our friend Homer Bayes flinched at nothing. He passed through clouds as black as ink. It looked as though they had the power to engulf us. His course never varied. Details I shall leave for conversation. I shall hold nothing back, however awful, but I shall tell you in very plain words the plain history of what has happened. I shall answer any questions you please to put."

"What," Commander Rushton demanded, "has happened to the war?" There was a dead silence. As Homer Bayes confessed afterwards, his tongue seemed for the moment to cling to the roof of his mouth.

"Two mornings ago," he said at last, "there was an announcer speaking on the radio, as one of the apostles might have talked. One by one he went through lists of the peace-lovers of the world who have striven to bring people together, who have striven by every means in their power to promote a spirit of Christianity, and hope for the future. They were jeered down in many countries. Where are they now, I wonder, those men who jeered? The whole earth is littered with dead bodies, and on the greatest battlefield of all—the Russo-German battleground—you can walk if you will, and if your limbs have the strength, on the bodies of dead men for hundreds of miles. To-day there is no fighting. There is simply a horde of chemists from every laboratory in the world striving all they can to analyse and disinfect. The seas are stormy places and there are few ships left. It is where men plotted the most fiercely that the earth is in the most terrible state. Such sounds as one hears, in the flight over Europe, are the sounds of the dying. In some places there are pits of dead, in others, fissures of the earth crammed with stinking bodies all down the course of the great Russian rivers. A radio has not spoken from Germany for many days. England and France are still talking, so is America, but there, there was less bloodshed than anywhere. America and Great Britain are striving to bring reason into the world, but men have been too near to lunacy. Much of Italy remains; all of Egypt. A great stretch of India is untouched. Japan has entirely disappeared under an earthquake of which neither the beginning nor the end can be traced. People are saying—careful-speaking men who do not sound as though they were exaggerating—that the earth of Japan has eaten up her dead."

There was the cry of a child and Rosina hurried away, only to return a few minutes later.

"The voice of the next generation," the Professor continued in a tone which was almost matter-of-fact, "is the most precious thing to which one can listen, and from Lisbon to the heart of China, it is the rarest. I am no politician. I speak now of facts. The great lands of Germany remain, but they are peopled only by women. German men seem to have passed from the face of the earth. To a much lesser degree that is the same with Russia, but Russia, an hour after the worst earthquake the world has ever known, is commencing to rebuild. America suffered chiefly in her huge cities. All her country districts are little hurt. South America remains almost intact. Parts of Africa and all the country around the Nile remain. France is sorely stricken, Paris desolated, but England, like Russia, commenced her rebuilding whilst we were still in the air. As for the war, there are few signs of it, except the dead bodies which every laboratory in Europe is seeking to destroy, and the broken remains of a hundred thousand tanks and plains. Here my companion, perhaps, can talk to you more intelligently."

The Professor sat down. Homer Bayes leaned over from his corner.

"Washington is almost whole," he declared, "also London. Berlin exists no more. Already the schemes for a new world are being carried into effect. Three great men are alive, have maintained their composure, and are planning—Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin, all together in London. There has been no peace signed because there can be no war: peace of a terrible sort has fallen upon the world."

The Professor rose to his feet.

"What has happened," he said, and there was something very solemn about his diction, "is the revolt of nature against mankind. There are signs, I may tell you," he went on, "as I, who once lectured upon the question of a former eruption to the Archaeological Society, know. Its vengeance once burnt out a foolish world. If our dates are correct that was nearly a million years ago. It should have taught us philosophy, but our mental sinews have slackened. Cultivation reigns, my friends, when you sit in peace and content here this afternoon, and remember that the ruin which fell upon the world to-day was a million years ago, and a million years is a long time."

Rosina thrust her arm through her husband's. The sun was growing warmer. The orchestra of birds outside, many driven in from the sea, was melodious, but almost overpowering. Myra held Rushton's hand. Anne and Roderigo drained their glasses. They all had the same thought—a million years is a very long time.

THE END

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