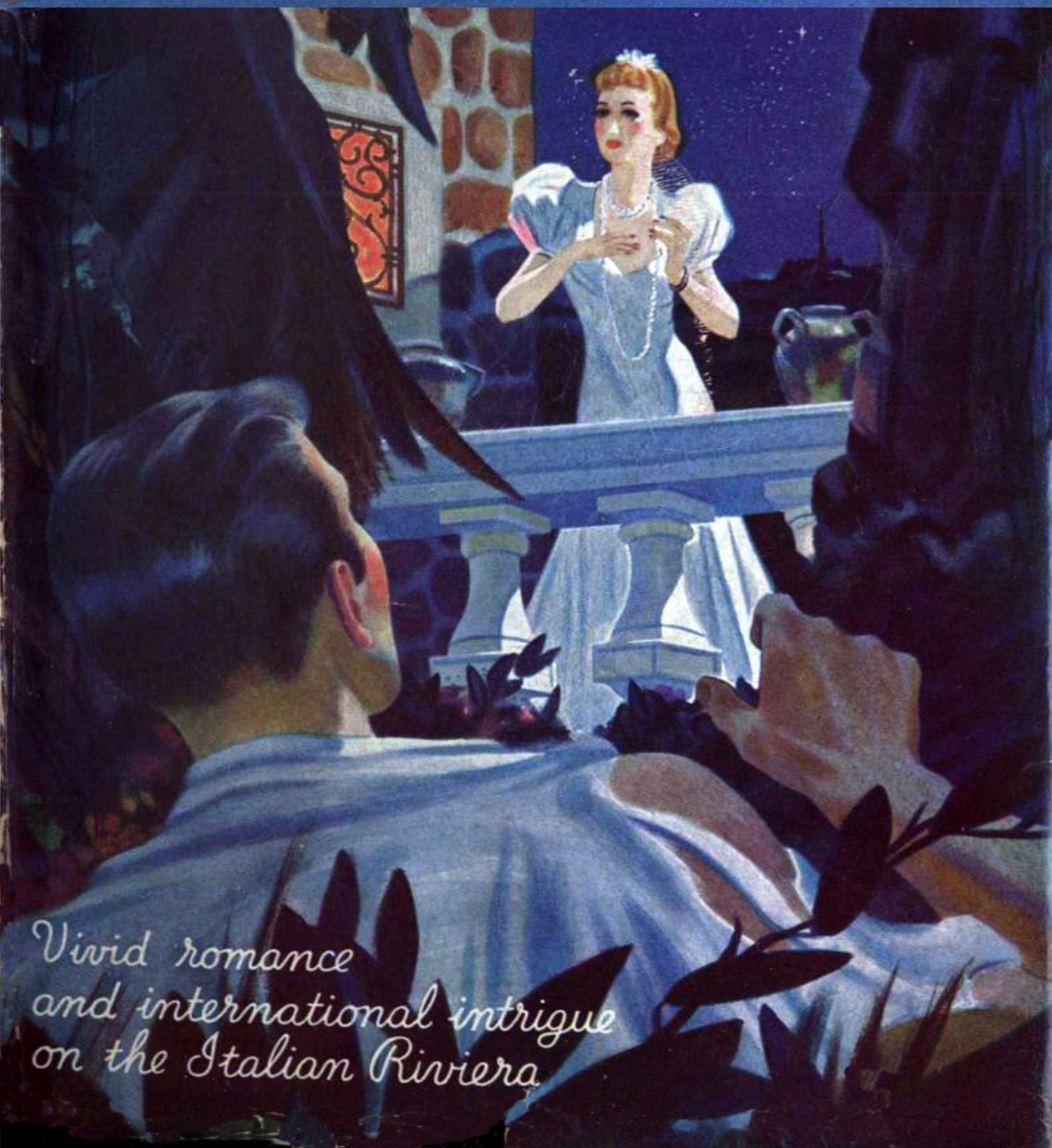


# ETHEL M. DELL

## *Serpent in the Garden*



*Vivid romance  
and international intrigue  
on the Italian Riviera*

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# THE SERPENT IN THE GARDEN

WHEN lovely Gabrielle Dermot left the shelter of the English vicarage where she had been brought up, to go to the Italian Riviera, three people awaited her with very different feelings. Her mother, who had left England years before with Count Gaspare Voltano, dreaded her daughter's arrival at the count's villa, which to her had become a hated prison; the count himself was eager, for he knew of Gabrielle's young beauty, and knew too that she could be a valuable assistant; Pierre Ronceau of the French Secret Service waited for Gabrielle's admission to the inaccessible villa above the Point des Sirènes to round out one of the most hazardous cases of his career.

These, and Pierre's English half-brother Peter, who was unwittingly drawn into an international plot because he loved Gabrielle as soon as he saw her, play varied roles in the sinister course of events which threatened to destroy Gabrielle before she escaped to happiness.

Ethel M. Dell has woven a brilliant tapestry of romance and intrigue in this new novel, and the remarkable suspense and dramatic interest of the story will win new praise from her countless readers.

SOME BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Juice of the Pomegranate

Honeyball Farm

Where Three Roads Meet

The Electric Torch

Dona Celestis

*The Serpent  
In The Garden*

ETHEL M. DELL

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*The Ryerson Press*

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I DEDICATE THIS BOOK

TO MY HUSBAND

FOR HIS BIRTHDAY

WITH MY LOVE.

*“Fortis Atque Fidelis”*

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# PART I

# CHAPTER I

## *Peter's Brother*

PIERRE RONCEAU inhaled a deep breath from his cigarette and slowly puffed forth a series of small smoke clouds. He was gazing out from under an awning at a perfect summer sea. His attitude was one of deliberate repose, but behind it there seemed to be an intense concentration of activity that was like a coiled spring awaiting release. His eyes were half-closed, but the mobile black brows above them gave an impression of mental agility that could leap to its full height at the briefest notice. His mouth with its curt moustache, though humorous, was not without severity. He had the look of a ready swordsman, and the whole of his trim, well-balanced person bore out the analogy. Even as he sat, he flickered his fingers deftly at a fly, that had ventured to settle on his knee, in a fashion that deprived it of any power to settle anywhere but in the dust forevermore.

“Well hit!” commented a sleepy voice beside him. “A jolly neat execution!”

Pierre smiled—his quick pleasing smile. “So you are awake, mon ami! I hope my energy did not disturb you.”

“It’s rather like a dynamo, isn’t it?” returned his companion. “But you’ve kept it under control very well for the past hour. And anyhow there’s one fly less in the world now, so I suppose I shouldn’t complain.”

He yawned with the words and turned a very English face upon Pierre. There was not the faintest physical resemblance between the two, and yet in some wholly inexplicable fashion they had a look of kinship. The youth who lay by Pierre’s side had a loose and almost clumsy appearance in comparison. He was twelve years his junior, a lad of twenty-four, with fair hair and somewhat lazy blue eyes. He had none of the taut alertness that characterized Pierre, but there was a sort of sporting athleticism about him that was not without its charm.

Pierre looked at him with cocked eyebrows. “You know, Peter,” he said, “when you are a grandpère, you will be—very stout.”

“Don’t mention it!” said Peter equably. “You—de l’autre côté—will be exactly like a dried lemon—very spare and very acid.”

The Frenchman laughed. “Me? I wonder! Perhaps I shall never reach that stage! There are so many knives that would like to taste my blood.”

“They won’t get the chance with me anywhere around,” rejoined Peter. “But I could wish you followed a more peaceable profession. Brave homme as you are, it is time you settled down.”

Pierre raised his shoulders. “What could I do with myself now? Surely—even my profession is better than none at all!”

“You could come and live with me,” said Peter, “and break all the hearts in the neighbourhood. They’d take some breaking too, I can tell you. They’re most of ’em hard-boiled.”

Pierre’s eyes twinkled. “Have you tried them all, my dear fellow? Then how should I succeed where you have failed?”

“No, I haven’t tried.” Peter’s voice was gruff and contemptuous. “They’re all after me—naturally. I’m the golden plum of the district. But a chap like you—well, that’s different. Someone might want you for yourself.”

“You think that possible?” Whimsical incredulity sounded in Pierre’s rejoinder. “A man who—if he lives—will one day become a dried lemon—very shrinkled—very sour!”

Peter gave a snort of laughter. “Pierre, you’re beyond price—and always will be, however shrinkled you get! But, after all, it hasn’t set in yet. And you might spot a winner if you gave your mind to it. Who knows?”

“Who knows indeed?” said Pierre. “And what would the winner say when she found me out, and saw in her imagination all those bloody knives that wait for me?”

“Pierre! You’d better stop!” declared Peter. “Or say it in French! It would sound better—anyhow in the winner’s ears. I think it’s high time you gave up this exceptionally unpleasant job of yours and took to something decent and aboveboard for a change.”

“Something decent!” said Pierre, and drew another deep breath through the end of his cigarette before he pitched it away. “Then this work of mine—this great work to which I have devoted myself—is to be thrown away—pouf!—like that? My little brother, if you think that, then you know neither me nor my work. Voilà!”

He smiled as he said it, but his black eyes held a protest that was genuine, and the boy by his side frowned in answer.

“No, really I’m in earnest. We’ve always got on all right, and I’ve got money enough for the two of us. I hate these underground, creeping sort of jobs. You’ve made a name for yourself—too big a name for your own peace and comfort. Why can’t you rest on your laurels now and let the hate die down? They’ll have you sooner or later, sure as a gun, if you don’t.”

Pierre Ronceau spread out his hands with a quick, delicate movement of disdain. “Let them try!” he said. “I am not afraid. You think this work of mine unclean—evil? But you are wrong. I work for good things. I work to remove the evil, to cleanse the world. To my mind”—his dark eyes flashed suddenly round upon his companion—“that is a better thing than the easy life that does neither harm nor good. I could not lead that sort of life—even with you, Peter. I have a brain that must work and work perpetually. A holiday—that is different. But to cease to work——”

Peter showed his teeth in a broad grin. “Leave that sort of thing to the brainless, what? Compritt—quite compritt! But we mustn’t be bitter about it, you know. The little ne’er-do-weels have their uses, even if only as a foil to the great. When you’ve finished cleansing the world, you can come to me for a well-earned rest. You may be glad of it by that time. Who knows?”

Pierre smiled at him at once—his quick ungrudging smile. “If it were not for the danger, I could wish that we were partners,” he said. “You have a brain too, mon ami; but you keep it always curled up in its little box. You never give it exercise, and so it will not grow. But you are English, and the English are different. It is not for me to judge.”

“Damn it, man! You’re half English yourself,” protested Peter. “You can’t deny our mother’s blood in you.”

“Ah! C’est vrai!” The Frenchman smiled again. “But nevertheless—I am not even half English. That blood has given me the power to understand you, mon demi-frère. But no more than that. I am Ronceau—Ronceau all through. Our mother was only a child herself when I was born. She left no stamp upon me that was of her. Afterwards—when she married her own countryman and gave birth to her second Peter—she was a woman, and you bear her traits as well as those of her second husband. She knew it herself. That was why her younger son was so far her best-beloved.”

“That’s not fair,” protested Peter.

“But true,” said Pierre gently. “I never felt resentment. I always understood. She was so very British—her French marriage so brief, perhaps mercifully so. They would not have been happy together. It was a dangerous mating, he so much the elder, so passionate, so dominating. It might have led

to tragedy had he lived.”

“Well, you don’t seem to have inherited anything of that sort from him, praise be!” commented Peter.

“Me!” Pierre stretched forth a slender finger and touched his arm. “You do not know me,” he said. “I have always been kind to you—yes, I know it. Even that day ten years ago when I beat you for throwing stones at the gardener—do you remember?—I was not unkind or really angry, because I understood.”

Peter grinned again. “Yes, I do remember. A judicial punishment and well earned—though the gardener was an old brute all the same! Pretty grim to be driven to steal your own apples, what? But I knew your heart wasn’t in it, old bird, though it was quite a decent strapping. But that only bears out what I say. I’ve never seen you in a blazing, honest-to-goodness passion in my life. I sometimes think there may be more in you than meets the eye—but nothing like that.”

“You don’t know me,” said Pierre, faintly smiling. “Not as I know you. You are so very English. You could not understand.”

“Why not say half-witted at once?” suggested Peter. “I’m very forgiving. Come on! Let’s go and swim! The greatest brain in the French Secret Service s’amuse avec his one-way traffic, footling half brother, Peter Dunrobert—the rich English bachelor whom no one loves! Isn’t that how the French papers would express it—or words to that effect?”

“I do not think so,” said Pierre and he got up, still smiling, and looking up at his young English brother who was nearly half a head taller than himself with a sort of affectionate tolerance.

It had been a day of intense heat on the Riviera, and they had idled most of it away since the early morning bathe with books and papers and desultory talk. Pierre’s spare time was of so brief and uncertain a nature that Peter had come south to join him. Peter was not in actual fact greatly addicted to travel. He had been round the world once to please Pierre, but had raced home again for the latter part of the hunting season, and after that had been absorbed in salmon and trout fishing on his own estate in England and he harboured not the faintest desire to encircle the globe again. He believed himself to be of the very straight and simple type of Englishman and so far his life had run on fairly straight and simple lines. He was rich and he had inherited one of the few remaining ancestral homes of the land which were without the usual embarrassments. His chief desire was to maintain his heritage in the state of prosperity in which it had come to him. He was an ardent lover of the country and would have made as good a farmer as he was a landlord. There was

nothing dilatory or unbusinesslike about him. Ever since his coming of age he had held the reins with a firm and understanding hand. In some ways he was older than his years, and already all who came into contact with him knew that Peter Dunrobert was a man of his word. He was thorough in all that he did and he looked for the same quality in others. At twenty-four he had gathered a not unnatural touch of cynicism, having encountered a good deal of artificiality and egotism in those around him. But it had not spoilt his serenity. He contemplated the world with a detachment which was his safeguard. He also bred horses—a pursuit which, as he said, filled up every spare cranny of his time. He was quite sociable but he was inclined to despise the froth of life, and the wild orgies of modern desperadoes held no attraction for him. To many of his contemporaries he seemed dull and unresponsive, but his restraint was not mainly due to shyness. He had a wholesome dislike for any form of insincerity or uncleanness, and his position had almost inevitably bred in him a deep-rooted suspicion that sprang from the instinct of self-preservation. He shrank almost too obviously from what he called “painted glamour.”

All this Pierre understood—Pierre Ronceau with his wide knowledge of the world and its evils; and he rather admired Peter for his solitariness. He had been appointed the boy’s guardian twelve years before by the English mother who had given birth to them both and he had faithfully carried out his trust. The two were close friends, though circumstances did not permit of their spending much time together. Their interests were widely severed. Pierre stood high in his country’s Secret Service, and his calling carried him to many parts of the world. His life was of necessity a cosmopolitan one, and the exact ingredients which went to its general composition were known only to himself. Peter took him for granted in a large-hearted, generous fashion and he had never paused to ask himself if he were justified in so doing. Pierre was Pierre, the shrewd, light-hearted mentor of his youth, the one man above all to be trusted, piquantly foreign yet strangely sympathetic, once the big brother and for all time the cheery comrade.

They went off together down the blazing front to the beach, and Peter’s arm was thrown carelessly yet half-protectingly around the Frenchman’s shoulders. If any of those secret enemies of whom Pierre spoke were anywhere in sight, let them know that he was there to shield him, whatever the odds might be!

But that he could be in any real danger he naturally, with British inconsistency, refused to believe. It never occurred to him that hostile eyes might actually be looking forth from the white, green-shuttered villas that gleamed among the pine trees that bordered the sapphire sea, or that any of the

varied crowd who lounged in and out of the great hotels and greeted himself with casual friendliness might regard his companion with suspicion and even a certain amount of animosity.

Peter was not accustomed to intrigue of any description, and his affection for Pierre was based upon complete confidence. In his opinion Pierre was just a jolly good sort with a complex for detective work which was superfluous and by no means an essential part of the man's character. That this same complex could by any far-stretched chance be the electric driving force that was Pierre himself was a possibility that had never occurred to him; nor would he have entertained it for a moment if it had. Pierre was just Peter's brother and simply not to be viewed in any other light.



## CHAPTER II

### *The Whirlpool*

THE APPEARANCE of the two half brothers seemed to be the signal for the whole of the visiting population of the neighbourhood to take to the water. Peter, swimming with long, slow strokes out towards the pine-crowned headland, looked back with a snort of disgust. Pierre, vigorous and graceful at his side, laughed and splashed water into his face.

“There are not many who will have the energy to come out so far. It is only on the return that we may find some congestion.”

Peter spat at him rudely. “The sea will be sticky with humanity. All your fault, Pierre! If you’d only come to me in England! There’s a decent swimming pool—diving board—everything.”

“But so cold!” said Pierre, turning on his side. “So clean—so safe—so English!”

“I’ll make you swim on your head in a minute,” rejoined Peter.

Pierre laughed mockingly and dodged like an eel from his outflung hand. “Then I turn back,” he threw at Peter. “I do not go to the end of the cape. It is called—Point des Sirènes. But—it is more dangerous than many mermaids. There are currents—*et puis encore des courants*. And there are no ‘Bewares’—as there would be in England.”

“Rot!” said Peter. “Bewares or no bewares, I’m going.”

Pierre turned on his back and floated inert. “I leave you to the sirens then, mon ami,” he called. “And I do not come to the rescue.”

Peter swam on. He was a stronger swimmer than Pierre and he had no fear of the currents. His muscular limbs spurned the blue water fearlessly. He revelled in the exercise with a sturdy pleasure. It was to his mind almost the only thing worth doing in the fierce heat of the south which was so alien to his blood.

He left Pierre and the seething crowd of bathers far behind. The jutting headland with its pines shaded him from the slanting rays of the sun. Before him gleamed a still stretch of water of so intense a blue that it looked like a shadowed inland lake, and beyond it there shone a pearly ripple where the

waters on the other side of the headland joined the waters of the bay. Close inshore there were a few brown rocks that might have been painted in for effect. The whole outlook had an impressionist touch, like the back cloth of a stage. It was as if in that many-coloured hour when the evening sky clasped the heat-laden earth, the world itself paused for a space awaiting the coming of fresh actors upon the scene of life.

And Peter, swimming brawnily, felt the lull and the expectancy and looked about him half in doubt, as if a sense of unreality had forced itself upon him. A few more strokes brought him into the glassy water that lay as if charmed, motionless and silent against the shoreward rocks. He knew that practically the whole of that jutting, pine-clad slope of rocks was owned by an Italian nobleman of whom hotel proprietors spoke deferentially as “Il Conte” or “Le Comte”—a superior being who was reputed to spend a good deal of his time at Monte Carlo, though he occasionally—like a raven—swept down upon the nearer if less exciting prey of the gaming tables at Ste Margu rite close at hand. Neither counts nor gaming tables held the smallest interest for Peter. He hated the jam of people in the casino and the brazen or furtive greed in their watching faces. But he felt a passing admiration for the curving line of bay and the straight trees above it that hid the villa from all prying eyes. It surmounted the height and looked straight out to sea, they said; but the trees grew so thickly that it was invisible save from the open sea itself. From the decks of yachts and steamers it had been seen, a fairy dwelling of dazzling whiteness rising from terraces of flowers—a palace of dreams standing inviolate above a dreaming sea. The ripples that broke at the foot of its rocks were opalescent, almost mesmeric. No one could tread there. The rocks were too high, the water too deep.

But it was not closed to swimmers, and Peter, scorning the quiet water, stretched himself towards those far ripples with a sudden dogged determination to see all there was to be seen. If there were any sirens about, they would be well worth the venture.

He had left Pierre far behind without a thought, and Pierre’s warning regarding the currents had slipped as serenely into the background of his consciousness. The water slid past him almost unbroken, and he was impatient of its stillness. A few more yards, and he had reached the fretted edge beyond. Then in a moment he felt the turmoil, the freshness of wavelets that came from the open sea, the first gentle buffet of a colder, deeper force. He braced his muscles to meet it, his hardy British blood tingling in swift appreciation. He felt a sudden eagerness which the warmer and more sheltered waters had failed to impart. He changed to the overarm stroke, spurning the semitropical luxury

behind him, and with a new energy he drew gradually abreast of the Point des Sirènes.

Here a wind met him straight out of the sunset—the first breath of the mistral which would not reach the incurved shore for another hour. It was like a challenge, soft but unmistakable, and he lifted his head to it with an odd, passionate defiance. It had the coldness of a steel weapon cutting through the heat-laden air, inviting him, mocking him. He swam on.

He reached the sunlight that smote across the water beyond the Point, but it imparted no warmth, for here he suddenly found himself in a tumble of waves that seemed to come pouring in upon him from all directions. He was in the thick of them almost before he knew, and in the midst of the churning water something seized and dragged at his legs, pulling him downwards.

With an immense effort he resisted, forcing his head and shoulders upwards, fighting the menacing waters. The currents had caught him indeed. He was in a foaming whirlpool, being tossed hither and thither like a cork despite his utmost efforts. It flashed upon him that he had ventured too near inshore where the currents met, and to extricate himself he must get out to sea. But though he turned his face southwards and battled resolutely, a wild race of breakers held him back, forcing him towards the brown wall of rock that bounded the Point, while the unseen power below dragged mercilessly at his legs, compelling him to use his utmost strength to keep afloat.

Further progress was impossible, and in despair he turned and tried to swim back. It was then that a sudden chill went through him that was like an iron hand gripping his heart. For in that moment he saw quite clearly and beyond all doubting that there was no return. The vortex raged behind as well as before. He had swum straight into the heart of it. The waters seemed to be fighting for him, while the rocks stood grimly waiting, and the undercurrent sucked him relentlessly downwards and ever downwards.

Panic was a sensation with which Peter was completely unfamiliar, but he realized the situation with a cold clarity that had in it a certain grim horror. He was in a trap, but—stubbornly he told himself the while he fought to keep his head above the foam—there must be a way out. He had never been trapped before but instinctively he summoned all his will power to keep his senses steady. There must be—there was—a way out, and he would find it.

The surging and rushing of waters filled his ears, and the spray buffeted and choked him. To swim out to sea was impossible; to return as he had come was equally so. He could not hope to force his way round the headland. There remained one chance alone and that a desperate one. Those towering rocks

might give him some sort of refuge. Somewhere along their slimy base there might be some foothold, some crevice in which at least he might find a little breathing space, if nothing more. For he was becoming exhausted and he knew it. His limbs had begun to feel the weight of a leaden inertia. The water was beating him down, and the strength to fight was going from him.

He would probably be hurled against the face of the rock, but he must take the risk or be drowned where he was. The swirling currents were sucking him under, and he was spluttering and gasping like a child learning to swim. For the first time in his life he found himself in the grip of the inevitable, and his muscles felt puny and ineffectual. It was as if some giant had caught him and were whirling him to destruction, not maliciously, but as though he were a thing of no account.

It took more courage than he anticipated to turn himself towards that frowning rock. He did not quite know how he did it, for he was gasping and nearly spent. And the moment after he would have turned back had he been able; but it was too late. As if seized by an immense hand he was encompassed by the racing water and borne beyond all resistance towards that wetly shining wall. For an instant he seemed to be poised in air and the sun blazed level into his dazzled eyes. And then he was flung forwards and downwards. He seemed to be going straight to the bottom and he thought his lungs would burst. There came a frightful, groping pause—a greenness that was somehow intolerable—a silence that he thought was death, and then he floated up again. His head bobbed above the surface and he drew a vast breath that meant life renewed. The eddies still snatched at his feet and broke in ripples around him, but the rage and stress of the whirlpool was past. He was under the massive cliff in comparatively calm water.

He dared not float though he was conscious of an almost overwhelming exhaustion. He swam feebly—it was rather like the paddling of a dog—along the edge of the rock, nearly blinded and weakly feeling his way, until his knee encountered something hard and firm, and he suddenly awoke to the fact that some jutting obstacle was in front of him.

He grasped at it with a somewhat piteous floundering and felt a support for his feet. There was a ledge here slanting upwards, widening to a definite shelf above him. Weakly he dragged himself up from the water, all his joints feeling jellified and undependable. Up and up on hands and knees out of the treacherous, dancing water, creeping like a lizard with limbs outspread and yielding, he made his uncertain way. He felt horribly sick but he would not suffer himself to pause on that account. If he fainted he might fall over. So, feebly crawling, he pressed on till he reached what seemed to be a sort of

alcove in the rock. It was well above the water. It was safe. Battered and dizzy, he crept into its shelter and sank down on his face.

## CHAPTER III

### *The Villa Garden*

IT WAS the chilly breath of the rising mistral that roused him at length. He raised himself on his elbows, still feeling numb and powerless. The sun had gone, and an orange afterglow spread across the sea, paling to yellow at the sky line. The wash of the meeting currents still came to his ears. It was not very far below him. As he knelt slowly up he had a glimpse of the turbulent, foaming waters that had so nearly overwhelmed him, and again he felt the chill of the wind that blew from the sunset. In another hour or two it would be warm again, but he was shivering now and he could not stay inactive any longer. He must find some means of escape while the light lasted.

Still on his knees, he peered around the jutting corner of his shelter. The ledge continued to slope steeply upwards, but from that angle he could not be sure whether it took a turn or ended in a sheer drop. There was nothing for it but to climb up and see. He braced himself for the effort and got rather unsteadily to his feet.

In that moment, coming from somewhere not far above him, he heard a voice—a husky, protesting voice that spoke in English, swiftly—with strange pauses, as though speech were not easy.

“Gaspare! She is young—innocent. I could not have her here. This place—the atmosphere—it is all wrong. And if she should ever come to suspect—it—it would simply kill me.” There was almost a wail in the last words.

A man’s voice made answer lightly, mockingly. “I have heard that before, my Lucia. You have died a thousand deaths already—and still you survive. As for this youth and innocence you speak of, does it exist nowadays? I thought the new generation was born old and wise.”

“You don’t understand,” the woman’s pleading voice made rejoinder. “She is pure—untainted. I have kept her so. She has not even been to school. Only an English vicarage—in the heart of the country—with a few other children—a place apart—not like this!” A shudder seemed to follow the sentence.

It was followed immediately by the man’s laugh. “Lucia—Lucia mia—is it such a hell? You are shivering. Come close to me! Ah, but you are thin! You are getting bony. I do not like to feel your bones.”

There followed a brief pause, and then the woman's voice again. "Gaspare mio, beauty may pass—but love—lasts forever."

"I worship—only beauty," said the man, and silence fell again.

"Confound it!" muttered Peter. "A damned awkward situation!"

Nevertheless, since he was shivering and extremely uncomfortable, he decided to risk intruding himself and began with great caution to negotiate the rocky shelf that sloped up before him. It was very rough to his unaccustomed feet and progress was necessarily slow, but when he reached the previous limit of his vision he was rewarded by the discovery of a hairpin bend by which he could still make his precarious way upwards. Stumbling up the steep ascent with the water washing and gurgling below, he came at length upon a flight of steps crudely hewn in the rock and winding upwards to a stony passage which swallowed him so completely that the sea was cut out.

It was very deeply shadowed here, and he could barely discern the path before him, but it still wound steeply upwards with now and then a step or series of steps which stubbed his feet before he realized their existence in a fashion that sorely tried his temper.

The rocky walls were no longer bare but draped with festoons of creeping plants that gave forth strange, aromatic odours to the night. Warily he felt his way until a faint gleam ahead told of an opening at no great distance. He had evidently reached one of the famous terraces that looked out to sea and he saw the dim outline of a stone balustrade hung with some dark flowering creeper on his right, while on his left there showed something massive, too shadowed by palms to be clearly discernible, which he took to be a summerhouse.

He was on a flight of regular stone steps when he made this discovery and he stopped short before reaching the top with an instinctive desire to remain undiscovered. He was sheltered from the wind that sighed through the trees above him. The wash of the sea below sounded soft and remote, so that the very danger from which he had extricated himself seemed artificial, even mythical. It was nearly dark, and stars were beginning to gleam in the wide arch of the sky like jewels on velvet. Perhaps if he waited for a few minutes he would be able to make his escape unseen and return to his hotel!

It was at that moment while he stood hesitating that there came to him the throb of a motorboat close inshore, and the thought of Pierre suddenly flashed through his mind. Had he already organized a search for him? If so—he supposed he ought to go back and announce his safety. But at the instant that this idea occurred to him he heard the man's voice again, speaking close to him.

“What fool is that, I wonder, sailing so near to the rocks? He will probably kill himself, and it will be a good riddance.”

“Gaspare!” protested the woman.

“Well, why not?” There was irritable humour in the rejoinder. “There are too many people in the world. We can do without the fools.”

“Couldn’t you shout a warning?” pleaded the woman. “It is such a dangerous spot.”

A half-angry laugh answered her. “I will neither shout a warning nor go to help him when he crashes. You may sing a requiem if you like, my Lucia, though that husky voice of yours would not travel very far. Like the rest of you, it seems to be shrivelling. You will soon be—a mere mummy of womanhood.”

She made reply as if in tremulous apology. “I was always older than you, Gaspare.”

“Nevertheless, you are still capable of amusing me.” There was arrogant self-assertion in the response. “The fire of evening is sometimes redder than the rose of dawn.”

“But if that also should fail?” she said uncertainly.

He made a sound of disdain. “In that case I must seek—another rose—another fire. But I am satisfied for the present. You are—a good comrade and you understand my needs.”

“Say rather—a good servant, mio conte!” she said in a different tone—a tone that throbbed with a kind of passionate insistence.

He laughed again as though in careless acknowledgment of a debt. “Basta! Have I not said it? The fire has not yet gone out.”

The churning of the engine below had begun to recede. The boat seemed to be rounding the point. The danger was past.

“He is safe,” said the woman in a tone of relief.

The man laughed again derisively. “The fools are always safe. Why worry about them? Is not my danger infinitely greater? And I am not a fool.”

He spoke bombastically, as one who would challenge the world; but the woman’s voice came quickly on his words.

“Gaspare! Hush! We may be overheard. There are spies everywhere. This place—this garden—there may be someone hiding close to us even now.”



The man's laugh rang out anew. "Ha! That is amusing, that. Some super French detective creeping among the bushes to listen and report! No, no, carissima! They will not trap Gaspare di Voltano on his own ground. He is too old a fox for that. Let them try—if it amuses them! A shot from this would soon scatter them."

"Oh, put it away—put it away!" entreated the woman. "I hate to think you carry firearms. Let us go in, Gaspare! We will dine on the loggia together and then we will come out again when the moon is shining over the sea."

"Quien sabe? There is enchantment in the moonlight. Perhaps we shall become lovers again!" The man's voice had a light, taunting note, and then his feet sounded upon the stones as he rose.

A moment later he sauntered forth on to the terrace, and Peter, instinctively crouching on the steps, saw him for the first time—a man of medium height with a certain arrogance in his gait that gave an impression of power. His face was invisible in the dimness as he swaggered across to the stone balustrade and stood looking out to sea.

Suddenly he swung round. "Well? What about this Gabrielle of yours from her English vicarage? This place is not good enough for her, you say. Bueno! What do you wish to do with her?"

"It is I—really—who am not good enough," came the mournful reply, and with the words another figure moved forward almost soundlessly out of the shadows. "I have been wanting—so much—to talk to you about her. But—you are so occupied with other matters. I have hesitated to intrude——"

He threw back his head and scoffed. "The rest of the world can wait for once. What is it you want? If she must not come here, then I suppose you want to go to her."

"Yes, Gaspare, yes!" The woman's figure, equal to his own in height, but so slight that it looked almost wraithlike, drew closer to the man's with a supplicatory gesture. "You have been so good—all these years. I shall never forget your goodness. But now—now that she is grown up——"

"Grown up!" He interrupted her upon the word. "I thought that she was a bambina. You always said so."

"That was ten years ago, Gaspare." There was a piteous quiver of laughter in the words. "My baby has grown into a woman. She is nineteen now."

"Ten years!" He interrupted her again. "Is it ten years since I stole you from your prison with that English fool? Is it possible?"

“It is fact, Gaspare.” There was still a quiver in her voice—but it sounded near to tears. “I have only seen her twice in all that time. But now—I feel I must go to her—for a little while. She has outgrown her surroundings. She is eager to make her own way in the world. Would it be possible for me to be with her just for a few weeks until—until something can be arranged for her future? She is old enough now to support herself and she so wants to begin. I am—so anxious for it to be—a right beginning, Gaspare.”

The man made a scornful sound. “You mean you are anxious to secure—the right husband, my Lucia. Well, there will be no peace for me until you go. I see that clearly. Bueno, you have my permission. You will keep me informed of your movements; and the allowance shall continue.”

He took a cigarette case from his pocket with a flourish and proceeded to light a cigarette.

The woman remained by his side in silence for a few seconds, seeming to watch him. At length, “For how long, Gaspare?” she asked in a low voice.

He jerked one shoulder. “For how long would you trust me to remain faithful to you?” he said curtly.

She made a vague gesture that seemed to indicate weariness rather than any active emotion. “That is for you to say,” she said.

“Is it?” He turned towards her with an imperious movement. “You would place me on my honour, would you? Then let me tell you this! If I had greater faith in your sex, you would not have reigned alone for so long. But it has suited me to keep you and it has not been in your own interest to betray me. I have been too generous for that.”

“You are always generous,” she said.

“It has answered my purpose,” he rejoined. “But you will be wise not to count too much upon my generosity. There are limits to everything, and I am growing tired.”

“Tired!” She echoed the word with a curious, subdued passion. “Ah well, Gaspare, perhaps the limit is nearer than you think. We are rather apt to forget that our destinies are not always in our own hands. It is God’s world, after all.”

“What do you mean?” he said, staring at her.

She made a gesture that was somehow ironical. “Oh! I was forgetting. You do not believe in God. Yet it is curious—when we are drawing near to the darkness beyond which none can see—how we come to know that He is there all the time.”

He interrupted her roughly. "Women's talk! Well, I conclude that you will be going through Paris to meet this young neophyte of yours. We will make use of that. You shall deliver a message for me to an address that I will give you."

"Oh, Gaspare!" A low note that was almost like horror sounded in the woman's voice. "Must I do that? Couldn't you employ—the usual means? I—might be taken ill. Anything might happen."

"How true!" He answered her derisively. "My envoy might be shot, might he not? But they will not shoot you, my Lucia—a blameless woman going to see her young daughter! Stay! I have a better thought. The girl shall meet you in Paris and you shall show her the town. That will lend colour to the expedition. I believe in colour—plenty of it. It conceals so much; and the message will be one of importance."

She made a tragic gesture. "Gaspare! I am not fit. Don't—I beg of you—ask this of me! It's impossible. I cannot be the medium of these communications. I know too much as it is—far too much for my peace of mind."

The man moved abruptly, flung an arm around her. "Carissima, the less fit you are, the better are you suited to my purpose. Here is an opportunity for you to repay my kindness of the past! Come! We will go up to the villa where we shall be safe from all these invisible watchers and listeners whom you fear so much. I must work out this scheme of mine. You are tottering. Lean on me! I shall ask very little of you, and you will not find failure easy. Come, my Lucia, come!"

He was urging her towards the further end of the terrace. They moved away together, and Peter, cautiously peering above the top of the steps, saw that the woman went slowly and haltingly, as though impelled only by the supporting arm of the wiry figure at her side.

The early chill of the evening was passing, the warm southern night was drawing on. Very carefully Peter crept upwards until at length he was able to obtain a view of the pagodalike summerhouse from which the two had emerged and of the whole stretch of the terrace itself to the balustrade that overlooked a sheer drop into the sea a hundred feet or more below.

The only light was that which came from the swiftly-fading afterglow and the brightening array of stars, but he saw that the place was empty. The sound of voices and even of footsteps had died away.

"The devil!" he murmured to himself as he looked around him. "I seem to

have put my foot into a hornet's nest. And now the point is how to get out again without being stung."

The silence around him offered no solution, but after a few minutes of stealthy reconnoitring he discovered that at the further end of the terrace there was a flight of steps which led both up and down. He took the downward course, and ere long he found himself upon a path that wound among pines just above the still stretch of water through which he had swum before reaching the currents at the end of the headland. This was exactly what he had hoped for. He left the path and scrambled down between the tree stems until he reached an outjutting rock. Then with a clean dive he plunged down into the quiet depths.

When he came up again, he saw the lights of the town and he struck out for the beach with strong, even strokes.

## CHAPTER IV

### *The New Recruit*

HE TOOK some pains when he reached the shore to render his return to the hotel unobtrusive but though he entered by a side door he was almost immediately pounced upon by the manager.

“Ah, monsieur is safe! Monsieur Ronceau was in despair and is gone to search in a boat among the rocks. The whole hotel is in a ferment. Monsieur, I am overjoyed to see you again. Le Point des Sirènes est très, très dangereux.”

“Oh, my good man,” said Peter, “let me go and get a bath!”

“Mais oui, monsieur! A bath! A bath! François, a bath for monsieur—vite—vite! But Monsieur has had a terrible adventure!”

“None at all,” said Peter tersely. “I swam out a little farther than usual and I swam back again. Now I’ll go and have a bath. Please tell M. Ronceau when he comes in!”

He escaped with disappointing abruptness and fled to his own apartment. To be the object of general attention was the very last thing he desired, and the idea that the hotel should be in a ferment on his account filled him with the strongest disgust.

Even as he lay soaking in a hot bath it seemed to him that the place was buzzing with excitement and he determined to keep out of sight until it had somewhat subsided. But within a quarter of an hour his seclusion was invaded. There came an imperative rap upon the door and his half brother’s voice, equally imperative, demanding admission.

“Oh, dash it, I can’t let you in now,” Peter protested. “Go and sit down in my room! I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

“I wish to enter,” announced Pierre on the other side of the door with great distinctness. “Will you open, please?”

Peter abandoned resistance with a groan. It was obvious that Pierre was not to be frustrated. He emerged from his bath and draped himself in a towel. Then reluctantly he unbolted the door.

Pierre slipped in and swiftly bolted it again. “Mon cher, I thought you were

drowned,” he said.

“Well, as I’m not, why this fuss?” asked Peter.

Pierre looked at him with keen eyes that travelled at incredible speed from head to foot and back again. “I see you are cut and bruised,” he said. “You have been among the rocks. I took out a boat to search for you and am only now returned.” He laid a gentle hand upon Peter’s arm and shook his head in half-wistful admonition. “You should not do it,” he said. “You give me too much anxiety.”

Peter gripped the hand in a brawny clasp. “My dear old chap, don’t drive! I’m none the worse. Thanks for trying to find me, but you shouldn’t have bothered. I always turn up again.”

The Frenchman’s eyes remained critical. “You need not try to hide it from me,” he said. “I know that you have been in great danger—how great I did not realize until the boatman took me round the Point. He would not go near, but I saw the whirlpool all foaming below the rocks. And you were caught in that!”

“Well, I got out of it again,” laughed Peter. “Nothing like being elusive! For heaven’s sake, man, go and tell everybody that there’s nothing on earth to make a fuss about! I didn’t even see any mermaids or sirens, so there’s no reason for excitement. I want my dinner badly, but if there’s going to be a cackle all round I won’t come down for it.”

Pierre released him, faintly smiling. “You are still very young,” he said. “But I see there is no need for a doctor. I shall tell them that you did not swim so far as the Point, after all. They will believe me, because it is said that no one has ever come out of the whirlpool alive.”

“Yes, you go and tell them!” grinned Peter. “Get them to simmer down so that I can get my dinner in peace! Afterwards——”

“Yes, afterwards?” Pierre paused for another quick survey. “Afterwards, perhaps you will tell me—strictly *entre nous*—what happened to you after you climbed up the rocks into the garden of the Villa des Sirènes.”

“Oh, don’t be so infernally astute!” said Peter. “There’s too much second sight about you, Pierre. I shouldn’t care to play mouse to your cat.”

Pierre’s brightest smile flashed across his face. “Eh bien, we must be partners,” he said. “Now I go to throw dust in the eyes of all our fellow guests. Then I shall commence dinner and you will come down and join me in your casual English way—*comme ça*”—he snapped his fingers—“as if nothing had happened.”

“Exactly comme ça!” agreed Peter with a smile that was almost a replica of Pierre’s own. “You can tell them that I’m not too young and inexperienced to avoid danger and that you got the wind up for nothing. Tell them what a silly old ass you are! Be sure to tell them that!”

Pierre’s hand was on the door. His look was enigmatical. “I will be sure to tell them that,” he said. “It will amuse them. And you shall add whatever you like. But do not be long, mon ami! Your own story will interest me much more.”

He opened the door and slipped out with the flickering motion of a lizard. Peter bolted it again and proceeded to get into some clothes.

“Yes, he’ll jolly well have to take me into partnership,” he told himself grimly as he did so. “I’m damned if I’m going to be a pawn in this game.”

He went down to dinner a little later in his casual English way to find that Pierre had so successfully contrived to reduce his adventure to the level of a mere boyish escapade that his appearance excited no more than a passing interest.

Pierre himself gave him the briefest nod and continued his meal with almost British stoicism, though once or twice Peter, who had immersed himself in the Continental edition of an English paper, caught a twinkling glance flung in his direction. There was something in Pierre’s attitude that made him feel rather small, and he somewhat exaggerated his own abstraction in consequence.

Pierre waited courteously, smoking a thin black cigar, while he finished his dinner, but when Peter finally drained his coffee cup he made a slight movement as of suppressed activity. Most of their fellow guests had left the room, and a dance band had begun to blare hideous discords in the ballroom.

“Shall we go?” murmured Pierre across the table.

Peter looked up languidly. “As you like.”

Pierre rose like a coiled spring suddenly released. “Come up to my room and we will talk!”

“Why not dance if you’re feeling energetic?” said Peter.

Pierre stretched out an impetuous hand and grasped his arm. “Later—later, if you wish. But come with me first, petit frère! I want a word with you.”

Peter smiled. It amused him to tantalize this French brother of his now and then. “Don’t be so fiery, Pierre! You remind me of that snapdragon stuff we

used to play with as kids, ready to burn anyone's fingers unless they're quick. But I don't see why I should be either quick or burnt."

Pierre's grasp tightened and held. "You play with me!" he said in a low voice. "I don't advise it—not even you! There are times when it is not wise. Come, mon ami—to please me——"

Peter's good nature asserted itself. "Right ho!" he said lightly. "Anything to oblige! I'm just going to fetch my pipe. Come up and wait for me!"

Pierre's face lighted up. There was magic in his smile. "Yes, yes! Let us go!" he said, and linked his hand in the younger man's arm. "Afterwards, we will go and look at the full moon on the water—if you do not wish to dance."

"Oh, I expect I shall dance all right," returned Peter with a grin, "but you will pipe the tune."

They went up in the lift together and along the spacious corridors, Pierre talking volubly about nothing in particular with a facility which Peter always described as a gift. No passing observer could have noted anything unusual in the deportment of the two brothers. They were obviously intimate friends, and there was nothing more to be discovered.

But the moment they were alone in Peter's room, Pierre dropped all subterfuge like the casting aside of a garment. With a searching glance up and down the passage they had just quitted he closed the door and locked it.

"Now!" he said in a whisper. "Speak low and tell me all!"

"Who said there was anything to tell?" fenced Peter, rummaging in a coat that lay over the back of a chair for his pipe.

Pierre came quickly to him. There was something staccato and very urgent in all his movements.

"Ah, do not waste time!" he said. "It may be valuable. You have a secret. I saw it in your eyes. Tell me what has happened to you—what you have seen!"

Peter found his pipe and pulled out a pouch. "Now look here, Pierre!" he said. "I'm going to be in this show if it's going to be exciting. It's my find, not yours; so you've got to give me a square deal. Understand?"

"I understand that you are trying to be very exasperating," said Pierre with a touch of heat. "But I will tell you this for your information. Gaspare di Voltano, who owns the Villa des Sirènes, is a dangerous man and a revolutionary, and anything concerning him is of the utmost importance to me—and to the state. I am here on his account, to run him and the rest of his gang



to earth, and they must not slip through my fingers. Now will you tell me what you know?"

He spoke with such vital earnestness that Peter was impressed. "I seem to have stumbled into something really interesting," he said. "All right, old chap. You shall have the whole story. But tell me first—who's the lady?"

"Ah! You saw her!" Pierre's eyes gleamed with eagerness. "You spoke to her?"

"No—no! I didn't speak to anyone. I was lying low. After I got clear of that infernal millrace, I climbed up the rocks and heard them talking. He had a revolver," explained Peter, "so naturally I was not in a hurry to expose myself in case of any misunderstanding. But the woman, Pierre, who is she? She is English, as I suppose you know."

"Yes, she is English," said Pierre. "No one outside the villa ever sees her except the doctor. She is ill—some disease of the heart, I believe. The count brought her here years ago. But tell me what you heard! I must know everything."

"Well, it was all a bit vague," said Peter. "But she was persuading him to let her go and see her daughter who is in England, and he finally agreed that they might meet in Paris if she would deliver a message for him to someone whom he didn't mention. She didn't take to the scheme at all, but I rather fancy he meant her to go through with it."

"Ah!" ejaculated Pierre with shining eyes. "That is what I want to know. Now will you please cast your mind back and remember every detail for me? Then—if you are very good—we will go to Paris together and follow up the scent."

"Oh, I'll be very good," promised Peter. "But I don't know that I have very much to tell you. He sounded a desperate sort of devil and as if he could push the unfortunate woman into doing anything he liked. He knows you're after him all right though and he is taking all precautions."

Pierre's teeth gleamed. "We are ancient enemies," he said. "Now tell me all, Peter, as far as you can remember exactly as it happened! It may be of the utmost service to me. But speak low, mon ami! We do not want to tell all the world."

He took out a pocketbook and sat down. Peter lit his pipe and stood over him. Briefly and accurately he gave his narrative, watching the hieroglyphic jottings of Pierre's pencil the while. They were quite incomprehensible to him, but he concluded that the writer would find them legible. The whole affair had

begun to excite his deepest interest. Pierre's attitude of earnest concentration infected him, and he forgot to be cynical.

Pierre wrote rapidly, now and then flinging out a swift question without raising his head, but—since Peter's statement was concise and simple—speaking for the most part very little.

Finally he looked up, and his tense face flashed into an approving smile. "Excellent, my friend, excellent! Your nice British directness is very helpful to me. Have you ever heard of a journal called *La Chasse*? I am a member of the staff and I shall appoint you my assistant."

"Good!" said Peter. "Then when do we start for Paris?"

Pierre shook his head with humorously raised brows. "You do not start, after all. You will stay here and watch at this end."

"Not so good!" said Peter without the faintest change of tone or countenance. "In other words, nothing doing! I am not interested in this end."

Pierre's smile vanished. "What? You will not take your orders from me?"

Peter laid a very steady hand on his shoulder. "Pierre," he said, "I may be a fool but I'm not that sort of fool. I'm coming with you. I'll take my orders all right if you'll trust me like a reasonable being and not a child that's to be kept out of mischief."

"I see," said Pierre. His keen eyes studied Peter's face with swift consideration. "Well, perhaps it was not quite fair to suggest that you should remain here. I will give you another task that you will like better. You shall go to Calais and watch for the young lady."

"What on earth for?" said Peter.

Pierre pursed his lips. "My friend, you ought to have served in the army. They would have taught you to obey without asking questions."

Peter coloured a little. "I say, that's a shrewd one! But all the same, I don't see why I shouldn't be a bit in the know. You can trust me, I suppose? And after all, I've brought you some useful information."

Pierre smiled indulgently. "Yes, that is true. And I am going to trust you, Peter, perhaps further than you realize. Remember, then, you are a journalist on the staff of the paper called *La Chasse*! The young lady is coming from England within the next few days to meet her mother. That mother is known to everyone—and probably to her own daughter also—as the secretary of the Count Gaspare di Voltano. In actual fact, she has been his mistress for many

years. The child's name is Gabrielle Dermot, and she is the daughter of Quentin Dermot, the well-known astronomer, who died several years ago, not long after his wife left him."

"Quentin Dermot!" said Peter sharply. "He was a sort of relation of mine. I met him once when I was a kid. He was always called the Stargazer. Yes, and I met her too. She was a very lovely woman—like an angel, I remember thinking. I suppose I was about ten then. It was before I knew much of you. Did you ever meet him? He was some kind of cousin of my father's."

"No," Pierre said. "I never met him. But I believe he loved her, loved her so much that he would not divorce her, swore that he would take her back if she would only return to him. But she never did. She was a brilliant woman and, as you say, very lovely. It was sad that he could not keep her. But—he lived too much in the clouds."

"So she eloped with this Italian scoundrel?" questioned Peter. "No accounting for taste! And the daughter was left. Who looked after her?"

Pierre shrugged his shoulders. "Who indeed? Dermot died practically penniless. He had spent all his money on his work. I imagine the daughter was provided for by the mother's lover but I have never interested myself in that. It is only now that the daughter comes on the scene. A timely introduction to her might be of great assistance. *Cherchez la fille et trouvez la mère!*"

"It sounds rather a dirty game," observed Peter. "The mother wasn't at all keen on the job. She may manage to back out."

"And she may not," rejoined Pierre with a certain grim humour. "In either event, your task will be to find the daughter, and if possible make her acquaintance. If you can claim her as any species of relation that should make it all the easier. Through the daughter we shall trace the mother's movements, and if our friend the count is rash enough to entrust her with any message for his band of desperadoes in Paris, it should soon be in our hands."

"Oh, that's the idea, is it?" said Peter.

Pierre nodded, his eyes upon his notes. "That is how we work, yes. I do not say that there are no other means. But that for the present is enough." He looked up sharply at his half brother. "If you really wish to help me, Peter," he said, "I will give you your definite instructions in the morning."

There was a hint of challenge in his eyes, and Peter, meeting it, realized something which till that moment he had not fully grasped. Pierre was master of the situation and he had every intention of maintaining his supremacy and none whatever of imparting any unnecessary information before the

psychological moment. There was to be no question of partnership between them. If Peter desired any share in the game it must be as a pawn and nothing else. But curiously he felt no resentment. Pierre had made his position clear without being offensive, and Peter was even conscious of a sense of admiration for the way in which he had expressed himself.

He stuck his pipe into his mouth with a grin. "Oh, have it your own way!" he said. "You always have had and I suppose you always will."

Pierre put forth an impulsive hand and grasped his arm. "That is very nice of you, Peter," he said with his charming smile. "I did not wish to insist. We understand one another, do we not?"

"I understand that you mean to be top dog," said Peter. "And I daresay you may be right. Anyway, I'm only a beginner, so I'll come for my instructions in the morning."

Pierre jumped to his feet, snapping his notebook shut with a deft movement. "A la bonne heure!" he said lightly. "I congratulate myself, Peter, on the good sense and courage of my new recruit. Let us go now and join the dancers! And perhaps—a little later—we will visit the tables. We must be gay and débonnaire—comme tous les autres. We must not let the world suspect."

"It's lucky, isn't it," grinned Peter, "that the world is such a green place?"

## CHAPTER V

### *The Traveller*

IT WAS a week later that Peter, carrying a small suitcase, with a camera slung on his shoulder, and his coat collar turned up to his ears, stood desolately on the quay to watch the Channel steamer come in through swirling drifts of fog. It was the seventh time that he had performed the same act, and he was getting distinctly bored with it. No one took any notice of him. A British journalist lying in wait for some celebrity held no interest for the public at large. He was obviously there for a definite object, and when it was accomplished he would be seen no more. The world was too busy to care how long it took him to fulfil his mission.

It was the end of September, and there were fewer travellers than of late. Most people were thinking of going home. But the homeward-bound throng were of no use to Peter, and he was beginning to wonder if any of the new arrivals ever could be either. At the outset the adventure had appealed to him, but his enthusiasm had faded after many disappointments. He hated the chilly northern port, and only his reluctance to lower himself in the eyes of Pierre kept him there.

He wondered sometimes if it had all been a wily scheme on his half brother's part to keep him out of possible danger, but the memory of the conversation he had overheard made him doubtful. He could not bring himself to desert his post so long as there remained any chance of achieving his end. For very pride's sake he would not so far put himself in the wrong. But he was not enjoying his vigil, and it seemed less and less probable that it could lead to anything profitable as time went on.

There came the blast of a siren from the incoming steamer which resounded under the iron roof of the shelter and echoed through the customs office and along the quay. Officials began to run about like the inhabitants of a disturbed ant heap, and a general excitement which seemed to him exaggerated to an extent which the occasion was far from warranting prevailed.

From where he stood he could see through fog wreaths and drizzling rain the hull of the Channel boat as she drew slowly alongside, and in the midst of the noisy stampede around him he leaned against a post and watched for the second time that day.

The muffled figures on deck were but vaguely discernible, but he was convinced beforehand that the object of his quest was not among them and he told himself sternly that, this being the case, he would not hang about like a fool any longer. He would catch the next train to Paris and tell Pierre exactly what he thought of his methods. To wait here any longer for a girl who might never come was sheer idiotic waste of time, and rather than do so he would throw up the whole business and go home to his shooting and his horses. Pierre had never wanted his assistance and he could jolly well do without it.

In this mood he hitched up the camera which hung from his shoulder and prepared to take a wholly uninterested survey of the travellers filing off the boat.

“What a herd!” he muttered to himself discontentedly. “Like a lot of drowned rats! Well, it’s the last time of asking. I’m damned if I’ll come again.”

Nevertheless when the gangway was fixed he drew a little nearer in order to scan the landing passengers more attentively.

The drizzle was turning to a downpour, and the salt wind blowing in from the sea had a chill that seemed to pierce to the bones. People descended the gangway in a rapid stream, and a flood of mingled French and English reached his ears. He pushed further forward through the throng. He would do the thing properly if for the last time.

No one even glanced in his direction. All were intent upon getting into shelter as soon as possible. And Peter watched face after face with a growing wonder at his own idiocy. Just a typical cosmopolitan crowd, utterly unremarkable, almost ludicrously devoid of any feature of interest. Businessmen and women for the most part, a few genuine travellers, some worried, some merely excited, some too commonplace to be either.

“I’ll never do this again,” said Peter, and even as he made himself that promise he saw a slight figure in a black mackintosh pass from the deck to the gangway and come stepping down to him.

She did not scamper or stumble down as did most of her fellow travellers. The state of the weather did not seem to be the one thing uppermost in her mind. There was something fairylike and very young about her. She moved with a light, springy tread. And before she reached the bottom her look which had a searching, uncertain quality had found him and dwelt upon him. She wore a dark, close-fitting cap, and her hair was pale gold. She might have been a child of fourteen.

Peter glanced beyond her, for it did not seem possible that she could be travelling alone. But in the same instant she reached him and spoke.

“Are you looking for someone? Is it me by any chance?”

He started and raised his hat. She was tiny, almost babyish of aspect; but yet there was about her a quaint sort of dignity that seemed to belong to maturer years.

“I don’t know,” he said in momentary confusion. “I’m looking for a Miss Dermot.”

“That’s me,” she said, and held out a confiding hand. “Thank you for coming.”

Peter held the hand as he might have held a captive bird. It felt so small and crushable. Her greeting nearly took his breath away. It was with an almost obvious effort that he recovered himself.

“Not at all! I’m delighted to see you. Have you got your passport?”

“Oh yes, everything,” she said. “But I don’t know exactly what one has to do. There’s some luggage too, not much, only two suitcases.”

“We’ll see to it,” said Peter. “You come into shelter! What a foul evening!”

“Is it?” she said. “I don’t mind it myself. I hope you haven’t been waiting long.”

He did not tell her how long. He was still a little dazed by her reception. “The boat’s a bit late,” he said. “I expect it’s the fog.”

“Yes, it’s quite thick outside the harbour,” she said. “Can you tell me how my mother is?”

Peter hesitated; then decided to take a risk. “I’m afraid she isn’t very strong,” he said, “but I don’t know any details.”

She gave a slight sigh. “No, I suppose they wouldn’t bother to have told you. I must wait till I see her. It was very nice of you to come. D’you mind telling me your name? Mine is Gabrielle Dermot.”

“Mine is Peter Dunrobert,” said Peter, and again he plunged a little. “And please let it be Peter! I’m a sort of relation, I believe.”

“Are you really?” she said. “I wonder how they managed to find you.”

“Oh, I just happened along,” he said cheerfully. “Very glad to be useful too! Now what about your baggage? Is someone bringing it ashore?”

“It’s in that crane, I think,” she said. “There’s nothing in it to pay on, but I’ll give you my keys.”

She took two keys from her handbag and gave them to him. Her complete confidence in him seemed to him rather pathetic, and if it relieved him in one sense it made him feel decidedly uncomfortable in another.

“I think the best thing to do would be to get you some refreshment,” he said. “There’s plenty of time. You were all right during the crossing?”

“Oh, quite,” she said. “It was very calm. I stayed on deck.”

He piloted her to the refreshment room and found a corner for her. “You sit here!” he said. “I’ll get you tea and then I’ll go and see to your luggage.”

He brought her a cup and some cakes and then left her, threading his way back through the excited crowd of officials and travellers to extricate the two suitcases of which she had spoken.

He was glad of the respite to collect his wits, for the situation presented difficulties with which he was somewhat at a loss to cope. His only course was to deal with it with as much ingenuity as he could muster, but he was grateful for the breathing space thus afforded. Her complete trustfulness made him feel a cad, and he almost wished that his mission had again proved fruitless.

Nevertheless, when he had successfully passed her modest belongings through the customs he had recovered a certain amount of assurance and he went back to her with a smile. After all, he had not done anything very despicable, and even if she found him out—which was unlikely—it would not be a very serious matter. No one could take him to task for placing his services at her disposal. In fact, under the circumstances, he had no choice.

He found her patiently waiting in her corner, but she caught sight of him the moment he entered, and her small, delicate face brightened at his coming. There was something starry about her eyes, and he realized that the brown lashes that fringed them were tipped with gold.

“It is nice of you to take all this trouble,” she said, rising to meet him. “I was dreading coming ashore in case you shouldn’t be here. I’ve never been abroad before.”

“It’s quite easy when you know the ropes,” said Peter. “Or even if you don’t for that matter. Everything is all right. Come along and we’ll find the Paris train!”

“Don’t you want any tea?” she said.



“No, thanks. I’m all right. There’s not too much time, I fancy,” said Peter. “Here are your keys! It’ll be nice to get out of this hole.”

“I’m afraid you’ve had a long wait,” she said.

He made no reply to that. The train was close at hand, and he busied himself with finding a comfortable compartment.

The usual confusion prior to departure was in full swing, but he managed to secure a corner seat for her and then got in after her, pushing his own suitcase out of sight and stowing away his camera with a sigh of relief.

“Have you been taking photographs?” she asked, watching him.

He laughed. “Not today. The light’s been too bad. Sure you’re quite warm? You didn’t bring a rug?”

“Oh no,” she said. “I don’t need one, thank you. I hate a lot of things to look after, don’t you?”

“You’re certainly travelling light,” said Peter with a smile. “I agree. It’s much easier.”

She made a small grimace. “I haven’t got a great many possessions and I don’t expect to be out here very long. The count isn’t very likely to want two secretaries, is he?”

“You never know,” said Peter.

She glanced at him. “You’re not one of them, I suppose?”

He bent to push his suitcase further under. “Well, not exactly. I’m only by way of being a journalist.”

“A journalist!” Her voice held a note of interest. “What sort of life is that?”

He came up again slightly flushed, but before he could answer, a voluble French family of four crowded into the compartment and they were overwhelmed with a clatter of tongues which for the next few minutes made any further conversation impossible. They smiled at one another and gave up the attempt.

Even after the train had finally started some time elapsed before their fellow travellers began to subside, and the English girl contented herself in the interval with gazing out of the window at the grey landscape of misty sodden flatness through which the Paris express raced like a shooting meteor.

Peter sat and reviewed the situation, wondering what his next problem would be. The fairylike person by his side was more of a responsibility than he

had anticipated, and there might be complications at the end of the journey with which he was hardly qualified to deal. He made up his mind to keep as near to the truth as possible, for there was that about her simple directness of manner that made him feel ashamed of the role he was playing. Child as she seemed to be, he shrank from the thought of being found out and labelled an impostor.

She turned her head suddenly and spoke to him, and the mist-blue eyes behind their sparkling lashes seemed to hold a certain compulsion.

“What did you mean by saying you were a sort of relation?” she said.

“Oh, that!” said Peter, relieved to have a comparatively easy question to answer. “Well, I am, you know. My father was a distant cousin of your father whom I once had the pleasure of meeting. Quentin Dermot, the celebrated astronomer, wasn’t he?”

She nodded. “I can only just remember him. He used to go off on big expeditions. He died on one. Rather sad, don’t you think? And what was your father?”

“My father,” said Peter, “was just an old-fashioned Englishman bred true to stock. I hope I’m the same.”

“You look as if you were,” she said with her fleeting smile. “And he is dead too?”

“Yes. I haven’t many people left belonging to me—just a few odds and ends of relations and a half brother”—Peter paused momentarily, not quite certain if Pierre were a safe subject for discussion, and finally ended ambiguously—“who is quite a good sort.”

“Isn’t that funny?” said Gabrielle. “I haven’t got any people either except my mother. At least, if I have, I don’t know where they are. She has been Count Gaspare’s secretary for so long that she seems to have lost touch with everybody in England—except the Lingardes, who brought me up. They’re a heavenly pair,” she added, “absolutely unworldly—real saints. But they’re getting old. I couldn’t go on living with them forever. I’ve got to make my own way in the world, be independent. P’raps you can teach me how to be a journalist! I believe I might enjoy that.”

“Oh, heaven forbid!” said Peter. “You must find something easier than that. I’m sure you’re not cut out for a quill driver.”

She drew her delicate brows together. “It’s rather difficult to know what I was cut out for. Is anyone ever cut out for anything, do you think? Or do they

just have to cut out themselves?”

Peter laughed. “Well, I should think circumstances might have something to do with it, but it’s a pretty big problem and it ought to have a good deal of consideration. No one wants to make a false start.”

“Oh no!” she agreed. “Fearful waste of time! Of course, what I should like to do would be to travel, go round the world, see everything. But that costs money and I haven’t got any. I shall have to make some first.” She paused. “Have you ever been to the gaming tables? Is it true that fortunes are made there?”

“More often lost,” said Peter. “Much more often! I can’t see you doing it.”

“Neither can I,” she said somewhat unexpectedly, though she still frowned a little. “I’ve been brought up to regard that sort of thing as sinful. Do you think it is?”

“No,” said Peter promptly. “Not if you can afford it.”

“Oh, but that’s just it!” She looked at him with a twinkle of amusement in her eyes. “I’m afraid you rather miss the point when you say that. If I could afford to gamble I shouldn’t want to.”

“In that case it would be definitely immoral,” asserted Peter. “You’d stake all you’d got and lose it.”

“One might win,” she pointed out. “Would that be immoral too?”

He laughed. “Yes, highly. You’d then become an adventuress.”

“I am one now,” she remarked with a certain sedateness. “I’m like one of the little pigs of our early days who set out to seek their fortunes. I wonder if I shall find one. Large interrogation mark!”

“I’m inclined to agree there,” said Peter.

“Yes. One never knows, does one?” She yawned suddenly. “But it’ll be fun looking for it, all the same.”

“‘This little pig was rash,’ ” quoted Peter. “‘That little pig was rasher.’ ”

“I don’t chance to be that little pig,” she rejoined, “so you can keep your sympathy—if any.”

“On the contrary, I congratulate you,” said Peter. “I haven’t much use for the rashers. They ought to know better.”

“They ought,” she responded firmly, and, glancing at her, it came to him again that, despite her childish appearance, she was by no means lacking in

character and strength of purpose.

A brief silence fell between them, and then, rather disconcertingly, she returned to her earlier investigations.

“How was it that you turned up just at the right moment? I was really hardly counting on anyone meeting me at Calais.”

“Oh, I just chanced to be handy,” said Peter lightly, “and being, as I say, a sort of connection, I offered myself for the job. Didn’t they tell you whom to expect?”

He had had time to consider the best method of dealing with enquiries and had decided that questions must be met by questions, and he would thus gather information as he went along.

Her answer reassured him as to the success of these tactics. “No. My mother only wrote that as she wasn’t quite up to the journey herself, the count would either meet me or make arrangements to have me met. But I thought it might not be—possibly—before I got to Paris.”

“I see,” said Peter, and hastily stifled a twinge of anxiety. “Well, I’m here, so it’s all right.”

She gave him a slightly puzzled look. “You know the count then?”

Peter skated swiftly over the thin ice. “You see, I’ve been staying down at Ste Margu rite—close to the villa. That was how it happened.”

“Oh, you know the Villa des Sir nes!” she said. “It’s a wonderful place, isn’t it? I’ve only seen pictures of it. I’ve always longed to go there.”

“It’s got a wonderful garden,” said Peter.

“I shall love that,” she said. “And the sea—and everything. I do hope my mother will soon be all right again. I haven’t seen her for such a long time. Being secretary to a man like that must be pretty hard work. She never seems to have any time off for a holiday, and I expect she needs one.”

“You ought to get her away,” Peter said, and there was more of pity than he realized in his voice.

She gave him a sudden keen look. “Do you think she’s happy?” she said.

He hesitated. “You mustn’t take my opinion for anything. I don’t know enough. But are you going all the way to Ste Margu rite now? Won’t you wait in Paris for her to join you?”

“Wait in Paris! But what’s the good?” Gabrielle looked frankly astonished.

“She isn’t well enough to meet me there, so of course I must go to her. Wasn’t that what the count meant?”

Peter considered. This was a development with which he was somewhat at a loss to deal, but he had a very strong feeling of distaste at the thought of this young girl joining her mother under the count’s roof. He realized that he was powerless to prevent her doing so unless any valid reason should offer itself, but he determined on the spot that he would not allow her to be escorted thither by the count himself.

“I don’t know what he meant,” he said finally. “My instructions were to meet you and conduct you to Paris. Perhaps we might ring your mother up from there and find out what she would like you to do.”

“It’s very odd,” said Gabrielle. “But I’m sure she meant me to go to her. I think I had better go straight on.”

She looked harassed, and Peter abandoned the discussion. Obviously, someone would be waiting for her when they reached Paris, and he himself would probably be exposed as a fraud within two minutes of their arrival. But he was resolved to weather the storm from whatever quarter it might blow. If he gained her confidence he might be able to help her. If he lost it, she would be no worse off than before.

“You must do as you think best,” he said. “I’m standing by, remember, and I’ll do anything I can to help.”

“But you were going back to Ste Margu rite in any case?” she questioned.

He smiled upon her reassuringly. “Yes, of course I’m going back. And I’ll look after you all the way.”

“I expect I could manage quite well alone,” she said.

“Naturally,” said Peter. “But relations were created to be made use of, so why should you?”

He was glad to see the fleeting smile light up her face again. “Well, there is that certainly,” she agreed. “It’s very kind of you. I’m not a very experienced traveller, and it’s nice to have someone to stand by.”

“You put every thing on to me!” said Peter cheerily. “And I’ll see you through.”

She thanked him gravely with a shade of restraint. He was not sure that she was entirely satisfied with the situation but he made no further attempt to improve it. He was beginning to feel some slight uneasiness himself as to what

the outcome might be.

## CHAPTER VI

### *The Rival Claim*

THEY DINED TOGETHER on the train. It helped to pass the time and, as Peter said, one never knew what might happen at the journey's end.

He told her all about his English home, his beloved estate, his horses; and she in her turn described the quiet country vicarage in which the greater part of her life had been spent. But though they laughed and joked together, Peter was aware of a vague reticence about her that kept their acquaintance upon a strictly impersonal footing. She listened to all that he said with intelligent interest but she did not ask many questions. He wondered if he had given her any cause to suspect his genuineness, or if her reserve could be merely due to a natural shyness. But the more he saw of her, the more he was impressed by that subtle stateliness of demeanour that seemed to fence her round against all intruders. She looked so young, but her serious self-control was like a shield belonging to an older person. She displayed little of the impetuosity of youth. There was something about her that baffled him. She did not seem to be deliberately holding him at bay, but he had a feeling that he could not have passed her guard had he attempted to do so.

Conversation flagged during the last hour, and Peter had plenty of time for conjecture as to the type of dilemma that might await him when they reached the terminus. Whatever was in store for him, he must get a message through to Pierre before starting for the south.

The French family, who had subsided somewhat during the journey, became violently excited as they neared the end of it. There ensued much talk and gesticulation which helped to cover the silence between Peter and his protégée. Looking at her, he thought that she wore a slightly anxious expression, but she smiled when she met his eyes.

"I suppose the other train will be starting straightaway," she said.

"That I don't know," he answered. "I shall have to find out and get you a sleeping berth if possible. You must be pretty tired."

"Oh no, not really," she said. "It's all so new and interesting. I don't mind about a sleeping berth in the least. I can go to sleep anywhere."

"You've got to have a night's rest," said Peter with decision.

The train had begun to slow down. He got up and stood at the window as it ran into the great station.

“Now for it!” he said to himself.

The usual confusion and excited yellings ensued. The French family were hustling all their belongings together and calling for a porter with great gusto. The door swung open, and porters seemed to swarm into the compartment.

Peter grabbed his companion’s baggage and got out; then, as she also descended, he turned back for his own. They extricated themselves from the excited crowd and struggled to a comparatively quiet spot beyond the vortex.

“I think you’d better wait here if you don’t mind,” Peter said, “while I go and make enquiries about the south express. Will you be all right?”

“Of course!” she said, and he hurried away, leaving her with the suitcases at her feet, quite unperturbed in the general confusion, but pale and a little strained-looking, as if the jostling multitudes made her feel a stranger in a strange land.

He raced to a bureau to make his enquiries, with the idea of despatching a telegram to Pierre at the same time, but the congestion of travellers delayed him. A great many other people had questions to ask, and he stood chafing behind an unusually voluble Frenchwoman for nearly ten minutes before he could obtain the required information. Then he was told that to secure berths on the train for the south which was leaving in half an hour he would have to go to another bureau in a totally different quarter of the great terminus. Until this matter was settled he could not send his message to Pierre, and he decided to return to Gabrielle and let her accompany him rather than leave her to wait alone any longer.

He hastened back therefore, fuming at the obstacles in his path and wondering how her patience had stood the test.

He did not see her at first, for the figure of a man obstructed his view; and then, impetuously drawing nearer, he caught sight of her and saw that she was in conversation with the stranger.

A sharp thrill went through Peter, but he did not slacken his stride. Something seemed to impel him into the fray.

He raised his hat as he joined the couple, and the girl turned and regarded him with intently questioning eyes. Her companion—a man of medium height with an olive complexion and a slightly insolent air—turned also and gave him the benefit of a fiery, uncompromising stare. He was a person of indefinite age



—he might have been anything between thirty and fifty—slim and arrogantly handsome after the fashion of an ancient Roman, aggressively self-assured. To Peter his bearing was an instant revelation. A vivid memory flashed upon him of the swaggering form that had sauntered across the stone terrace above the Point des Sirènes a few nights before, and he was immediately on his guard.

He addressed himself to Gabrielle without an instant's hesitation. "Is this gentleman a friend of yours?"

A fierce exclamation broke from the man in question. He spoke with a sudden burst. "I am Voltano," he announced aggressively. "Il Conte di Voltano! And may I know your name?"

"Of course!" returned Peter nimbly. "My name is Dunrobert, and I am escorting my cousin—Miss Dermot—who is on her way to join her mother."

"Escorting!" The Italian repeated the word with a kind of furious incredulity. "And who gave you authority to escort her—if I may ask?"

"Ask anything you like!" said Peter without heat, wondering a little at his own glibness. "I am related to Miss Dermot and she is under my care."

Voltano uttered a sort of choke of rage. He looked suddenly dangerous. Abruptly he turned to the girl. "Is this true?" he demanded.

Peter's eyes went swiftly to her also, and in a moment her look met his. She was pale but quite composed, almost exaggeratedly so, as if she were putting strong restraint upon herself. She spoke as if to him. "Yes, quite true," she said. "I am travelling with Peter Dunrobert, as I told you."

Peter drew a sharp breath between his teeth and smiled at her. Voltano glanced from one to the other in savage interrogation. "He has brought you all the way from England—and I have never heard of him!"

Peter leapt in. "You don't know her English relations, do you?" he said. "You see, I didn't quite like the idea of her travelling alone. This is her first venture across the Channel."

Gabrielle spoke again with grave decision. "I want to get to my mother as soon as possible. We are catching the next train to the south."

"Sapristi!" exclaimed the Italian. "But it is I—I—who have come from your mother to meet you!"

"I know," she said. "So I understand. And it is very kind of you. Thank you very much."

He made a violent gesture. "But now you are in my care—mine! This—

this English cousin can now go home.”

“Oh no!” said Peter, still smiling. “I’m going south in any case and I should like to see her to the end of her journey. You’d like me to come—Gabrielle?”

Her eyes flickered very slightly as she replied, “Yes, I should like you to come and I see no reason why you shouldn’t.”

“Amazing!” broke in Voltano. “Do I understand that you do not wish to entrust yourself to me—when your mother expressly desired it?”

“Look here!” said Peter. “Isn’t all this rather a fuss about nothing? If we’re all travelling in the same direction, I can’t see any reasonable objection to our going together. And—by the way—there isn’t much time to lose. The train starts in under half an hour, and we’ve got to get tickets.”

“Ah!” snarled the Italian. “Why were you booked to Paris if you were going straight through? Answer me that!”

Peter saw the weak spot almost before the question was uttered but he covered it instantly. “It would have been better, I admit. But as originally Gabrielle’s mother was to have met her here, the arrangement was left unaltered. If we go straight on, there won’t have been much time lost.”

Voltano looked at him with eyes of blazing hostility. “There is something here which I find it very difficult to understand,” he said.

“It’s the same with me,” flung back Peter with sudden warmth. “I’m not accustomed to being questioned and treated with suspicion. My cousin and I are catching that train for the south tonight, and if you’re not wanting to come, we’ll go alone.”

“Basta!” ejaculated Voltano explosively. “Do you realize that this signorina’s mother is in my villa—under my protection?”

“That doesn’t entitle you to dictate to her daughter,” rejoined Peter.

“Ah! There you are wrong.” The Italian’s words came clipped and savage from between his teeth. “I have her mother’s precise instructions. They do not include you. I question if she has ever heard of you. She quarrelled with your family years ago.”

“I know all about that,” said Peter, “and I don’t care two imperial hoots for your instructions. This lady is travelling in my care, and I will see her to the end of the journey.” He turned to Gabrielle. “We had better be going.”

It was impulsively uttered, but he had a strong feeling that if he paused to

consider he would lose the day. And there was something in the girl's eyes which urged him forward. He realized that she had given her trust to him rather than to the dark-faced Italian whose presence there was actually more justifiable than his own.

She made a movement as if to comply with his suggestion, but the count turned swiftly upon her, checking her. "A moment!" he said. "I wish to know one thing. Do you place this—gentleman—first—before your mother?"

"What can you mean?" she said.

He held her by the arm. "You will answer me—if you are wise. Your mother is ill—at my villa. No one enters that villa without my consent."

"But—you are impossible!" said Gabrielle, startled in spite of herself.

He smiled at her with very evil humour. "I am not impossible. I am very reasonable. You will be well advised, signorina, to place your mother first. She is in my care, remember. All who approach her must have my permission."

"But—you could never keep me—her daughter—away from her!" gasped Gabrielle.

"I could shut the gates against you if I chose, signorina," he said through his drawn-back lips, "and no one could open them."

"But she is not a prisoner!" the girl protested, her voice quivering. "She could come out to me."

"If she were well enough—bueno—she might," he said.

Gabrielle turned from him with a gesture of desperation. "What is the matter?" she said to Peter. "What have we done?"

"Nothing—nothing," Voltano assured her. "I will take you to her myself. But I will not have your friend. You part from him here and now."

"That's just what she doesn't do," began Peter; but she stopped him with a quick, almost agonized movement.

"Wait! I must think. I must get to my mother somehow—whatever happens afterwards. Perhaps—perhaps——" she broke off with an appeal in her voice to which she gave no words.

"I shall travel on the same train," said Peter doggedly. "No one can prevent that."

He had almost forgotten his mission in the exigency of the moment. He was determined that she should not be left to the sole care of this infuriating

Italian.

She turned swiftly to the count. “You couldn’t possibly object to that. You see—my cousin and I have arranged to do this journey together.”

“And if I do object?” said Voltano. “If I say, I do not like the English and I will not have his company either for you or myself? If I say, I am deputed by your mother to take the place of guardian to you and I will share the charge with no one? What will you say then, signorina? Do you think you will be wise in persisting? I think not.”

She looked back at Peter, and he saw repugnance as well as entreaty in her eyes. “I think I shall have to give in,” she said in a low voice.

“Not with my consent,” he said firmly.

“Your consent,” said Voltano with sudden brutality, “is of no consequence. You have chosen the only wise course, signorina. Come!”

“You are not going!” interposed Peter quickly and sharply. “You shan’t go with him. I’m here and I mean to look after you. Tell him to clear out—go to the devil!”

His words had weight. She looked on the point of yielding. But in that instant Voltano executed his master stroke with overwhelming force.

“And leave your mother to die alone?” he said. “Have it so then! But do not blame me!”

That moved her. She caught her breath on a barely suppressed cry. “To die! She is not so ill as that!” She turned again to Peter, her face quivering with agitation. “I can’t risk that,” she said hurriedly. “I shall have to go with him. Can’t you see?”

“I see more than you do,” Peter told her. “Don’t believe him! Don’t listen to him!”

But for her the battle was over. He reflected afterwards that she was scarcely to blame, considering the manner of their meeting. If she did not trust Voltano, she had still less reason for trusting himself, and the stake was a high one.

“I can’t help it,” she said, and he thought he caught a note of pleading in her voice. “But I can’t argue any more. I’ve got to go with him. Thank you for all you’ve done. Good-bye!”

It was definite. He was worsted, and something about her checked any further altercation. He saw that he would gain nothing by pursuing the matter,

especially as a little knot of railway officials had gathered near to watch the dispute.

He did not look at Voltano, who raised his hand in arrogant summons to a porter, but stooped and picked up his own suitcase with a brief: "Very well, if you wish it. Good-bye!"

"I'm terribly sorry," she breathed.

"There's nothing to be sorry about," he rejoined. "You're acting for the best—whatever it may lead to. Good-bye!"

And with that he walked away with such dignity as he could muster. Never in his life had he longed more ardently to knock a man down than at that moment.

## CHAPTER VII

### *The Choice*

HE HAD NOT GONE many yards along the platform before he heard the sound of running feet behind, and a man wearing a porter's badge dashed up and swung the suitcase out of his hand.

He turned in some surprise as a voice cried, "Vite—vite! Allons donc! Suivez-moi, monsieur!"

On the verge of indignant protest the words were choked in his throat. The face that smiled up at him under the porter's cap was the face of Pierre.

"What on earth——" began Peter and was instantly cut short.

"Yes, yes! You would like to know! I will tell you later. Follow me now!" And Pierre ran ahead, gripping the suitcase and driving all and sundry from his path.

Peter strode after him, bewildered, but determined to play his part.

He admired the dexterity with which Pierre threaded his way. There was something superlatively artistic about it. He might have been a porter all his life.

They dodged through the great station at a tremendous pace, up steps and along corridors, until finally Pierre dived through a half-open door into what appeared to be a small office and dropped his burden upon the floor.

"Ah, mon Dieu!" he ejaculated. "But what a chase! This is where we make another—what do you call it?—lightning change. Peter—mon très cher—you have very nearly cooked my goose!"

"I don't see——" began Peter.

"Ah no! You would not see." Pierre's eyes chaffed him openly. "But you should never quarrel with your victim. You should be patient—always patient. Why did you not hand over the lady without hesitation? Surely you did not want her yourself!"

"It's a damnable position!" burst from Peter. "The man's an infernal scoundrel—anyone can see. She didn't want to go with him."

Pierre chuckled derisively. “My dear good fellow, that goes without saying. But now wait! You shall tell me everything presently. First, let me put on my own attire! Second, let us catch our train! Et après cela, we will smoke our cigars and breathe.” He flung off his porter’s cap and badge and snatched his own black hat and coat from a peg. “Now we are ready, hein? We must hurry, Peter, hurry. Wait! This is for you.”

He suddenly produced a broad-brimmed hat similar to his own and presented it to Peter.

“You have a mackintosh? Put it on! Turn up the collar and cover up your so-English face as much as possible! Remember you are my colleague! We are two journalists and we travel at the very end of the train—in the luggage van if we must—if only we keep out of sight. Are you ready? We will go.”

He swept Peter along on the tide of his impetuosity, and in a few seconds they were out once more in the turmoil of the station, hurrying unheeded through the varying crowds, heading for a destination with which Pierre was obviously familiar.

Peter gave himself up to his guidance with a curious sense of exhilaration. When Pierre took the helm in this energetic fashion there was nothing else to be done, and he inspired a confidence that was highly satisfying.

He was somewhat surprised that Pierre did not stop to obtain tickets, but when they reached the turnstile a folded paper snatched from his pocket passed them through. The official nodded without a word.

As they walked on to the platform at which the train was waiting, Pierre’s pace became more leisured.

Peter began to look about him for his late travelling companion, but was instantly reprovved. “Keep your head down, foolish! Get into the first empty carriage! Ah, this will do. There is no one here. Get in, I tell you! Here is a paper! Read it!”

He seized a crumpled newspaper from the seat and thrust it into Peter’s hands with a threatening frown that provoked a faint snigger from his half brother.

“You laugh at nothing,” said Pierre sternly. “Here are some glasses!” He pulled a case from his pocket. “Put them on—and read—read!”

Peter complied, huddling himself down obligingly to hide as much of his so-English face as possible. Pierre remained on the platform, glancing up and down with casual interest and guarding the door.

No one attempted to enter the carriage, but Peter had a suspicion that Pierre would have produced some very cogent reason for diverting any intruder had one presented himself. He waited patiently, asking no questions, while the turmoil outside increased and the train began to fill.

Finally, as a warning whistle sounded, Pierre got in and banged the door.

“All is well,” he said. “They are in a wagon-lit in front. Now, my friend, you shall tell me everything and why in heaven’s name you quarrelled with the count.”

“I think I had some reason,” said Peter, and proceeded to give an account of his doings to which Pierre listened with concentration and some amusement.

“And the lady played your game and let him think you were old friends and had travelled together from England!” he said. “That was very subtle of her.”

“Well, it was pretty obvious,” Peter retorted. “She didn’t like the look of the ruffian any better than I did. What are we going to do about it, Pierre? I loathe the thought of her being cooped up with him all night. We can’t keep an eye on them at this distance.”

Pierre patted his arm soothingly. “She will be all right,” he said with conviction. “The man is a scoundrel, yes. But he too has a game to play. If he had stayed in Paris, it would have been different, but he is taking her straight back. He is afraid to do anything else. She will be quite safe for the present.”

“You might let me into your side of the secret,” observed Peter, only slightly reassured.

Pierre smiled at him. “There is not much to tell. He has been watched but he eluded us. It was only this afternoon that we discovered that he had gone to meet the Calais train. Then I guessed that he had managed to fulfil his mission and would return with Madame’s daughter forthwith. Doubtless he carries with him documents for the agent in the south which I would give much to obtain. But I shall not succeed yet. I can only follow and watch.”

“And what am I to do?” said Peter in a voice from which any enthusiasm was markedly absent.

“You!” said Pierre. “You are going to be quite invaluable. You have already done wonders. Your only mistake was to quarrel with the count, and that can be remedied. Except for that, you will go on as you have begun. You will become the man who controls the traffic lights. I shall look to you for the signal—the red light for danger—the green light for safety. And the amber



light—which you must never forget, my Peter—for marking time.”

The train was gathering speed. Peter gave a glance towards the darkness through which they were rushing. His eyes were a trifle sullen. “That’s all very fine,” he said. “I’m quite willing to be made use of. But I don’t quite see how it’s going to work. I’ve been shouldered out of it.”

“You can shoulder yourself in again,” said Pierre. “This demoiselle—she trusts you. She will welcome you back. She will turn to you as a friend.”

“Yes, but she’s in the brute’s power now. How am I going to get her out of it? I can’t very well force my way in through locked doors.” Peter’s voice held resentful perplexity.

Pierre laughed. “You can do that—and more, if I know you. In fact, it should be easy for you now. You have established yourself as her friend and cousin. You have only to follow that up. You are not afraid?”

“Afraid!” echoed Peter.

“Well, but that is all you need—a little courage—a little originality—and patience. You will always need patience, Peter.” Pierre took out a cigar and lit it with an air of smiling philosophy. He was evidently far from despair.

“You’ll have to explain a bit more,” said Peter.

The Frenchman made a small grimace. “I must remember that you are only an apprentice. Later—I shall expect more of you. *Écoutez donc!* We return to Le Beau Rivage and there we remain—or shall I say, you remain—for three days—passive. Then, seeing no sign of the lady, you become tired of your inactivity, and—being English—you decide upon a bold step. Something must be done about it, you say. I will not be cut off thus from my new-found relative. You go therefore to the Villa des Sirènes in broad daylight, having nothing to hide. You send in your card, and you ask to be allowed to see the belle cousine.”

“Fat lot of good that’ll do!” commented Peter. “The door will be shut in my face—if it’s ever opened.”

“That is possible,” admitted Pierre. “But, remember, you are English and you do not know when you are beaten. We will take it that the door is opened, but that you are refused admittance. You then remember that in France it is customary to ask for *la mère*. You bribe the porter to take in your card.”

“Well? Go on!” said Peter. “She also refuses. What do I do then?”

Pierre’s eyes twinkled. “Then, *mon ami*, if that should happen, you betray

some slight awkwardness—*toujours à l'anglais*, you understand—and you ask if the Count himself will have the goodness to receive you, in order that you may offer him an apology for a small misunderstanding that has arisen between you.”

“I’m damned if I’ll do that!” exclaimed Peter.

“Oh yes, you will.” Pierre leaned back to smoke at his ease. “That apology must be made sooner or later—the sooner the better. And it must be a very ample and sufficient one. You will ask his pardon for any offensive language you may have used in the heat of the moment. You will tell him that you hold yourself greatly to blame, but that you did not fully understand his position and travelling as your cousin’s escort had given you—possibly—too exalted an idea of your own. And you will ask him with your nice English smile to shake hands with you and forget it.”

“I’m damned!” said Peter again.

Pierre turned upon him and laughed. “Not yet, *mon frère*. There is still hope for you. You will lay yourself in the dust and let the Italian wipe his shoes on you—even kick you if he desires. And you will then get up, humiliated but without any resentment, and tell him that the punishment was well deserved but that you now rely upon his national generosity to forgive you.”

“Is it a joke?” said Peter.

“No—no! It is what you have to do before you can hope to establish the traffic lights. When you have appeased him—and you will, my friend—you have an aptitude if you will but use it—you will then revert to your relationship with *mademoiselle* and ask him very humbly to allow you to renew your acquaintance with her. He will probably demand as a condition that you repeat your apology in her presence, and to this you will gladly accede, in the spirit that will accept any conditions to attain its end. After that, the wound to his vanity will be healed, though he may continue to treat you with contempt which you will endure with the respect of an inferior.”

He paused. There was a dangerous light in Peter’s eyes, but he did not give vent to his feelings for several seconds, while the train roared through the night making a dull background to mental tumult.

He spoke at length with a certain amount of restraint. “I wonder precisely why you say all this to me, Pierre, when you know perfectly well that I’ll see that dirty dog in hell before I’ll do anything of the kind you mention.”

Pierre took the cigar from his lips, and it was as if he removed the smile

with it. “Why do I say it, you ask? Because, Peter, if you are going to be of the smallest help to a girl who is in a very difficult and even perilous situation, and who, heaven knows, may need your help urgently on a day that may not be very far away, I think it best to show you the only manner in which you can hope to approach her. I will not speak any more of your desire to serve me since I see that that will not avail. But if your pride is of the brainless sort which cannot take the strain, I will say no more at all.”

“Good heavens!” said Peter, startled. “Well, that’s pretty straight from the shoulder, anyway.”

“When I hit—I hit straight always,” rejoined Pierre. “It is more simple and more effective. But I do not hit unless I am sure of my mark. And I do not waste my ammunition upon men of straw.”

Peter uttered a gloomy grunt of appreciation. “Thanks for that compliment, anyway. Well, of course I want to be of use, but I can’t quite see the point of eating dirt to that extent.”

“I have eaten many spoonfuls,” said Pierre quietly. “To me it is only the aftertaste that matters. It is only children who refuse medicine because it is unpleasant.”

Peter grunted again. “You have a convincing way of expressing yourself,” he remarked. “I’ll think it over.”

“Yes, think carefully!” said Pierre. “And remember that pride is after all only a luxury which most of us can renounce with advantage. You are young, Peter. You have yet to learn these things.”

He laid a kindly hand upon Peter’s knee with the words, and in spite of himself Peter melted. “You’re a good chap, Pierre,” he said. “But you’ve given me a pretty tough task. I’ll see what I can do with it.”

“I am sure you will succeed,” smiled Pierre. “When you have thought it over you will see that it is worth the sacrifice. But you shall choose for yourself. I shall ask nothing of you until you have decided.”

Peter looked at him with a grin. “You’re pretty safe there, you old rascal,” he said. “You know I couldn’t back out of this if I tried.”

Pierre’s eyebrows made a most expressive gesture upwards. “Good, Peter, good!” he said. “Enfin, we will work together.”

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Gabrielle's Mother*

IN THE WHITE VILLA above the Point des Sirènes, screened by its many trees, the green shutters were drawn and all was very still. The glare of the sun on the distant sparkling sea was almost intolerable. But the villa stood aloof and secretive, shielded from the glare. The mystery of it, of which the dwellers in Ste Marguérite were so well aware, seemed to be almost intensified by the light of day, as though a veil of solitude had been of set purpose wrapped about it.

The garden that immediately surrounded it was ablaze with flowers and loud with the hum of bees. Climbing roses and blossoming creepers were everywhere, trailing from pillars along the façade, smothering the porch. They were the embroidery on the veil. They helped to screen.

The slow deep murmur of the sea came up through the quiet pines almost like the sound of a requiem. Everywhere there hung a stillness, a hush, that seemed ominous.

And Peter, who had come deliberately to storm the citadel, found himself walking with wary steps, as though he feared to break a spell. The gate at the entrance had been locked, but he had found a vulnerable place in the surrounding wall and had climbed over without much difficulty. But now that he was actually inside, the sense of intrusion was strong upon him. He was by no means sure that Pierre would have countenanced that means of securing an entrance. He might have counselled a preliminary letter and a further three days of inactivity. But Peter had come to the end of his patience and he had no intention of postponing the venture any longer. He was burning to know how Gabrielle had fared in this place of sinister repute and he was determined to satisfy himself as to her welfare at least.

Approaching the portico, he stiffened a little and made his tread more pronounced. After all, they were related. He had a right to seek her out.

But when he reached the white door, with the green-shuttered windows on all sides, something that was vaguely uncanny made him pause. He stared at the black hanging bellpull and hesitated. It was so like a palace of enchantment—or had it become by some malison a prison?—that he could not bring himself without a definite effort to disturb its grim silence. He stood and

listened, as one on the threshold of some tragic discovery. What did those white walls hide?

He raised his hand at length and pulled the dangling handle. A bell clanged somewhere in the house, not loudly, but with a deep, fateful sound. He glanced around at the shielding palms that stood like sentinels along the path by which he had come. But the last vague echoings of the bell died away, and neither from within nor without came there any answer. The silence fell again like an all-enveloping mantle, and again he heard the dirgelike wash of the tideless sea.

A curious sensation of unreality came upon Peter—a feeling that was mixed with awe. The whole place was an enigma—almost of the nature of a fantasy. He might have been dreaming the entire adventure. But here his staunch commonsense asserted itself. He remembered the three days of patience that had been imposed by Pierre, and with the memory his patience came to an end. He caught at the bellpull for the second time.

Again the melancholy notes resounded with a quivering resonance through the villa. It was like a monastic bell, solitary, persistent, somehow despairing. He was convinced beforehand that it would bring forth no response.

But in this he was wrong. Before the spell of silence had completely engulfed the place again there came from somewhere within a sound of shuffling feet. Their approach was deliberate, maddeningly so to his keyed-up senses, but he controlled his impatience, realizing that all semblance of impetuosity must be kept out of sight. He was a normal visitor, come upon a normal errand; and the detail of having climbed the wall to accomplish it must be thrust into the background. There must be nothing in the least headlong or unusual about him. He must be composed and wary, ready for any emergency.

He heard the scrape of bolts being withdrawn, and then the lifting of the latch. The door opened a few inches and a face peered forth. It was the face of an old old woman, and it looked as if it might have been made out of crumpled brown paper. The eyes were black and almost incredibly bright, like the eyes of a monkey. They travelled swiftly up and down him with a species of hostile inquisitiveness.

Peter hesitated momentarily, and then, feeling uncertain as to her nationality, spoke firmly in English. “I have called to see Miss Dermot. Is she at home?”

The beady eyes continued to run to and fro over him at baffling speed, but the mouth, sunken yet hard, remained uncompromisingly closed. He felt that in another moment the door might be shut in his face.

But having ventured so far, he had no intention of being sent empty away. He took out his pocketbook, extracted ten francs and a visiting card, and offered them with a smile. He noticed that during this operation the hostility gave place to another expression more favourable to his cause though scarcely more friendly. A clawlike hand came forth and received his offering, and with a brief nod the brown-faced old woman withdrew.

The door was left ajar, but a heavy curtain of oriental tapestry hung within, hiding the interior from any prying eyes. He remained in the portico where the odour of a thousand flowers, exotic, overpowering, seemed to crowd out all vitality from the air, leaving it languorous and unrefreshing.

Several minutes passed. He began to think himself forgotten, and had started a mental debate as to his next move when there came again the shuffling tread, and the folds of the curtain were pulled aside.

He saw the old woman against the shadows. She was beckoning to him imperiously. Without more ado he pushed open the door and entered.

She slithered behind him in her slippared feet and in a moment the door was shut again. He heard her shoot the bolts while he stood in what seemed to him almost complete darkness after the glare outside.

Then she brushed past him, drew back the curtain again the space of a foot or so and motioned to him to follow.

He did so, and as the curtain fell into place behind him he found himself in a dim, cool passage in which all light was filtered through green shutters. Again that feeling of unreality came upon him. It was as though he walked in a dream. The old woman moving in front was like a witch out of a fairy tale.

And then, suddenly it seemed, they were at the end of the passage, and she opened a door in the gloom. He caught a glimpse of the slats of sunlit shutters and heard again the secret murmuring of the sea. A few muffled words were spoken, and then his guide stood back, ushering him forward.

He entered a room that was filled with a green twilight, and it came to him with a sense of shock that it was like stepping into a grave. There was a vaultlike stillness in the atmosphere that smote him with a ghostly chill.

The door closed behind him, and he looked about him expectantly, half hoping that Gabrielle might move forward out of the shadows to greet him. But he was disappointed. No greeting reached him.

His eyes found and dwelt upon the only occupant of the room—a woman with a strange Madonnalike beauty who sat still in a great easy chair near one

of the shuttered windows and looked at him with eyes of so startling an earnestness that they seemed to pierce through to his very soul.

She was the first to speak, and that after a considerable silence during which he sought in vain for words. For there was something of tragedy in that quiet room that demanded the most elemental simplicity. It was no moment for subterfuge or for the conventionalities of ordinary intercourse. It was to Peter as though he stood by a deathbed, and her voice, low and husky, seemed to proclaim the semblance as actual fact.

“So you have come!” she said. “I have been hoping—praying—that you might, though the chance seemed so small—so small. Ah well, I know now—now—that God answers prayer, if—if only one can pray hard enough.”

She paused, and he was aware of a hand held out to him—a trembling, uncertain hand. He bent swiftly and took it.

“You are—Peter Dunrobert,” she said, “—my Gabrielle’s cousin. Won’t you sit down so that we can talk?”

He found his voice. “You are Gabrielle’s mother,” he said, and took the chair beside her to which she motioned him. “She reached you safely, I hope?”

“Oh yes, she is with me.” She spoke in the same low voice; it was as if she feared the exertion of raising it. Her sunken eyes still searched his face. They held a look that stirred him to a deep compassion. “She told me about you, how kind you had been. He—the count—brought her straight here.”

“I’m glad of that,” said Peter with a touch of grimness.

She continued to watch him with a sort of mute entreaty. “I was taken ill,” she said. “I could not go to meet her as I had intended. He—Gaspere—went in my place. I had no one else to send. I did not know—I could not guess—that you would be there.”

It was as though she were pleading with him, fearing some harsh judgment, and striving to range him on her side.

“Of course not!” Peter said. “How could you know? It was really an odd coincidence.” He hesitated momentarily, and then, “I don’t suppose you remember me, do you?” he asked. “I saw you once—many years ago.”

“I do remember,” she said. “Your honest, wide-apart eyes—they made an impression upon me, though you were so small.”

“It’s a strange chance,” said Peter with more assurance, “that we should meet again like this.”

“Ah! I do not believe in chance.” Almost under her breath she answered him. “It isn’t chance that has sent you. I have been praying that you might come. I have been an unbeliever for years, but now—with the night drawing on—I am beginning to see—something that I have never seen before. Someone is holding up a light in the darkness. Someone is guiding me.” She paused with her hand to her heart. Then with obvious effort: “It was not chance that sent you to—my Gabrielle,” she said. “It was not chance that brought you here today.”

“It was not,” said Peter.

She laid her wasted hand upon his arm and a strange light shone in her eyes. “Oh, how good it is,” she said, “to speak once more with an honest English gentleman! Do you know you remind me somehow of—my husband?”

“I believe he was rather a wonderful man,” Peter said, not quite certain how to answer this.

Her hand pressed upon him. He could feel through his sleeve that it was burning. “Yes, he was wonderful,” she said. “He was more. He was safe—honourable. He gave me that which might have turned my world into a paradise. But in my blindness—my wickedness—I threw it all away. I chose instead a dream—an illusion, a shining bubble of emptiness. Well, that is all over.” Her beautiful face quivered for a moment, but she controlled it. “The chance will never be mine again—in this world. You know what I did and what I became. And I have been punished bitterly—bitterly.”

Some impulse he could not check moved Peter to ask: “Why did you never go back? Wouldn’t he—couldn’t he——” He broke off. “Oh, forgive me! I shouldn’t have said it.”

“You may say anything you like to me,” she said gently. “I didn’t go back because he died before I repented. After that, I felt more or less bound. There was my child. It would have meant destitution for her too. I had no near relatives. I could not ask my husband’s people for help.”

“If I’d only known!” Peter said impetuously.

“My dear boy, you were still a lad at school. Besides, it would have been impossible—utterly impossible.” But her eyes held gratitude none the less, and he thought he saw in them a gleam of tears. “No, I sowed tares instead of wheat, and it was just that I should reap my harvest.” Her hand slipped slowly from his arm. “I should not be saying this to you,” she said, “if I had only myself to think of.”

He bent towards her, for it seemed for an instant as if she were receding



from him, growing shadowy amongst the shadows of the room. "I can help in some way," he said. "Tell me how!"

She lay looking at him as though on the verge of exhaustion. "I don't know—if you can," she said, almost in a whisper. "But—there is no one else who could. You see, the time is so short—so very short. It is right that I should suffer. I deserve it, God knows. But—my one fear is—that my sin may be visited—upon her. That is my great dread now. If—that—were only taken away, I could die in peace—die gladly."

"I see," Peter said very gently.

In the silence he saw her throat working; she put her hand up to still it. "I tell myself"—her words were very faint; he had to stoop nearer to catch them—"that that is why you have been sent—to—to—perhaps to save her from evil. But am I right, I wonder? Or is it—just another of my blunders?"

The piteous question moved him deeply. All the strangeness of the situation had faded into insignificance beside the fact that he saw before him a woman who was very near to death and in great distress of mind. For there was no mistaking the nature of the shadow that overhung her. There was death in her face. He saw it clearly, and because of it he answered her instantly and swiftly, as he would have held water to one dying of thirst.

"I will do anything in my power to help you—anything whatever."

"Ah!" She drew a sharp breath and flinched as if at a stab of pain. "How good you are! And you would keep your word. I can see that. Do you know she is here—here in the very midst of evil—and she has not seen it? She is untouched as yet. Her eyes have not been opened. She has not seen—the serpent in the garden." A sudden shudder caught her, and she closed her eyes for a few seconds. When she opened them again they were heavy with suffering. "She does not even know yet that I am leaving her. I have managed—somehow—to hide it from her. I am clinging on for her sake—because—when I am gone—there will be no one to protect her. Oh, do you understand how terribly afraid I am for her, and what it means to find someone—suddenly—who might help?"

"I think I do," Peter said slowly. "But—she will have to be told—something. She can't be left in ignorance, poor kid."

"How naturally you say that!" The flicker of a smile crossed her drawn face. "But don't you see how necessary it is for her to leave me? And do you imagine for one moment that she would do that if she knew?"

Peter gave her a very direct look. "I think you'll find it difficult to get her

to do that in any case,” he said.

She pressed her hands together. “But not impossible! That is where—perhaps—you can help if you really will. But you are so young. It makes it difficult.”

“Don’t forget I’m a sort of relation!” said Peter sturdily.

“I know.” She spoke gratefully. “And she likes you and trusts you. She believes that you were sent to meet her. I believe it too—though not by me.”

“I can partly explain that,” Peter said. “I am by way of being a journalist. I went to meet the boat at Calais, and she spoke to me as she came down the gangway. I saw that she was an inexperienced traveller and offered my help. The rest—followed.”

He paused, wondering if this explanation would suffice. She accepted it without question. “You were very good to her. She told me. And afterwards, when you reached Paris, I’m afraid Gaspare was rather suspicious and not too polite. He is like that. He jumped to the conclusion that you had come all the way from England with her, and she did not undeceive him. That I quite understood. He is very fiery and can be difficult at times. It was natural that she preferred to be with a countryman of her own.”

“But I suppose you told her,” Peter said, “that you had not sent me?”

She shook her head. “You will think me very deceitful, but I was convinced that you would follow her here. And so I simply said that there had been a misunderstanding.”

“And the count? What did you say to him?” asked Peter.

“He still thinks that you travelled with her from England. I had to leave it at that for her sake.” Again he saw the ghost of a smile in her eyes. “I don’t think that there was much harm in that, and it saved discussion.”

“It certainly simplifies things for me,” said Peter. “Do you think—if I apologize for any roughhouse language I may have used—he will admit me here as a family friend?”

“Would you apologize?” she said on a note of surprise.

“If there’s anything to be gained by it—certainly,” said Peter squarely.

He saw the tension gradually passing from her. She looked exhausted yet unutterably relieved. “What a help you are—already!” she said. “Of course I do not say that he would welcome you but I don’t think he would wish to appear unreasonable. I am sure he would like an apology.”

Peter almost laughed. “Very well. I’ll do that as a beginning. And then—as regards Gabrielle! If I were able to find some post for her in England, and then—well, then kept a fatherly eye on her, is that the sort of thing you would like?”

Her eyes lightened wonderfully, and he saw in a moment of revelation how lovely she had once been. “Could you do such a thing?” she said. “Is there the faintest chance of it?”

“If she would agree,” Peter said, “and if I could find out what she would really like to do, I would get busy about it. I know plenty of people. It ought not to be very difficult.”

“That is wonderful of you,” she said. “But you will want money. I have always provided for her. All I have—jewels—everything is hers.”

Peter broke in with a touch of gruffness. “Oh, please—not that! I’ve got money too. My father was a rich man. Let her think it comes from you by all means! But I couldn’t—I mean I’d rather not——” He stopped abruptly.

She had put her hand over her eyes. “I understand,” she said.

He looked at her, and his heart smote him. “Listen!” he said suddenly. “I expect you’ll think me mad. I don’t care what you think. Why don’t you leave this man—send him about his business? I’ll provide for you—look after you both.”

She kept her eyes covered. “You don’t know what you are saying. It is quite—quite impossible.”

“Why?” demanded Peter doggedly. “You say you can trust me, and, as a matter of fact, I make rather a point of being trustworthy. Why won’t you leave him? He’s a scoundrel, and you know it.”

A low sob came from her, a wrung sound that made him curse himself for his clumsy floundering in a situation that required the utmost tact and delicacy of touch.

“Oh, I say, forgive me!” he said. “I ought not to have said all that. I hadn’t the faintest right. But I only want to help.”

“I know,” she said gently. “I know. Believe me, I do fully understand that. But what you suggest is impossible. I gave myself to him—unconditionally—long ago, and in his own fashion he has loved me. I belong to him until he finally throws me aside.”

Peter suppressed the forcible words that clamoured within him. She was

obviously nearing the end of her strength, and he was beginning to wonder if he had already stayed too long.

But even while the thought hung in his mind she looked up at him again with eyes from which all emotion was steadfastly banished.

“I have no words to thank you,” she said. “Your kindness is simply overwhelming. But I want you—please—to give it all to my little girl. Her need of it is very great. There are dangers of which I cannot even speak to you to which she might be exposed at any time. If you can do anything, let it please be soon!”

“It shall be,” Peter said. “Where is she now? Can I go and find her?”

“She is in the garden, down on the terrace or by the sea. But first—before you go”—she leaned forward, holding out both her hands—“oh, will you promise me one thing—only one thing—and that is not to let her know—never to let her know? It’s the only pain left that I don’t think I could bear.”

Peter held the imploring hands very firmly. “Of course I will never let her know!” he said. “But—are you sure she has no suspicion?”

“She has not the faintest. She believes that the count is a very busy man—as indeed he is—with many calls upon his time, and that I am just his paid secretary. I want her”—her voice shook—“I want her always to believe that, even after I am gone. I feel that I shall know; wherever I am, I shall know. And oh, it hasn’t been so easy all these years. I have had to think of her as well. Oh, never let her know! Never let her suspect!”

Peter was looking at her with his straight, level gaze. “She shall never know,” he said, “if I can prevent it.”

There was firm resolution in his tone. He spoke as a man whose word was his bond. And as she heard him, great tears welled suddenly in her eyes and rolled down her drawn face. She could not speak, but in those tears there was more than gratitude.

Peter released her hands gently and stood up. He was moved himself but he did his best to hide it.

“Thank you,” he said, “for the trust you have placed in me. I will do my best—always—to be worthy of it. Shall I leave you now? May I go into the garden and perhaps come back and see you again afterwards?”

She made a blind gesture of acquiescence. He saw that for the moment her self-control was gone and he judged that it would be kinder to leave her.

So, quietly, he turned away to the door by which he had entered and passed out into the passage beyond.

## CHAPTER IX

### *Gabrielle*

A CURTAIN of green reeds hung before a doorway which he guessed must lead into the garden, and he made his way towards it over thick rugs that muffled the sound of his footsteps. A draught of warm air blew in from the sea as he reached it, and as he parted the reeds the dazzle of the afternoon sun burst upon him, nearly blinding him.

He found himself standing at the top of a flight of white stone steps with the villa garden lying asleep below him. All along the terrace at his feet there ran a gorgeous border of belladonna lilies, deeply pink; while beyond it stretched the cool dark green of pines and cypresses, and a path winding between palms and flowering yuccas lost itself in their dark shadows.

He descended the steps to the terrace and found another flight immediately below flanked by statues of dryads and nymphs and urns that were massed in flowers. The riot of colour and perfume was almost bewildering, extravagant to his English eyes, exotic in every detail, typically southern.

He descended this second flight and heard the tinkle of falling water. A moment later he reached the path and turning into the welcome shade he came upon a fairy cascade that tumbled with a miniature roar over moss-grown stones. It was an exquisite contrast to the heat and glare above, and he paused for a second's breathing space to review the situation in which he found himself. It was totally different from what he had expected and the tragedy of it seemed to spread to the very atmosphere around him. It was strange how Fate seemed to be sweeping him perpetually out of his course. He was evidently not destined to play any part in Pierre's game, and in fact he no longer had any desire to do so. Gabrielle and Gabrielle's mother filled his thoughts to the exclusion of all else. He had come in the hope of being of some use to the girl; now he knew that it was his task to save her. She had become his own especial responsibility in a fashion that there could be no disputing, and he meant to shoulder that responsibility to the full. It was almost as if she had been given to him, who had so few family belongings, to care for and protect; and something within him warmed to the thought. He visualized for the first time the possibility of turning his energies to good account.

The music of the cascade held the sound of laughter, and he glanced about

him almost as if he expected to see some mocking, gnomelike creature pointing the finger of scorn. But the only living thing he saw was a brown lizard that whisked swiftly away at his movement and was gone in a second among the stones.

He turned from the sylvan fairyland and went on down the path, moving deeper and deeper into the shadows until a glitter through the trees told him that he was nearing another terrace—probably the terrace of the pagoda from which the news of Gabrielle’s existence had first come to him.

He pursued his way and very soon discovered that he was walking along a shelf high above the glassy pool through which he had swum into the crosscurrents at the Point. That gave him his bearings and very soon he reached the flight of steps that led down to the second terrace. He descended as far as the angle where they turned abruptly inwards, and then, leaving the downward grade, mounted again between ilex trees to the terrace.

The sun smote upon him again with burning intensity as he emerged. The paving stones on which he walked had a blistering heat, and everywhere, like the flames of a multicoloured furnace, were flowers—roses, lilies, flowers of all descriptions—set in a blazing profusion of creepers that made the eyes ache for the shelter of green trees.

Peter had never regarded himself as impressionable before, but he was conscious of an active sense of repulsion as he walked through that gaudy wealth of blossom. Words which had but recently been uttered ran suddenly through his mind: “She has not yet seen the serpent in the garden.” And he reflected sombrely that he at least would be on the lookout for something evil in such a spot. Its beauty was of too fantastic an order. It reminded him vaguely of the transformation scene of a pantomime. It was theatrical—even melodramatic.

The sea was like a sheet of silver that reflected and enormously magnified the sun. He could not bear to turn his eyes towards it. The piercing, metallic sheen of it was unendurable.

“I was a fool not to bring my glasses,” he muttered to himself.

The dazzling dome shape of the summerhouse rose before him, and he turned towards it, almost groping his way. He stumbled against the first of the marble steps and then recovered himself and ascended them with purpose. He would seek her here before he went any further.

The glare lessened as he reached the top. He saw a tangle of passionflowers climbing over a white stone balustrade and behind this there was a welcome

stretch of shadow into which he stepped.

At once he was standing in a sort of green gloom in which chairs and cushions were scattered as carelessly as the clambering flowers. He stopped on the threshold and looked about him, and before his eyes were accustomed to the dimness Gabrielle's voice accosted him.

"Why, it is you—Peter! I thought it was Cesari."

There was surprise in her tone, but he was not quite sure that it held pleasure though he tried to fancy that it did.

He turned towards her and found her risen from a low chair to greet him. Her eyes behind their gleaming lashes shone intensely blue. She gave him a sedate smile of welcome while she extended her hand.

He held it in his for a moment, and marvelled again at its smallness. It seemed to go to nothing in his grasp.

"I hope you're not disappointed," he said. "Who is Cesari?"

"Signor Montello—a friend of Count Gaspare's," she answered. "He said he should be coming some time this afternoon. But never mind him! How long have you been here?"

"I have been in Ste Margu rite for the last three days," said Peter. "But I didn't like to call upon you too soon."

"Why not?" she said. "I was sorry we had to part as we did in Paris, but the count was rather difficult to manage, wasn't he?"

Again he was struck by the self-possession that seemed to go so oddly with her childish appearance. For here, standing bare-headed, with her fair hair slightly ruffled, she looked even younger than when he had first seen her. She was exquisitely made, and her thin summer dress gave her a fairylike aspect that appealed to him strangely. She seemed the one pure white flower in the whole of that tropical garden.

"Would you like to come and sit down?" she said. "It's very nice here, don't you think?"

He followed her and sat down in the low chair she indicated. Somehow, in face of her quiet detachment, he found it difficult to broach the matter that was uppermost in his thoughts. If she had greeted him with any real warmth he would not have hesitated.

"I hope the count behaved decently to you," he said with a touch of awkwardness.



She laughed a little. “Oh, quite. His manners were perfect the moment you were gone. Of course, he rather took me in over my mother. I found her much better than I had expected.”

“I have just been with her,” Peter said.

“Oh, have you?” She seated herself on the wall of the balustrade and looked down at him with grave attention. “What do you think of her?”

Peter hesitated. “She doesn’t look overstrong,” he admitted after a moment. “But of course I’m no judge.”

“No,” she agreed quietly. “I daresay you think I look delicate too, but I am not in the least. I don’t think appearances are always to be relied upon.”

“Probably not,” said Peter.

“Certainly not in my case,” she maintained. “But now that I am here, I think that I can do a good deal to help her. I have told the count so, and he seems willing to let me try.”

Peter sat up sharply. “What does that mean?”

She smiled at him with a hint of irony. “Well, what do you think it means? Naturally I want to earn my bread and butter.”

“D’you mean you’d offer to act as that man’s secretary?” Peter said.

“I have offered,” she told him calmly. “I am not much good but I could learn. My mother could help me, and so could Cesari.”

Peter stared at her. He felt as if she had dealt him a light but very decided buffet in the face. “Have you consulted your mother?” he asked.

“No, not yet.” She pulled off a fruit of passionflower and began to play with it, throwing it carelessly from hand to hand. “I thought I would sound the count first. He seemed to think the scheme had possibilities.”

“It sounds madness to me,” Peter said.

Her face was in the shadow, but he saw an enigmatical expression flit across it at his words. She said nothing but continued to throw the tiny green ball to and fro.

He sat watching her, wondering how to deal with this new contingency and trying to rein in the impetuosity that urged him.

“Shall I tell you what your mother has just been saying to me?” he said.

She shook her head without pausing in her game. “I’m not very interested

in fairy tales,” she said.

That flicked him very definitely. He got up and stood before her. “You’ve no right to say that to me,” he said.

She was smiling, as a child might smile at some amusing secret. “Are we talking of rights or wrongs?” she said.

Peter paused for consideration. She was very baffling, this girl with the innocent face and self-contained manner. She made him think of a will-o’-the-wisp, impossible of capture, yet alluring even while she eluded.

“We are not discussing either,” he said at length. “But I don’t see why I should be treated with suspicion just because I am out to help you.”

She made a faint sound that was like a suppressed laugh. “Are you sure you’re backing the right horse?” she said. “What makes you think I want any help?”

He answered her without any hesitation. “The mere fact that you are thinking of taking employment from this Voltano. You hated him yourself at first sight. You can’t deny it.”

“I don’t,” she said coolly. “That was mere insular prejudice on my part. I’ve changed my mind since.”

“You can’t mean that you trust him!” Peter said explosively.

She dropped her hands suddenly, holding the fruit caught between them. “Can you tell me why I should trust anyone?” she said.

It was the third cut that he had received from her. He realized that it ought to have stung him to fury, but it did not. He simply stood looking straight into her eyes until with a small gesture that was half-petulant and half-appealing she turned aside.

“I think you know that you can trust me,” Peter said then in a low voice.

She did not answer him, and he was not sure that her silence held acquiescence. Because of that small gesture of hers which had not been wholly repelling, he decided to press the point.

“Can’t you trust me, Gabrielle?” he said.

She did not look at him, and he suddenly caught a glimpse of something forlorn and rather dejected about her that he had not suspected until that moment.

He dealt with it swiftly, in his own way, throwing discretion aside. “Look

here! You've got to trust me," he said with decision. "I've not let you down yet and I never shall. You're going to believe that whether you want to or not."

She turned her head slowly and contemplated him. "I'm sure you're very well-meaning," she said.

"Well-meaning be damned!" said Peter. "I'm one of the family—not a blasted outsider—and I mean to be treated as such. Your mother—thank goodness!—realizes that."

"My mother!" Her eyes fixed him with a very straight look. "What do you know about my mother?" she said.

He met her look with absolute directness, but something within him flinched. "I know that though she is herself in the employ of this Voltano, she doesn't consider it at all a suitable setting for you," he said. "She would never have brought you here. It was only the unlucky chance of her illness that made it unavoidable. But she doesn't want to keep you here. She has probably told you so herself. If not, she certainly will. She wants you to go back to England and find work there."

"That is rather easier said than done, isn't it?" said Gabrielle.

"As it happens, it isn't," he returned. "I can help you there. I am quite certain I could find you a job."

"You are always certain of everything," she said in a tone that he did not quite understand.

"Well, I shouldn't let you down," he rejoined. "If you would go back to your friends the Lingardes for a short time, I would undertake to find you a post within two months."

"Somewhere under your eye, I suppose," she suggested, "as head of the family?"

He received the barb without any sign of discomfiture. "All right, if you like to put it that way," he said. "I promise I shouldn't lose sight of you anyhow."

"I wonder why," she said musingly.

"Why what?" said Peter.

"Why you should want to take all this trouble," she explained, her wide eyes still frankly studying him. "It can't be just because there is a very distant connection between us. I simply won't pass that. It's too silly. Why is it?"

The question was quietly uttered, but it had in it something of the quality of

a challenge, and he knew instinctively that he must stand up to it or lose her confidence for good and all.

He flung down his own gauntlet forthwith. "Is there any reason why I shouldn't take an interest in you?" he said. "Have you any special objection to me?"

It was her turn to flinch, but the fact that she did so was scarcely perceptible. Her eyelids flickered very slightly as she said, "Not at present. But I'm not sure that I want too much of it—not if it amounts to interference."

"If it's for your own good," said Peter stubbornly, "I don't see that you have any cause for complaint."

She smiled at that and he saw the tip of her tongue for an instant. "That's the remark that usually precedes a whipping, isn't it? I'm sure you must think I'm very young and foolish. But, whatever your point of view——"

He interrupted her, urged by an impulse that would not be restrained. "Oh, don't talk like that! I want to know you. I want to be friends. If you were old and wise I don't suppose I should like you half as much. But you're so sweet—exactly like a fairy princess. Surely you can't be offended with me for wanting to know you better!"

He flushed hotly over the words, but Gabrielle flushed too with a pleasing vividness that almost put him at his ease.

She turned a little from him and began to play with the passion fruit again. "P'raps we're neither of us very old or wise at present," she said after a few seconds. "It's very hot, isn't it? Don't you think we'd better go somewhere where we can cool down?"

Since it was an invitation and not a dismissal Peter accepted it. There was something within him—could it be his heart?—that was strangely quivering. Perhaps he was intoxicated by the heavy perfumes around him.

"I'll go anywhere you like," he said. "But don't get sunstroke! It's like a furnace outside."

She stooped and picked up a green sunshade from the floor, handing it to him with that demure smile of hers which he was beginning to know.

"We'll go to the very tip of the Point des Sirènes," she said, "and have a look for mermaids. And if we see any——" she paused.

"Yes?" said Peter.

"I shall then know how much your interest is worth," she said gravely.

“And if we don’t?” said Peter.

He caught a mischievous gleam behind her gold-tipped lashes. “In that case I suppose I shall remain in blissful ignorance,” she said.

“But not for long,” said Peter with a ring of determination in his voice.

“You’d better walk very carefully,” said Gabrielle, “because it’s rather slippery.”

## CHAPTER X

### *The Rocky Edge*

THEY WENT ALONG the glaring terrace under the green sunshade to the steps at the further end up which Peter had crept on the evening of his adventure in the whirlpool. Seen by the light of day, the place, though overgrown and deeply shadowed, had lost its eeriness, and Peter moved with assurance, feeling himself upon familiar ground. He furled the sunshade and they descended the winding flight side by side.

The sound of the sea which had seemed remote up above grew louder and more insistent as they went, but it had lost its menacing quality. It made a murmuring background to a scene which even he had to admit was full of charm.

“This is the best thing I’ve seen yet,” he said.

“Don’t you like the gardens?” asked Gabrielle.

“No, I don’t. I hate all that blaze of flowers. It’s like too much to drink,” said Peter bluntly.

“You are English, aren’t you?” she said, and he was not sure whether her tone held admiration or disparagement.

“I am—very,” he returned. “But so are you, so it can’t be that.”

“I think I know what you mean,” she conceded. “But here in the south one expects things to be a bit flamboyant. If you don’t like it, why do you come?”

He hesitated a second and then decided to tell her. “I have a half brother, a Frenchman. He is older than I am. He wanted me to take a holiday here with him.”

“Oh!” she said in a tone of enlightenment. “That is what brought you. I was thinking you didn’t somehow fit in with the usual Riviera crowd. What is he like—your half brother? And how does he manage to be French?”

“His father was French,” explained Peter, wondering if Pierre would approve of these confidences. “His mother—and mine—was English. Her second husband was an Englishman.”

Gabrielle gave him an interested glance. “Is your half brother nice? What is

his name?”

“Pierre. Yes, he’s a first quality brick.” Peter felt that on this subject at least he could expand with impunity. “I’ve never known a better chap. He was made my guardian before I came of age and he’s been my best friend ever since.”

“And you’re both Peters!” commented Gabrielle. “That’s rather a nice idea. It must seem funny to have a French brother. I wonder it hasn’t made you more tolerant.”

“I’m afraid I don’t see enough of him,” said Peter with abrupt humility. “He’s quite a wonderful fellow. I hope you’ll meet him someday. I’m sure you’d think so.”

“I’m sure I should,” she agreed. “Does he keep you in order? Or has he given up trying?”

Peter laughed. “He’s quite good at holding his own, if that’s what you mean. By Jove, that’s a good sight!”

They had reached the bottom of the steps and rounded the rocky corner where the jutting shelf began. Before them stretched the Mediterranean, no longer a blinding sea of light, but from where they stood, looking eastwards, an immense expanse of sparkling sapphire.

“Yes, this is what I like best,” Gabrielle said. “It’s a lovely world, isn’t it? Look at those red sails over there—and the white ones beyond—just like toys! But come down a little further! There’s a sort of recess where we can look over at the crosscurrents. You’ll enjoy that better. It’s more like England.”

Peter knew that recess. It was there that he had lain after his terrific struggle in the whirlpool. “Let me go first!” he said. “Then you can hang on to me if necessary.”

“It won’t be,” she assured him. “I’ve been there before. I have a very steady head.”

But he preceded her down the rocky incline nevertheless, looking about him with interest and marvelling more and more at his own escape as he descended.

The roar of the clashing currents came up like the sound of a cataract, and as he rounded the curve of rock he saw the broken water foaming around the rocks and dashing its spray against the foot of the brown cliff that fell away practically sheer on his right.

The path narrowed considerably before bending steeply inwards to the recess and for the last few paces it was barely more than a yard in width. He looked back at his companion and found her treading lightly and surely, without the faintest hesitation, in his wake.

As he reached the cleft he held up a hand to help her, but she did not take it, merely stepped down beside him with a soft little laugh.

“You ought not to come here by yourself,” he said.

She looked at him wide-eyed. “Why ever not? I should have said it was just one of those places where solitude really belongs. I’ve been here lots of times.”

“It’s dangerous,” Peter said. “Look down there! How would you like to be caught in that race?”

She stood in the hollow beside him and peered over the edge. “Well, not much, certainly, though it isn’t far to fall. All among the mermaids! Can you see any?”

“I’m not laughing,” Peter insisted. “It is—damned dangerous. You’ve no idea what it’s like down there. It simply sucks you under like a bit of driftwood. It’s like being in the grip of a giant. No skill in swimming is of the faintest use. You simply have to go the way you’re hurled—either be drowned or possibly smashed to a jelly against the rock.”

“That sounds very realistic,” she said. “Almost as if you’d tried it. Have you?”

The direct question pulled him up short. He suddenly found that he could not lie to her. “Well, I know what it’s like,” he said. “You can picture it for yourself.”

“Oh yes, I can,” she answered. “But you can’t. You would say—if you hadn’t tried it—‘No current would ever get the better of me. I’d force a way out somehow.’” She mimicked his voice with her faint, inward-looking smile. “Now wouldn’t you? Does any man—any Englishman—ever own himself beaten without a practical demonstration?”

“I don’t know,” said Peter.

She bent round abruptly and looked up into his face. “And why weren’t you either drowned or smashed to a jelly? Tell me!”

His eyes met hers because it was impossible to avoid them. “I suppose I was lucky,” he said.



“Go on!” she commanded, still peering at him with a look half-coaxing, half-imperious.

He drew back from her sharply, as though resisting a sudden impulse. “I’m not going on,” he said. “If you’ve got such a lively imagination, you can picture the rest for yourself. But I still maintain it’s dangerous for you to come here alone.”

“How did you get out?” she insisted. “Was there a mermaid to help you? Or did you crawl up there?” indicating the narrow ledge that slanted downwards from their resting place to the tossing water.

Peter thrust his hands into his pockets with a definite movement of negation. “I won’t try your credulity too far,” he said. “You don’t like fairy tales, do you?”

“No,” she rejoined. “I should very much appreciate the truth for once. If you won’t tell me anything, I’m going down that little gully place to look for myself.”

He stood firmly planted, like a mule. “No, Gabrielle, please! You’re not to go down there. One false step would finish you.”

“But I never take false steps,” she said. “And I want to see how you climbed up. You needn’t treat me like a child, because I can easily go another time when you’re not here.”

“No, you mustn’t,” Peter said with abrupt earnestness. “You’ve got to promise me you won’t. It’s a hell of a place, and if I thought you were going down there alone I should never have a quiet moment. Come—promise!”

She looked at him with raised brows, but she was not offended. “Do you think I’d keep a promise of that sort?” she said.

“Yes, I’m dead sure you would.” There was no hesitation in Peter’s rejoinder. He held out his hand to her. “Is it done?”

She regarded the hand with pursed lips. “I don’t quite see why I should,” she said. “It can’t matter so frightfully to you.”

“It does,” said Peter shortly.

“But why?” she persisted, putting her hands behind her with a touch of perversity. “We’re only acquaintances, after all. You’re scarcely a relation, and you’ve no authority whatever over me. If I choose to go down there and get washed away, it’s no affair of yours.”

“It is my affair!” burst from Peter suddenly, so suddenly that he himself

hardly knew what was happening. “We’re not just acquaintances. I’m trying to play the game, but you won’t let me. You’re pushing me over the edge all the time. Yes, I know it’s only the second time I’ve seen you—but you——” He broke off, fighting with himself and then made a blind movement to leave her.

But she stopped him with the lightest touch on the shoulder. “Don’t go away!” she said. “Get it off your chest! It’s much better.”

Coolly as she spoke, her touch was more than he could bear. It was flint to steel. He turned before she could know what she had done and caught her to him.

Even then, had she resisted him, he would have set her free. But she was passive in his hold, passive though gasping as his lips strained upon hers, and when his hold relaxed she still made no effort to withdraw herself; only said in a small, breathless voice: “That’s—rather impulsive of you, isn’t it?”

“Are you furious with me?” he asked under his breath.

“No.” But she turned her face away from him as she answered. “I suppose I asked for it—more or less. Only I didn’t know you’d take it—quite like that.”

“May I take it again?” whispered Peter.

She uttered a shaky laugh. “It doesn’t much matter now. It’s no good locking the stable door, is it? After all, you are an Englishman.”

“Why do you say that?” he said.

Her eyes met his for a single instant. “I think you know why,” she said. “You may lose your head—but not your reason.”

The words pierced him though he did not feel that they were meant to wound. “I’m sorry,” he said humbly. “You’re right. The air of this place has gone to my head. But I loved you from the moment I saw you. It is love, Gabrielle. You do believe that?”

“Yes,” she said simply.

He bent his face to hers again. “Then won’t you—couldn’t you——?”

Her eyes were closed. “If you want to kiss me, you can,” she said. “But I shan’t kiss you—ever—unless I’m quite sure that I love you.”

He clasped her closer. “All right, darling. I understand. Will you try?” he said.

“I won’t promise,” she answered with that vagrant smile of hers that was somehow so magnetic.

He stooped and kissed her again, less passionately, but in a fashion more possessively. "You needn't," he said. "I'll teach you without, my lovely queen of the fairies. When will you let me take you back to England?"

"Not yet," she said.

"Why not? You like this place so much?"

"I don't know," she said. "I've got to find out."

"But why?" he urged. "Your mother doesn't want you to stay, and I've got a super home in England waiting for you—with horses to ride—everything you could possibly want."

She gently freed herself from his hold. "You mustn't be so sudden, Peter," she said. "You don't know me at all yet. I shouldn't dream of marrying you, if that's what you mean. And I couldn't very well share your home without."

"I'd get a chaperon for you," he said recklessly. "I'm not such a fool as to expect you to fall in love with me at first sight just because I've done it myself. But I've never been in love before. I think you ought to know that."

"Thank you," she said. "It's very nice of you. But—I shouldn't like you to sacrifice your journalistic career on my account—unless I felt I had something to give you in exchange."

"Oh, damn that!" Peter said. "I only took it up to please Pierre."

"I should like to meet Pierre," she said, a provocative gleam of humour in her eyes. "I want to know what he does when he wants to keep you in order."

"You shall meet him," declared Peter. "He'll give me a good character all right. Come and dine with us at the Beau Rivage tonight! I'll see you home."

She shook her head. "No, thank you. Cesari is coming, and we are all going to the casino afterwards."

"All?" questioned Peter.

"Well, Count Gaspare, Cesari and I," she told him, still looking provocative. "I suppose I really ought to ask your permission first, but, you see, it was all fixed up before you came on the scene."

"Who on earth is this Cesari?" demanded Peter. "You seem very familiar with him."

"Everybody seems to get familiar here," she returned, passing a hand over her ruffled hair. "I can't tell you who he is if you want to know what his father and his grandfather were. I only know he's a friend of the household, and he is

teaching me Italian.”

Peter suppressed a rude ejaculation. Her fairness and her composure were almost too much for him. She gave him the impression of a child swinging her legs nonchalantly over the edge of a precipice. She made him half angry and half scared.

“Look here!” he said, restraining himself with difficulty. “I am English as you’ve remarked more than once. And I hope by that you mean I’m trustworthy. But these foreign chaps are different. You can’t afford to be free and easy with them. It’s not safe.”

“But I’m not free and easy with anyone,” she pointed out. “And anyhow Cesari knows how to behave. He only kisses my hand.”

Peter grinned in spite of himself. “A bull’s-eye, mademoiselle! But I’m in earnest. I look on you as my own particular responsibility, whether you like it or not. I don’t want you to stay here indefinitely. Say you won’t!”

It was boyishly spoken, and perhaps on that account it went further with her than any maturer pronouncement. “I’ll think about it,” she said. “But I can’t rush off again quite yet. You see, I’ve only been here three days and I want to be with my mother for a little while, anyway.”

“Oh, I know,” Peter said. “But she would like you to be settled in England. She told me so. And then, as long as you’re here, I shan’t see anything of you.”

“Why not?” she said.

“Well, you don’t suppose the count’s going to treat me as a household friend!” explained Peter. “He’ll exhale fire and brimstone every time I come near—he’d probably stick a knife into my ribs if he knew all. And that would be the end of a rather promising romance. You’d be left like Juliet weeping over my corpse.”

“I hope I should have more sense,” said Gabrielle, but he fancied that there was something in her look that did not tally with the words.

“I’m sure you would,” he said without conviction. “But all the same, I’ve got to see you somehow. I suppose you’re allowed to go out by yourself, are you?”

“Allowed!” She raised her brows. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I had to climb the wall to get in,” he said. “The place is like a fortress—all locks and bars.”

She nodded. “Yes, I know. He doesn’t like strangers. But if I wanted to get

out——” She paused.

“What would you do?” said Peter.

She was frowning a little. “I should ask the old woman for the key.”

“I wonder if it would be as simple as all that,” said Peter.

“He couldn’t object,” she protested.

“He would like a shot if he thought I had anything to do with it,” rejoined Peter. “Isn’t there any other way? There’s that pool place just round the Point. Couldn’t I come and fetch you in a boat?”

She looked at him with sudden interest. “Yes. There’s a sort of natural landing stage down there on the rocks. I scrambled down only this morning. I wanted to bathe, but I wasn’t sure I could get up again. You could come round there tomorrow if you cared to—on the chance, of course.”

“What time?” said Peter.

“Oh, after dark.” She laughed a little. “It wouldn’t do for you to be caught, would it? I’d try to be there about nine, or perhaps a little later. Ten would be safer, I think.”

“Right ho!” said Peter. “And then we can row about and enjoy ourselves.”

“You’re going to take me to see Pierre,” she reminded him.

He laughed with her. “Very well—we’ll do Pierre first and then the balcony scene afterwards—only for balcony, read boat!”

She regarded him with great directness. “You’re not to behave as if we’re engaged,” she said.

“Good gracious, no!” said Peter. “I’m much too modern for that. I shouldn’t dream of getting engaged before the banns were published. A terribly stuffy thing to do! We weren’t born in the Middle Ages, dear, were we?”

She shook her head at him. “Peter, you’ve got to be just a friend to me first.”

There was a note of appeal in her voice that banished his flippancy in a second. He held out his hands to her with a very straight gesture. “I am your friend,” he said, “now and always. I swear I’ll never let you down.”

She made a forward movement to lay her hands in his and then in a flash drew back. A small pebble was rolling down the path. She stooped and picked it up.

“Look!” she said unconcernedly. “Such a little thing—and yet it’s what the world is made of! Let’s see how far I can throw!”

She raised an arm with deliberation and flung it out to sea, then very quietly she turned and walked up the rocky shelf with Peter closely following.

As they rounded the curve and turned inwards, they met Voltano and another man face to face.

## CHAPTER XI

### *The Apology*

GABRIELLE extended her hand to the man who accompanied Voltano. He was young, olive-skinned, with ardent black eyes that flashed over her with a torchlike brilliance. He bent low over her hand, while above her head Voltano looked annoyed interrogation at her companion.

Peter smiled in return with baffling complacency. "I was hoping to see you before I left, sir. I came to call."

Voltano's swarthy features were compressed in a sort of quivering rigidity. "You are very—punctilious," he said. "May I ask how you entered?"

Peter continued to smile. "Well, I tried the door, but it was locked. I'm afraid I climbed over the wall," he said.

"You shall go out by the door," said the count in a tone that was grimly significant.

"Thank you, sir," said Peter disarmingly. "But not before I have taken the opportunity to apologize to you most humbly for my unfortunate behaviour at our last meeting. That was really one of my main reasons for coming."

"Really!" said Voltano.

"Yes," asserted Peter, assuming his best public-school demeanour. "I'm afraid I made an egregious ass of myself, sir, and I hope you'll forgive me. I was a bit rattled at the time as there was a train to catch, but of course I ought to have known better. My cousin has been giving me a good dressing down on the subject. I really am most awfully sorry, and if you'll overlook it this time I'll promise to behave myself in future."

"I never overlook anything," said Voltano stiffly.

Gabrielle suddenly turned upon him. "Oh, Count, please be generous! Peter is young, and English people are always rough and ready. He didn't mean to give offence any more than I did. And, anyway, he can't do more than say he's sorry."

Voltano looked at her with smouldering eyes. "He can do more," he said. "He can leave this place—which belongs to me—and not return. I will not be

insulted to my face. No one has ever insulted me and been forgiven. I do not forgive.”

Peter swallowed hard and rushed to a second assault. “Oh, you can’t mean that, sir! You couldn’t take anyone as damn’ silly as I am seriously. I’m not worth all that. I’m afraid I behaved atrociously but I do most earnestly ask your pardon. I suppose I ought not to have pushed my way in but I’ll go back and write a letter of apology if that’ll do any good.”

The count raised his hand. “You say you are not worthy of serious consideration. You may be right. But is it not the little things that we call nuisances of which we are most anxious to rid ourselves?” His eyes gleamed suddenly red. “What do we do to the mosquito that tries to bite us? We kill it, do we not? We do not say it is too small a thing to kill. Nothing could be that.”

Peter gave a gulp. He was on the verge of furious speech. But Gabrielle was too quick for him. She broke into gay, irrepressible laughter and took him by the arm. “Oh, don’t be silly, Peter! He isn’t in earnest. You’ll let him off this time, won’t you, Count? He’s never going to do it again. Please don’t be cross, because it was quite as much my fault as his! Now, Peter, let me introduce you properly—first to Count Gaspere and second to Signor Montello! This is my cousin—Mr Peter Dunrobert. And shall we go up to the garden? There isn’t room to talk properly here.”

Somehow her hand transferred itself from Peter’s arm to the count’s, and Voltano’s glowering visage softened in spite of itself at the sweetness of her smile. There was that about her—a fearless, childlike confidence—that was almost impossible to resist.

“Sapristi!” he muttered. “A siren has indeed come to the villa! Do you always get your own way thus, signorina?”

Her hand remained within his arm as they turned to ascend the steps, leaving Peter and the young Italian to follow.

Peter said nothing whatever. He was dumbfounded by the ease with which she had mastered the situation, and her intimacy with the count rather took his breath away. Though she seemed to have gained her point, he was not sure that an open breach would not have been preferable. He hotly resented the low-toned conversation between the two as they climbed slowly to the terrace. There was a species of indulgent authority in Voltano’s attitude that he found almost unendurable. It bred in him an urgent desire to take the man by the neck and kick him.

It did not make him feel less hostile when at the top of the steps Voltano



turned round to him with a smile of haughty magnanimity and thrust out a narrow, tense hand with the remark: "I accept your apology, Mr Dunrobert, and I hope you will not give me cause to regret it."

Peter took the hand with a strong sensation that he was grasping something poisonous but he forced himself to murmur: "Thank you, sir," though it nearly choked him.

There was a malicious glint in Voltano's eyes as he turned to the silent Montello. "You, Cesari," he said, "will show him the way out—to save him the trouble of climbing the wall again."

Montello bowed, but again Gabrielle intervened. "Later on, Cesari!" she said lightly. "He is coming in to see my mother first. He is a friend of the family, you know, Count. Don't let him go yet!"

Voltano smiled upon her again with a kind of caressing mastery. "Little tyrant," he said, "it is growing late, and your mother is tired today. Besides, you have not yet had your Italian lesson. You will never be proficient if you do not learn."

Gabrielle made an impulsive gesture as though to free herself from some invisible restraint. "Oh, not today!" she said. "Cesari can come tomorrow morning. It will be cooler then."

"No." Voltano spoke with firmness though he still smiled. "Cesari has come today, and he will give you your lesson now—as soon as he has taken Mr Dunrobert to the gate. You understand me, Cesari? Go—and return as quickly as possible!"

Peter looked at Gabrielle. He was on the point of refusing to leave her, but a warning flash in her eyes stopped him. She shrugged her shoulders with a touch of petulance.

"Very well," she said, "as Cesari is here. I'm sorry, Peter, but the arrangement was made before you came. If I am to be of any use as a secretary, I suppose I must learn the language. You won't be leaving this place yet?"

"Not yet," said Peter steadily.

"Good!" She smiled at him. "Then we'll meet again soon." She waved her hand airily. "Good-bye!"

He followed her lead, feeling baffled and somewhat disconcerted, and with a brief salute walked away with Cesari, who marched briskly beside him like a military escort.

They did not exchange a single word as they mounted to the upper terrace in front of the villa. Peter surmised that the young man probably spoke as little English as he did Italian. But as they emerged in the blaze of flowers before the green-shuttered house he decided to make an effort to bridge the silence that stretched like a gulf between them.

“I should like to see Mrs Dermot,” he said with great distinctness. “She is expecting me to look in before I go.”

To his surprise Cesari replied in perfect though carefully uttered English. “I am afraid that that is not possible. The order of Il Conte must be obeyed.”

Peter suppressed a rude rejoinder and tramped on. They passed round the side of the villa into the welcome shade of pines and palms and arrived on the drive by which he had approached.

A few yards further they came within view of the gate, but Cesari with a motion of the hand turned aside along a narrow path that wound round between trees to a door in the wall. He took a key from his pocket as they reached it and in another moment the door was open and Peter found himself being marshalled into the road.

His inner pride rebelled, but he had no option. Grimly, without a backward glance, he passed out, and immediately the door was shut and locked upon him. It was the most ignominious thing that had happened to him since his school days.

He stood still, seething with indignation, and heard Cesari’s martial footsteps retreating into the distance. He had been routed, literally sent about his business. Yet, after a few seconds of internal raging, he pulled himself together and pushed his fury into the background. The rout, after all, was but temporary. He had gained something that afternoon which he had never expected and he could not consider himself a loser.

The memory of the girl who had suffered him to hold her in his arms went suddenly through him with a glow that warmed him from head to foot. She had not repulsed him. She had trusted him. And the feeling that she had awakened within him surged up to the surface, overwhelming every other thought. In that moment he knew the early morning rapture of first love, and the sweetness of it almost intoxicated him. It was different from anything he had ever known before. There was nothing else in the whole world that counted. He had not won her yet, but she was not beyond his reach, elusive though she might be.

He stood still in the hot sunshine while the wonder of this new thing rioted through his veins. He remembered the fragile loveliness of her—the exquisite

delicacy of the face that he had dared to kiss. And for a space he felt as if the world itself had been uplifted through the ether and turned into a flawless paradise.

How long that strange ecstasy held him he could not have said. But it passed at length, leaving him oddly powerless and incredulous. Was he a fool? Was he mad? Had she really understood or merely humoured him in a moment of caprice?

He became aware of the glaring sun on his head, and the earth scorching his feet. He realized that it was no time for daydreaming. He remembered that the serpent was in the garden and that he himself had been thrust out.

And with a certain dogged fatefulness he turned about and began to trudge down through the dust to Ste Marguérite.

But as he left the Villa des Sirènes, the glory that had touched him there still lingered in his heart and somehow he knew that he was changed. Whatever he did and wherever he went, he would never look upon life in the same way again. In a brief space of amazing revelation his boyhood had been finally cast aside.

## PART II

## CHAPTER I

### *Il Conte di Voltano*

“I OUGHT to punish you,” said Voltano, “for being so young and so wilful.”

He smiled with the words, but they had a certain significance notwithstanding, and Gabrielle flushed and stiffened very slightly in response.

“I don’t think you need have sent him away like that,” she said. “After all, he apologized. We do things differently in England.”

“I am sure of it,” said Voltano, and his smile became a slow, insidious sneer. “But I have never learned to model myself according to the English ideas. And frankly, signorina, I do not care for your family friend.”

“My mother received him,” protested Gabrielle. “He visited her first.”

Voltano frowned a little. “She will not receive him again without authority from me,” he said. “And you, my little bella donna, must not expect me to open my doors without reserve to all your English friends. It is asking too much.”

“I’m sorry,” said Gabrielle formally. “I will be more careful in the future.”

His dark eyes glowed into a smile again as he looked at her. “Now you are angry,” he said. “And it is poor Gaspare’s turn to be punished. Let me apologize, signorina, and then—according to your English code—all will be well.”

She smiled also half-reluctantly. “It isn’t the same thing,” she said.

His look dwelt upon the soft gold of her hair. “No?” he questioned. “Well, we must see what can be done. You are very hard to refuse. I have never seen anyone so like an angel. Is that why they called you Gabrielle, I wonder?”

She laughed a little. “I don’t suppose so. I am not at all angelic really. Shall we go into the summerhouse? It’s too hot out here.”

He followed her into the cool stone building with its creeper-festooned pillars. “Come and sit on my knee,” he said persuasively, “and be my bambina, and you shall tell me what you would like best in all the world.”

But Gabrielle dropped into a cushioned chair instead. “I want to get cool,”

she said. "You can smoke your cigar if you like. I don't know that I want anything specially—except money. I should love to win some money at the tables."

He leaned upon the balustrade, watching her. "But that should not be very difficult," he said. "They say that the beginners always win."

"And then lose again," said Gabrielle with a small grimace. "Yes, I've heard that."

He lighted a thin cigar and began to smoke with a species of impatient enjoyment. "You are so young," he said. "There is so much that you have never seen or dreamed of. There are the wonders of Venice—the glories of Rome—the soul-stirring beauties of Naples. Then there is Egypt—the orange and gold of the Nile." His voice softened to a husky undertone. "How I would love to show you those things, little one! How we would revel in them together!"

Gabrielle looked up with shining eyes. "Yes, and I would love to see them. Couldn't you take us when my mother is strong enough?"

He pulled the cigar from his lips with a faint spitting sound. "Perhaps it would be better for her if we left her here to rest."

"I couldn't do that," said Gabrielle with decision.

He reached out and touched her hair. "I should not ask you to do anything against your wish," he said caressingly. "We will make her come too if you desire it; but it might not be very good for her."

She leaned back in her chair with a sigh, and his hand fell. "We must wait till she is better," she said. "Then perhaps a change might do her good. I think this place is too hot for her."

"It will be getting cooler every day," he said. "She has Marta to care for her. I do not know why you should not leave her for a little while. She has not had you with her for so long that she would miss you."

"I don't know about that," Gabrielle said. "But I can't leave her—anyhow at present. I didn't come out here just to have a good time, you know."

He replaced his cigar, and his lips twisted a little as he said: "You are a model daughter and I am sure she must be very proud of you."

"I don't claim to be that," Gabrielle returned with simplicity. "But she has worked for me all my life and I love her."

"You are very young," he observed.

She nodded. “I am sure I must seem so to you. I don’t suppose you would care to be my age again—any more than I want to be yours.”

He sat upright with a jerk. “I wonder how old you think I am,” he said.

She gave him a brief glance. “I expect you are in the forties,” she said.

He sprang to his feet. “Basta! I am not yet thirty-six,” he declared with violence. “I am years younger than your mother! What are you thinking of?”

She looked at him with grave attention. “That is nearly twice my age,” she commented. “No wonder you think me young!”

His manner changed. He bent over her. “You are just right,” he said softly. “A scarcely opened flower—a rose of dawn. Do I seem so old to you, my little Gabrielle?”

A faint smile showed at the corner of her mouth. “Well past the schoolboy age, anyhow. I can quite understand that I must seem a mere infant to you. I suppose I am pretty ignorant but I’m learning every day.”

“There are many things I would like to teach you,” he said.

“I don’t want to learn everything at once,” she answered naïvely. “It would be like looking at the end of a book when you’ve only read the first few chapters. One loses interest that way.”

“Yes—yes,” he said. “You must keep your bloom. That is why I want to take such care of you—to show you bit by bit the wonders of the world—and of life.”

She did not look up into his fiery eyes. “I expect there’s plenty of time for everything,” she said. “I don’t like being hustled. It spoils things. This place—this garden—are quite enough for me at present. I am going to work at my Italian with Cesari too. You were quite right to insist on that. I like him. He takes a lot of trouble.”

“You must not like him too much,” said the count in a voice that was not quite as jaunty as he strove to make it. “Or I shall be jealous.”

She laughed softly, aloofly. “That would be very funny. Then I suppose you would have a duel and shoot each other. Everything is so mediæval here. I feel as if I had suddenly plunged into the Middle Ages.”

“You think it funny, do you?” said Voltano sombrely. “Would it seem funny to you if I were indeed ready to commit murder for your sake? Would you scream and run away, you golden-haired siren? Or would you laugh and revel in your power?”

“Not being Cleopatra or Boadicea or any other of those ancient harridans, I should probably do the first,” said Gabrielle lightly, “bar the screaming. I don’t like people who scream. It’s so futile. But I’m not fond of murders, even in books. It’s going too far.”

“It is generally women who drive men to do such things,” said Voltano. “But perhaps you are too young yet to understand. After all, you are scarcely more than a child.”

“Quite,” she agreed nonchalantly. “Not worth bothering about in any case. Ah, here comes Cesari back again! I must get out my books. There is only an hour before tea.”

She got up with the words, and Voltano drew back rather moodily and continued to smoke his cigar. Fascinating as she was, he had it in his heart to wish that her womanly instincts had been a little more mature.

Cesari came up the steps and entered with an apologetic air. “I am grieved to have kept you waiting, signorina,” he said. “But I hurried as much as possible.”

“Poor man!” she said. “And you’re so hot. Sit down and cool off while I get everything ready! I shall have to be very good and attentive to make up. You had better run away, Count. We are going to concentrate.”

Voltano’s eyes flashed momentary indignation, but her innocent and slightly impudent smile annihilated wrath. Her demeanour was that of a careless and friendly child, impossible to resent. He smiled upon her because there was nothing else to be done.

“I will leave you to your lesson,” he said, “and afterwards you will tell me how much you have learned.”

“The signorina is a quick pupil,” said Cesari with a gleam of white teeth.

“You see, I want to learn,” said Gabrielle. “It’s no good thinking of going to Italy till I know the language. I think you’re a very good teacher, Cesari. You make things interesting.”

Cesari bowed. “It gives me very great pleasure,” he said.

Voltano looked not wholly satisfied, but it was impossible to find any tangible cause for complaint. Both teacher and pupil were preparing for the task which he himself had arranged for them, so he could scarcely object to their assiduity.

He lounged out therefore somewhat sullenly into the sunshine, and perhaps



it was as well that he did not see the gaily derisive grimace which Gabrielle made behind his back as he went.

Cesari saw it and tried to look stern, but when she turned to him his expression melted into one of burning admiration.

“You would like to begin now, signorina?” he asked.

And her brisk, “Of course! It’s what we’re here for, isn’t it?” banished any idea on his part of turning the occasion to his own advantage. With a sigh of deep melancholy he gave himself up to the matter in hand.

## CHAPTER II

### *Mother and Daughter*

THE FIERCEST HEAT of the afternoon was beginning to die down when Gabrielle softly opened the door that led into her mother's deeply shaded room and looked in.

The low husky voice greeted her instantly. "Come in, my dearest! I'm not asleep."

She entered, looking strangely light and radiant for such dark surroundings. Her mother was lying back in the deep cushioned chair in which Peter had seen her. A table with books and writing materials was by her side, but she was not occupied; and a shade of anxiety showed upon the girl's face as she approached.

"Aren't you so well today?" she asked. "I thought you were feeling better. Is it the heat?"

She came and stood by her mother's side and gently took the thin hand that came up to her.

"It has been hot," came the wistful reply. "But the worst is over now. What have you been doing, Gabrielle mia? Have you been happy?"

"Quite happy, dear." Gabrielle dropped down upon a stool beside her. "But I am a little worried about you. Do you think you will get really well in this place? It is so frightfully hot in the daytime."

"You mustn't worry about me," her mother said gently. "I am used to it, you know."

"But of course I worry!" Gabrielle's voice was almost indignant. "The count has been talking about going away. Don't you think it might do you good—if we could get up into the mountains somewhere? I wish we could."

"It wouldn't make any difference," her mother answered gently. "Rest is really all I need, and I am having that now. I didn't know that the count was thinking of going away again. But he travels so much. Tell me about Peter Dunrobert, darling! I have been expecting him back again. Has he gone?"

"He had to," Gabrielle said. "The count made him. I don't think he is a

very good-tempered man, Mother. Do you?"

"He is not an easy man to know," her mother said. "But I hope he wasn't unkind to Peter. I want to hear all about his visit. He is a very charming man, isn't he?"

"A nice boy," qualified Gabrielle. "Yes, quite!"

"He told me"—her mother spoke slowly—"that he thought he could find you a post in England. Did he talk of it at all to you, dear?"

Gabrielle smiled a little. "Well, yes. He seemed to think that this place was most unsuitable for an innocent young girl—in spite of the fact that she has a mother to take care of her." She laid her cheek for a moment against the delicate hand she still held. "I'm afraid I said 'Bunkum,' or words to that effect."

A short silence followed the information. Her mother lay very still against her pillow, her eyes gazing through the green slats of the shutters with the far-off look of one who seeks to read the future.

She spoke at length very slowly, as if with effort. "My Gabrielle, I am afraid that he is right. I am thankful to have had you even for this little while, but—darling—I can't keep you here. It wouldn't be right. You will have to make your own way in the world, and I must not hinder you."

Gabrielle turned and looked up at her with sudden earnestness. "Of course I can't stay and do nothing!" she said. "But I am going to learn to take your place with the count. He is quite willing. And then I shall be able to keep you—instead of you keeping me."

"Gabrielle!" There was a sharp-wrung sound in the older woman's voice though she scarcely raised it. "You could never do that! You don't know what you are saying. It's an impossible life for such as you."

"Mother, why?" Gabrielle knelt swiftly up beside her. "What is the matter? Why do you look like that? Why shouldn't I make myself useful to him? If you have borne with him all these years, why shouldn't I?"

"You don't understand." The words came faintly through lips that had a bluish tinge. "Nothing—nothing would induce me to consent to such a thing. It is different for me. But for you—no, a thousand times no!"

The emphasis of the brief sentences was indescribable. They carried all the more weight because they were entirely lacking in violence. Gabrielle gazed at the speaker in a silence that had in it a kind of awe.

“I’m afraid I *don’t* understand,” she said after a few moments. “I should like to—very much. There must be something the matter with the count. What is it? Is he a bad man?”

Her mother sat slowly forward. “It is not for me,” she said, “to say a word against him. He has been—and is—generosity itself to me. And I have given him all that I could of faithful service in return. But—there are limits. He dominates all with whom he comes in contact. But I refuse to let him dominate you too. You shall not be made a human sacrifice.” She checked herself sharply. “Oh, what am I saying? I have no right. But—my darling—this idea of yours distresses me—beyond words. You must give it up—once and for all.” She paused, gasping a little; then continued with greater calmness. “This young Englishman—your kinsman—he is straight and honest and clean. Take what he offers you, for my sake! The life here is not fit for you. It is demoralizing—debasement. Don’t ask me to explain! I doubt if I could, but I think you have sensed it for yourself. Haven’t you?”

“I don’t—know,” Gabrielle said. “You see, I have never been abroad before. It’s difficult for me to judge. But, dear, I don’t see why I should rush off again just as I’ve got here. I want to be with you and take care of you. The count is quite willing, and it is you that matters.”

Her mother drew a sharp breath. “My dearest, I am going to ask a very hard thing of you—hard for us both. I am going to ask you to leave me and go back to England, even though it means accepting help from Peter for a little while—until you are able to find your own feet. I myself have nothing whatever to offer you, and I will never consent to letting you remain in the count’s care.”

Gabrielle leaned forward across her lap, gazing straight up into her face. “Mother,” she said suddenly, “what is it you’re afraid of? Are you thinking that the count may make love to me?”

Her mother made a blind gesture. “My Gabrielle, don’t torture me! I can’t say what might happen. It’s impossible to tell. I only know that you mustn’t stay. There can be no question of your working for the count. You have this opportunity of making your own way honourably in the world. Peter Dunrobert is a relation and he holds himself responsible for you. I am deeply grateful to him. And I am most anxious that you should accept his help. You will be able to repay him later. Please, darling, for my sake”—she paused, her hand at her throat which was working spasmodically—“for my sake,” she said again as if groping for words, “don’t refuse—or make difficulties! I can’t tell you—what it would mean to me—to feel that you were provided for—in the days to come.”

She ceased to speak and leaned slowly back as if exhausted.

Gabrielle got up quickly and bent over her. "Mother—Mother darling, what is it? Are you ill?"

Her mother's hand came out to her again, trembling, feverishly hot. "Don't worry, dear! I shall be all right. Only promise me that you will do this one thing for me! Your safety means everything—everything to me."

"My—safety!" Gabrielle repeated the word in bewilderment. "But—I don't understand. What is the matter here? What is this sort of undercurrent that seems to upset everything? What is the danger? What is it you're afraid of? Mother—tell me!"

But a spasm of breathlessness had come upon her mother, and she could not answer.

Gabrielle turned and unfastened the shutters, flinging them wide. A scent of flowers, sun-smitten, thirsting for the evening dew, entered the room. But all the garden below lay oppressively still, save for the soft, almost secret murmur of the sea.

A curious sensation came upon the girl as she stood there—a feeling that was akin to shrinking, as if something unknown and inexpressibly evil were close to her. She drew back almost involuntarily, suppressing a shudder.

Her mother was leaning forward, gradually recovering herself. Gabrielle bent over her. "Darling, what is it? Can't you tell me? I'll do anything—anything—to help."

The answer came with a deep groan that expressed more of mental anguish than physical suffering. "You can only leave me—go back to England with Peter. I trust him, but I can trust no one else. It is the only way, and I beg you—I implore you—to take it. If you don't—I—I think it will kill me."

"Mother!" Gabrielle said, and there fell a silence between them—of amazement and noncomprehension on the girl's part, of agonized suspense on the mother's.

It was broken in a way which neither expected. There came a sound at the door. It swung slowly back upon its hinges, and Voltano came in with his lordly and somewhat spectacular carriage. His look, as it travelled from mother to daughter, was quite inscrutable, but his whole air was one of complete domination.

"Well, Lucia?" he said. "Still resting? I hope that it is doing you good."

She laid a nervous hand upon the table at her side. "I am ready for work at any time," she said, "if you wish it."

He smiled half-contemptuously. "I shall not require your services this evening," he said. "We have other plans." His eyes gleamed a little as they dwelt upon Gabrielle's fairness. "You shall continue to rest tonight, and we will go down to the casino."

Gabrielle spoke abruptly, almost ungraciously. "Thank you, Count! I have changed my mind. I should prefer to stay with my mother tonight."

His brows went up. For a moment he did not speak. Then: "And why this change of mind?" he asked with a kind of suave displeasure.

A faint flush rose in Gabrielle's face. "I just prefer it, that's all," she said simply.

His look went to her mother, who spoke in answer in a swift undertone. "It is her own desire; we have not seen a great deal of one another today. The time passes so quickly."

"I see," he said. "Well"—he smiled again—"it is for her to decide. But I thought she wanted to see the gaming tables and to have a little experience of life; perhaps—quien sabe?—to make a little money!"

Gabrielle's flush deepened. "Yes, I should like to make money," she said deliberately. "But I haven't any to play with, so it's not much good."

Voltano's teeth gleamed a little. "I am a great believer in what you call beginner's luck," he said. "You shall play for me, and if you win, I give you half."

"And suppose I lose?" said Gabrielle, half-attracted in spite of herself.

His smile broadened. "You could not lose, signorina," he said. "If your luck failed, the loss would be mine."

"But I shouldn't like that," she protested.

He snapped his fingers. "I should see that you did not go too far. But I think you would be lucky. You have a lucky face. It is not the face of a loser. Come!" His voice was suddenly persuasive. "Will you not give me this pleasure? I will promise to bring you back early, and you can spend all of tomorrow telling your mother about it."

Gabrielle looked irresolute. "I am an absolute novice," she said. "You would have to teach me everything."

He laughed lightly. "I shall be charmed to teach you, signorina, and it will

be a new experience for me to have a novice in my charge. Come, Lucia!” He turned to her imperiously. “You cannot refuse the child so brief a pleasure. It is not right that she should never leave your side.”

“I shall not attempt to prevent her,” she answered in a low voice, but her eyes were fixed upon Gabrielle almost imploringly as she spoke. “She must decide for herself.”

Gabrielle turned to her with a slightly deprecatory gesture. “Mother, I think I will go—just this once. I don’t suppose I shall ever want to go again. But it would be interesting just to see. I promise I won’t do anything rash, and I know the count will keep his word and bring me back in good time.”

“You shall come back whenever you wish,” said Voltano. “I shall hold myself at your command. We will see what the wheel of fortune holds for you. Perhaps—you will come back—an heiress!”

Gabrielle laughed. “Oh, I don’t expect that. But it will be fun to see it all. You won’t mind, will you, dear?” She spoke with greater seriousness. “I shan’t be late back.”

Her mother had sunk back in her chair again. She looked exhausted, almost shrunken, but she smiled in answer. “You must do as you think best, darling,” she said. “Only—be back early—don’t forget!”

“Of course I won’t forget!” Gabrielle assured her and stooped to kiss the pale forehead. “I shall come in and say good night to you when I get back. Now I think you had better rest again, don’t you? I must go and get out my best party frock.”

Her mother’s hand clung to hers for a moment. “Let me see you,” she whispered, “before you leave!”

“Of course, dear!” Gabrielle whispered back. “And I shan’t be going for some time yet. I’ll come in as soon as I’m dressed.” She gently freed herself and threw a smile to the count, who stood watching with darkly intent eyes. “This’ll be a grand occasion,” she said. “But though I may be young, you won’t find me really rash. I always look before I leap.”

“That,” he returned, “is only wise. But you may trust me to take care of you. I shall not permit any leap in the dark.”

She laughed carelessly, with just a hint of challenge. “That will make everything quite safe,” she said, and she moved with an airy gesture to the door. “The gaming tables under your auspices ought to be about as thrilling as a donkey race on the *plage*. Very many thanks, Count! I will try to be worthy

of your distinguished protection.”

She was gone with the words, lightly flitting through the shadows, and a faint echo of girlish laughter that was like the soft song of a bird came back to them from the passage as she went.

Voltano turned to the silent woman in the chair. “And why,” he said, “are you afraid to trust your daughter to my care?”

She did not answer him immediately. When she did, her words had a slow and almost fateful meaning. “My fears—and my hopes—are my own, Gaspare. But she is more precious to me—far—than my own soul. I would like you always to remember that.”

He stooped and flicked her cheek with his finger. “Bueno, Lucia! I accept the responsibility,” he said, and turned carelessly aside to light a cigarette.



## CHAPTER III

### *Beginner's Luck*

IT WAS not until Gabrielle found herself in Voltano's luxurious car with her host beside her and Cesari in front that she realized that their destination was not Ste Marguérite, but the great casino some fifteen miles away, where the count declared both dinner and sport were provided on a scale that should be worthy of such a novice as herself.

The night was warm and starry, and as they sped along the marvellous coast road she looked out over the jewelled waters of the Mediterranean with fascinated eyes. It was like an exciting dream, and though the way was precipitous she felt no fear. It was rather a spirit of high adventure that possessed her, and the rapid motion gave her a sensation of flying above a strangely alluring and unknown country. The chauffeur was obviously very sure of himself, and they spun round bends and corners which possibly by daylight might have aroused in her some feeling of trepidation. But the sense of unreality which characterized the whole atmosphere of the Villa des Sirènes went with them as though they travelled on a magic carpet. She was too young not to be swept by the thrill of a new experience, and any misgivings which had been awakened in her earlier were tossed into the background by the swift surge of interest that raced through every nerve. The mysteries which she meant to probe were for the moment of no consequence. Even her mother was forgotten in this feverish whirl which was bearing her to the goal of her desires. She was too young and had led too commonplace a life not to be gripped by the novelty of this unexplored world. It drew her like a magnet.

"Do you think you will enjoy it?" the count asked her once.

And her ardent answer, "I know I shall love it," made him laugh.

But there was nothing supercilious about his mirth. It somehow conveyed the impression that he was enjoying it also, and that added zest to her own pleasure. It gave her the feeling that he was in sympathy with her.

"It's terribly good of you to take me," she said.

And he answered lightly: "I am not at all good, signorina. It is all on your side, not mine."

"Why don't you call me Gabrielle?" she said impulsively. "Don't you

know me well enough?"

"If you will call me Gaspare," he said, "at least for tonight, I will do my part."

She wondered for a second if she had committed a blunder, but his tone was such that it was impossible to regard it as serious.

"Well, just for tonight then," she conceded. "But not tomorrow."

"Is tomorrow ever here?" he countered. "Let us wait till it arrives!"

She saw no serious risk in the suggestion and let it pass. It was not a moment for considering possible contingencies and she was in a mood to give herself up to the full enjoyment of the evening's gaiety. She felt almost as if she owed him that, for everything had been planned for her entertainment. It was what Cesari called her festa.

They swung on through the night through phantomlike scenery such as she had read of but never beheld. The great car was like an enchanted ship carrying her to a new world. All her senses seemed to be strung to a keener life, an almost overwhelming vitality. She tingled with eager anticipation.

Once or twice indeed the thought of Peter shot across her, like the stab of reality in the midst of a dream; but that also she deliberately relegated to the background. Peter's hour would come later, and she could not dwell upon it now. She was to meet him tomorrow, but, as Gaspare said, was the morrow ever here? Besides, Peter was not one of those amazing currents that bore her like flotsam without her own free will. She was sure that she could always cope with him. With all his impetuosity, he was slave and not master. Also he was young—very young compared with the man by her side who had swept her into this strange fairy world in which no wonder seemed too great. With Gaspare, a certain wariness might be advisable, but with Peter the idea was absurd. He was too English, too completely and unquestionably comprehensible. Later on, the memory of his kisses might return to her, but now she was too bewitched to think of them. All her being was, as it were, pulsing under a spell which she had no desire to break.

The wonderful journey ended at length in a blaze of lights and crashing music. The car slid to a standstill, and the count descended and handed her out as though she had been a princess. They went up some carpeted steps into a radiance of shifting colours and figures that dazzled and astounded her. It was a palace of enchantment indeed to her unaccustomed vision. The place was crowded, and a golden glow suffused everything with a splendour which was almost beyond her grasp. She seemed to hear a dozen languages at the same

time, and the whirlpool of humanity that swept around her reminded her vaguely of a burst rocket scattering in a thousand sparkling atoms of vivid colour. She passed through a surge of people, hardly knowing whither she went.

And then, when all the confused impressions in her mind solidified again, she found herself at a little table with Gaspare and Cesari, drinking golden liquid out of what looked like a jewelled glass while a distant band played a sort of wild, jesting music that was like the laughter of fauns and pixies.

“You like that?” asked Gaspare as she set down her glass.

And she answered, “It tastes like a magic elixir,” with an enthusiasm that made him smile.

The dinner that followed was quite perfect in every detail, but she had no idea of what it consisted. The chattering throng and the giddy music filled her brain too exclusively. All that she actually noticed was a waiter with most punctilious manners and a face adorned with a small upturned moustache that smiled encouragingly whenever she looked at it, who came and went with obliging promptitude and served them like a faultless machine. He addressed her once when handing a dish as “Mademoiselle,” and so she concluded that he was French.

The meal came to an end. They had coffee—amazing coffee—and the two men drank liqueurs which she refused.

Gaspare laughed at her in his soft fashion for her caution, but she declared that it was sacrilege to adulterate anything so exquisite. And the young French waiter smiled approvingly, as if he agreed.

Her companions also lighted thin black cigars which made her feel a little impatient until Cesari leaned forward with a melting look and assured her that they would not stop to finish them.

Finally, as the great salon was beginning to empty, they left their table, and the waiter, having received a princely tip from Gaspare, drew back her golden chair with a low bow and a conventional murmur which did not convey the impression that he was glad to see them go, though she reflected that he had probably been longing for the past half-hour for their departure.

“Now for the great adventure!” murmured Gaspare at her shoulder, and she threw him a smile in answer, feeling all her veins aglow with anticipation.

She hardly knew what she expected, and her first sensation upon approaching the gaming tables was one of bewilderment mixed with repulsion.

The crowd that hummed about her, glittering as it was, seemed to be actuated by one immense impulse that strangely shocked her. Everything glittered—dresses, jewels, eyes. In whichever direction she looked something shining caught her glance. And every human being in the room reflected, as it were, the great central motive. People of every nationality appeared to be gathered together like votaries in a temple, but the only emblems of worship were spinning balls and numbers and piles of notes. It was as though she had suddenly reached the very hub of the world where the great god Mammon held undisputed sway. She would scarcely have been surprised to have seen a vast image of gold with attendant priests and neophytes.

The buzz of conversation around her made a droning accompaniment to the raucous voices of the croupiers. People talked in semiwhispers which added to her impression of being in a place of strange worship. She felt as if heathen rites were being performed which demanded a certain reverence which was thus crudely given.

They stood on the outer edge of the circle congregated around a table at which a number of players were seated, and she watched with a fascination which gradually took the place of her repugnance.

Money seemed to be changing hands at an amazing rate, and the incessant call of “Faites vos jeux!” was almost as mechanical as the striking of a clock. Gaspare’s hand gently gripping her elbow gave her a certain confidence which increased with the passage of time.

The faces of the players looked to her mechanical also, as if they were half-dazed, though here and there she marked the swift gleam of eyes that shone for an instant as the ball spun and came to rest.

“Be ready!” Voltano whispered into her ear. “Your turn will come.”

He was edging her closer and closer in before him, and she saw that one or two of the occupants of the chairs were moving and leaving the table.

“I shan’t know what to do,” she whispered back in a sudden flutter of agitation.

“Be still!” he said. “I will tell you when the time comes.”

She obeyed him of necessity. There was no possibility of retreat. They were hemmed in on all sides, and the reiterated call of, “Faites vos jeux!” seemed to clang through her consciousness like a command.

She saw a man on the further side of the table rise abruptly with an ash-white face and almost pound his way through the throng. There was something

dreadful to her in the manner of his going. But his place was instantly taken by a thin, fierce-eyed woman with a gorgeous jewel gleaming in her black hair, and in watching the newcomer she forgot him.

It was in some fashion like watching an animal behind bars—an animal with glinting eyes and mouth drawn back as if to snarl. There was a terrible kind of beauty about the set features; it might have been the face of an ancient Egyptian.

Gabrielle gazed upon her with a fascinated stare, though she would have preferred to have looked another way. And soon she saw that the woman was winning. She played for high stakes, and a pile of notes began to accumulate beside her. But no sign of satisfaction appeared upon the grim face. Rather it grew harder, more determined, more predatory. There was something definitely horrible about her long, purposeful fingers. The nails were tapered to points and painted a glistening red. They looked as if they could tear and rend, and they might have been dipped in blood.

Beside her sat a young Jew with a plump, astute face who lost and won and lost again with unvarying imperturbability. And next to him was a stout, elderly woman who looked English and whose expression of open and almost blatant greed was like a challenge to everyone within reach.

Gabrielle, gazing from one to another of those three, was scarcely aware of another movement immediately in front of her until she felt Gaspare's hand impelling her forward again. Then she found herself standing directly behind the chair of a player—a man with a small black beard and a curiously narrow, domed head.

She watched him play and lose, play and lose, with unflinching regularity for a space, and then he suddenly won and won again. She heard him chuckle softly as he grasped his winnings with a bony, brown hand. Then, with an impulsive movement, he leaned forward and placed a high stake upon a number that was almost beyond his reach. The swinging ball spun round and round and fell. He had lost.

The croupier pushed notes towards the wolf-eyed woman with the crimson fingernails, and the fashion in which she received them filled Gabrielle with a sick disgust. The next instant the black-bearded man had risen with a lithe movement, and she heard Gaspare greet him as a friend.

And then, before she knew it, she was in the vacated chair with Gaspare leaning over her, pressing notes into her hand with murmured instructions.

She knew a few seconds of panic, but they were soon past. The thing was

simple beyond belief. One merely backed a number and automatically lost. It was Gaspare's responsibility in any case. He was watching and he knew that she was wholly without experience.

She banished her misgivings and waited with at least apparent composure for the call of the croupier.

It came, and she deliberately chose a number and staked two of Gaspare's notes. He stooped over her, his hand pressing her shoulder.

"Back two—back three!" he whispered urgently. "I am here. You need not be afraid."

She hesitated momentarily, then she obeyed him. There followed a few seconds of tense watching, and the ball fell. She was a winner. A handful of notes came across to her, and she heard Gaspare laughing softly and felt his breath hot upon her neck. He was like an excited boy.

"Double the stakes!" he urged her. "Be brave! Play your own game!"

And Gabrielle played. It was as if some strange force that was almost a mesmerism had taken possession of her. She played as though she were an experienced gambler, fearlessly and collectedly, meeting gains and losses without a tremor.

But her losses were few, and her winnings mounted steadily. She no longer needed Gaspare's whispered instructions. He stood upright behind her chair, intently watching her, but attempting nothing further in the way of advice or reassurance. She needed neither. After the first few fluctuations she seemed to be inspired, winning time after time until it almost seemed that she could do no wrong.

It developed at length into an amazing run of luck which it seemed that nothing could break. She became the object of general attention, and subdued murmurs of admiration went round the table. She was scarcely aware of them. Her whole mind was concentrated upon the game. She had almost forgotten the jostling crowds behind and the variety of faces around. She was as if possessed by a spirit that guided and dominated her own. Her brain was, as it were, working under a different pressure. She felt neither elation nor anxiety.

And then suddenly something impelled her to glance across the table, and a feeling that was akin to an electric shock went through her. For she met the eyes of the woman who had first attracted her notice—eyes that gazed at her with a kind of glazed enmity, inexpressibly malignant—the eyes of a wolf with the red gleam of ferocious hunger, hating yet fiercely desiring its prey.

Gabrielle was horrified. In a second the influence that had bound her senses like a narcotic was shattered. She started as it were into broad awakeness, and in the same instant got up from her chair.

“I’ve finished,” she said to Gaspare. “I won’t play any more. Let me—get away!”

She looked indeed as if she were on the verge of fainting. He checked the impulsive protest that he had begun to utter, gathered up her winnings, and, with his arm around her, made a way for her through the shifting crowd of onlookers.

On the outer edge of spectators he stopped and looked at her. “You are not well, carissima. What is it?”

She smiled at him, resolutely composing herself. “Yes, I am—quite well. I’ve had enough of it, that’s all. We must have been at it for a long time, and you promised I should get back early.”

“It is not late,” he said. “Why did you take fright so suddenly? Did you think you were going to lose?”

She nodded. “No one can hope to go on forever. And I have been—very lucky, haven’t I?”

“I have your riches quite safe,” smiled Gaspare.

“No, no! They’re yours,” she protested, flushing. “You provided the first stakes. It all belongs to you.”

“Ah no! The luck—was yours,” he answered softly. “If I had played—quien sabe?—I might have lost. Now you will have some money of your very own, as you wished.”

“We must talk about it later,” said Gabrielle. “Anyway, you must take back what you risked.”

“Bueno!” he said, laughing. “I will do that. And you will still have more than you realize. But you are tired. I will take you to have a cup of coffee, and then we will go home.”

She appreciated his consideration; in fact, she was nearer to liking him at that moment than she had ever been before. Very thankfully she passed out of the gaming room with him and sat down upon a settee in a quiet corner which he selected for her.

## CHAPTER IV

### *The Warning*

“I WILL SEND you your coffee,” said Gaspare. “If you will pardon me for leaving you, I will go back for a word with my friend Prince Bruno Saffari. You saw him. He was playing. It was his chair that you took.”

She remembered the thin active man with the small black beard who had been seated at the table before her, who had lost and had suddenly given place to her.

“Is he still there?” she said. “Of course, go! I will wait for you here.”

He bowed and departed, while she rested her elbow upon the arm of the settee and leaned her head upon her hand, conscious of a great weariness. Though she had not been aware of any great excitement, she realized now that the strain had been intense. She could not quite understand herself. It was as if some strange power had possessed her and now had gone completely from her, leaving her fatigued almost to exhaustion. She would have repudiated the idea that the evening’s entertainment had been too much for her nerves. Yet the fact remained that she was more tired than she had ever been before within her memory. She hoped that Gaspare would soon return and take her back. She also wondered vaguely what had happened to Cesari. It would be tiresome if they had to wait for him.

Someone approached with a quick, light tread. She heard a low murmur above her, and looking up saw the young waiter again who had served them at dinner. He bore a coffee tray which he placed upon a small table beside her.

“Thank you,” she said.

He smiled down at her. He had a quick, attractive smile. “Will you have it black, mademoiselle?” he suggested. “Avec sugar—one—two—three!”

“Two, please!” she said, and added on a kindly impulse, “I didn’t expect to see you again.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I am—everywhere, mademoiselle. The hotel adjoins the casino.”

“You must work very hard,” she said.



He nodded. “Mais oui, mademoiselle. We must all work, n’est-ce pas? Unless,” he suddenly twinkled at her, “we can make a fortune at the tables. Mademoiselle has had some good fortune tonight, yes?”

She wished that her winnings had not been in Gaspare’s pocket, for she would have liked to have given him a share. “Yes, I have been very lucky,” she said. “But I wasn’t gambling with my own money, so I hardly know if I can look upon it as mine.”

“Oh, mademoiselle!” he protested. “The luck—the inspiration—is all yours. It is the player—not the money—that counts.”

He spoke with such conviction that she was constrained to believe him. It was a strange world into which she had strayed. Its values were all totally different from those of the world in which the whole of her life had been spent. She had not yet adjusted her sense of perspective, and there were many things for her yet to learn.

“Perhaps you are right,” she said. “The count said the same, but I thought perhaps he was only being kind.”

The Frenchman’s face changed. He stooped abruptly to brush an imaginary speck from the corner of the table. “Do not deceive yourself, mademoiselle!” he said in a voice that was low and vehement. “Such men as Il Conte di Voltano”—he uttered the name almost venomously—“are never kind.”

And with that, before she could express her surprise, he drew himself up, whisked his napkin under his arm, bowed like a marionette and smartly walked away.

She would have liked to have recalled him, but the fear of Gaspare’s return restrained her. She leaned back instead and slowly drank her coffee while the old feeling of doubt and unreality, the sense of something lurking in the background, returned irresistibly upon her. It was a strange world indeed—a place of unknown impulses and queer enchantments—a dazzling, overwhelming sort of place in which it was hard to keep one’s balance undisturbed. She was not exactly afraid, but she did not feel happy; her mind was not at rest. She was beginning to wonder if everyone felt the same, as if there were no solid foundation upon which to rely, no safety from that hidden evil to which she could give no name.

She watched people drifting to and fro and she tried to read their faces and discover if it were the actual pursuit of pleasure or some other motive that brought them here. Some were laughing and joking, yet few of them looked happy. Here and there she seemed to catch sight of something that was akin to

desperation. The whole atmosphere was one of strain and fever, as if one and all were striving after some elusive treasure that just hung out of reach.

Her mind went back to the young waiter and the last words he had so impressively uttered. What did he know of Gaspare and his friends? What had induced him to speak with such sweeping condemnation? Perhaps he was a Communist—though he did not look it—and hated all his social superiors! Yet he had said it to her, not to a fellow worker.

“Do not deceive yourself!” he had said. Why had he put it in that way? Was she in danger of being deceived? Was this underlying current of which she was becoming ever increasingly aware likely to overwhelm her at some unexpected moment?

Her thoughts flashed to Peter—his mysterious coming—his persistent warning. And her mother! What did it all mean? What were they afraid of? Had they all gone back suddenly to the Dark Ages when magicians worked their evil spells and no one was really safe?

She finished her coffee and tried to smile at herself. Surely she was getting morbid, almost hideously so! She must shed this muffling garment of conjecture and become normal again.

As she set down her cup, she caught sight of the count strolling towards her with Cesari and the black-bearded man whose seat she had taken at the gaming table. They were all laughing together—not as Englishmen laugh with bursts of open mirth—but secretly, between themselves, as though merriment were something to be suppressed.

As they drew near she noticed the stranger make a peculiar motion with his left hand which was like a sign. With the thumb and second finger joined, he tapped downwards with his first finger as though he were jerking the ash from an invisible cigarette. She could not have said what made her notice the gesture. It might have been a mere characteristic of the man, but she remarked it, for it seemed to be in some fashion significant.

They drew slightly apart, and Gaspare approached her first.

“Ah, Gabrielle!” he said, pronouncing the name with a foreign and curiously possessive intonation. “I wish to present to you my friend Prince Bruno Saffari. Prince—my friend, Signorina Dermot!”

The newcomer bowed low. He was a slight man, slim and athletic in appearance, very handsome, very self-assured.

She rose and held out her hand. He did not kiss it though his attitude

almost led her to expect him to do so.

He addressed her in slow but quite faultless English. "I am charmed to meet you, signorina. It is a most happy occasion. May I congratulate you upon your good fortune? I hear you have had some wonderful success at the tables."

"Thank you," she answered. "I hardly know what I have won yet. But I am sure I was very lucky."

"You could not be otherwise," he returned gallantly with a look that conveyed an admiration that he would not embarrass her by putting into words.

"Oh, I don't feel too sure of that," she said. "It would be a mistake to tempt Fortune too far, wouldn't it?"

"Not for you, I should imagine," said Prince Bruno.

"She will have to play again," said Gaspare. "But I think she is a little tired now. Perhaps it would be well for me to take her home."

She turned to him with a touch of relief. "I am rather tired, and it is getting late. My mother will be anxious."

"It is not really late," said Gaspare reassuringly. "And it will not take very long to return."

"But we ought to be going," Gabrielle insisted. "It has been a very interesting evening. I hope you made up for your bad luck," she added to Prince Bruno.

He smiled courteously. "I have done that in the last ten seconds, signorina. I trust that I may soon have the pleasure of meeting you again."

"Thank you," she said sedately. And to Gaspare, "Can we start back now, please? I really do feel we ought to go."

"Whenever you wish," he said. "I am—as always—at your service."

She turned back to the stranger. "You will excuse me, won't you? I promised not to be late, and the time goes so fast here."

He bowed again. "You are quite right, signorina. A promise should always be kept. I shall look forward to our next meeting."

She felt that everything was supremely correct and ornamental. It was easy to be gracious in the face of such flawless manners, and she and her escort might withdraw without any appearance of churlishness.

But before they had time to do so, a figure wrapped carelessly in a sumptuous red velvet cloak suddenly appeared from a doorway close at hand

and moved with a gliding motion to join them.

Gabrielle gave a small, involuntary start. It was the woman from whose look she had instinctively fled so short a time before.

There was no wolfish glare in her eyes now. They were quite expressionless, rather like dark polished stones. She smiled with her red lips only as she reached the group, and spoke in French to Prince Bruno, who at once turned to Gabrielle with a wide sweep of presentation.

“Will you permit me?” he said. “Madame Silvestre desires the honour of your acquaintance. Mademoiselle Dermot—madame!” Gabrielle bowed, and she knew that the gesture was crudely stiff.

The elder woman’s smile became slightly more pronounced. She extended her pointed, crimson nails.

“La petite Anglaise!” she said in a voice that might have been rasping had it not been so cultivated and restrained. “You have beaten us all tonight. The lamb has conquered the wolves indeed!”

Gabrielle shrank with a repulsion which she scarcely knew how to mask as she gave her hand into the talonlike clasp. It seemed as if this sophisticated Cleopatra woman could read her very soul.

“I was very lucky,” she said again almost mechanically.

The hand that had taken hers retained it with a kind of steely determination; its grip was like a trap.

“So lucky—so lucky!” smiled the red lips, showing a glimpse as of snarling teeth behind them. “But I congratulate you, chère enfant—petit agneau! You will do it again without doubt—and yet again—until you have beaten the bank.”

“I don’t think so,” Gabrielle said, and freed her hand with so resolute an effort that it escaped with a jerk. “I am not really a player at all. I shouldn’t care to go on.”

“You would lack the courage?” suggested Madame Silvestre, superbly cynical.

“Yes,” said the English girl bluntly. “I should.”

“What an admission!” murmured the Frenchwoman derisively.

Gabrielle laughed with a sudden curious sense of superior strength. “Perhaps I am a little braver than you think,” she said.

“Ah!” put in Prince Bruno. “It is not true cowardice to be cautious. How often is it not the foolhardy who lose the battle?”

“And those who flee save themselves,” supplemented Madame Silvestre.

It came upon Gabrielle at that moment that to be at the mercy of this woman would be a terrible situation. She could not have said wherefore, but there was that about her—a hostile emanation—that was as menacing as a bared dagger. She sensed an unscrupulous cruelty that was more impressive than an open challenge. The thin features had an insatiable look notwithstanding the inscrutability of the eyes. Though she would not yield an inch, she had an urgent desire to terminate the encounter, just as she would have turned away from a ferocious caged animal raging to reach her.

Gaspare’s suave laugh deftly diverted the current of the conversation. “I take great credit to myself,” he said, “for discovering our little signorina. It has been an interesting and delightful experience to watch her. It is a sad thought that the first time never comes again. I must take her away now but I hope it will not be long before we all meet again. Come now, carissima! We will not linger any more.”

He put his hand through her arm with kindly intimacy, and she was actually glad to feel it there.

They took their leave of Prince Bruno and his companion and went away, leaving them standing together.

“I suppose they are friends,” Gabrielle said.

“They are very great friends,” Gaspare answered, “such friends as you and I will soon become. Cesari, will you find the car? We will follow slowly.”

The young man shot away to obey his behest, and Gabrielle awoke to the fact that the hand that had been inside her arm had stolen around her waist.

She made an immediate movement of withdrawal, but he laughed again and deliberately held her for a second or two before he let her go.

“I am selfish,” he said. “I do not want to share my friend with anyone. Does that seem very wicked to you?”

“Perhaps scarcely wicked,” she returned. “But rather silly. I am quite willing to share your friendship with anybody who cares to join in.”

“Ah!” he protested. “Now you are trying to torment me. But I shall take my revenge, little one. You may be sure of that. I am not to be bullied by a little English girl.”

He spoke smilingly though with some purpose, but he made no further attempt at familiarity. And Gabrielle walked on, dwelling more upon the thought of the woman she had left behind than of the man at her side.

She did not doubt her own power to keep the count at a distance. But the woman was an enigma which held her attention. She had no desire to meet her again, but she had a curiously strong conviction that she was destined to do so.

## CHAPTER V

### *The Drawn Sword*

THEY SPOKE BUT LITTLE on the drive home. The weariness of which Gabrielle had been aware on ceasing to play had returned, and she could scarcely keep awake. Gaspare placed a cushion in the corner behind her, but beyond that he paid her very little attention. She felt grateful for this forbearance. It seemed to denote an understanding with which she had not credited him.

They stopped before they reached the Villa des Sirènes to part with Cesari, and she roused herself to take leave of him; but the sense of lethargy came back almost immediately. She was as one in a dream.

Gaspare's hand slipping softly over hers and closing upon them as they lay in her lap made her stir uneasily, but she submitted, reflecting drowsily that it really did not matter. His fingers coiled about hers with a lithe, encompassing strength. She did not like the feeling of them. They seemed to curve in all directions with a smooth irresistibility that was ready to defeat any effort at escape. But she remained very still after that first instinctive movement, and they were still also, though they seemed to throb against her skin, making it tingle like an electric battery.

When the car stopped again she heard him murmur something under his breath as if he resented the interruption.

"Bueno!" he said then. "We have arrived, little sleepy one. You are very weary. Shall Gaspare carry you?"

She sat up, shaking off her apathy, drawing her hands free from that almost hypnotic clasp.

"Of course not!" she said. "I'm not quite so helpless as that. I must go straight to my mother. She will be wondering what has become of me."

"Ah, do not wake her!" he said. "Sleep is so precious to her. Shall we go down to the terrace for a few moments and breathe the lovely night air?"

"No, thank you," said Gabrielle very firmly. "I would rather go in now. Thank you very much for this evening. It has all been very interesting."

The car door opened, and she gathered her cloak about her and descended.

The night was all silvered with moonlight, and the shadows of the palms spread like ferns upon the ground. She turned resolutely to the portico, and Gaspare could not linger.

He opened the door and they entered together. "So you are leaving me now?" he said.

Something in his voice sent an odd little quiver through her, but she gave no sign of it. "Yes, I'm going to bed now," she said practically. "Good night—and thank you again so much for everything."

She saw his eyes shine in the lamplight and was conscious of a sharp, momentary sense as of something dangerous close to her. But as his smile answered hers, she was reassured.

"Good night, most beautiful!" he said softly.

She nodded in response and turned lightly from him. "Good night!" she said again, and whisked away without further ceremony.

She reflected as she went that perhaps his own country-women appreciated sentimentality better than she did. To her young mind, Peter's forthright British love-making was infinitely preferable, easier to cope with, and decidedly more wholesome.

She reached her mother's door and gently turned the handle and peeped in.

The low voice instantly greeted her. "My darling, you are very late. Has all gone well?"

She entered. The room was flooded with moonlight and by it she saw her mother's face on the pillow. A vague fear shot through her. It looked so unearthly, so spiritual.

She went forward to the bedside. "Mother darling, you haven't been ill while I've been away, have you?" she asked anxiously.

"My dearest, no!" Very tenderly the answer came while a quiet hand reached out and held hers comfortingly. "I was tired and went to bed but I have been listening for you. Have you enjoyed it?"

"I have had quite a wonderful time," Gabrielle answered. "But I won't stay to tell you about it now. You must rest. Yes, I won quite a lot. I don't know how much yet. But I don't think I want to go again."

"Thank God for that!" her mother said with deep earnestness. "Good night, darling! You must get your rest too. Don't get up too soon if you are tired!"

Gabrielle bent to kiss her. "Oh, I shan't be tired," she said. "But you must



go to sleep, dear. You shouldn't have lain awake for me. Good night!"

The pale cheek felt cold to her warm young lips, but her anxiety was allayed. The gentle voice had set her mind at rest. She patted the bedclothes caressingly and stole away to her own room.

It was at the further end of the passage—a beautiful apartment with windows opened wide on to a broad balcony facing the sea and the moonlight. The scent of flowers from the garden below was almost intoxicating. She went in and shut the door behind her without turning on the light. There was no need with that dazzling moon shining straight in upon her.

Her sleeping suit lay ready on the bed, and she slipped out of her clothes and put it on. But her drowsiness had gone from her, and the scented garden and murmurous sea seemed to call her. She pulled a wrap about her shoulders and went out barefooted on to the balcony into the warm marvel of the southern night.

It was exquisite, and all her senses thrilled to the magic of the hour. A great magnolia lifted a perfect blossom to her from the stonework of the balustrade as though offering her divine nectar. She stooped and drew its sweetness deep into her being. The sheer loveliness all about her far surpassed anything she had ever known. From the terrace below, the belladonna lilies flung their incense up to her as if in adoration.

And the sea—the sea was a pavement of living, molten light.

She stood and gazed and gazed till the beauty of it all almost hurt her. It was as though she had stepped suddenly into a paradise above the bounds of dreams. The wonder of it seemed beyond her grasp. It left her awed, amazed, breathless.

A faint sound near her made her turn and glance swiftly about her, but she saw nothing and dismissed the matter as of no account, bending again over the glorious white flower cup, holding it between her hands while she drank its perfume once again as though it had been a magic elixir. And in that moment the memory of Peter swept through her again with a strange feeling of exaltation. How heavenly to be loved and to be able to love in return! She felt as if something were calling her, drawing her, and she had neither the will nor the strength to hold back. For a few seconds she was scarcely conscious of her own personality in the unknown rapture that had come upon her.

Yet, as she straightened herself slowly at length and the glory gradually receded, she told herself that she was being absurd. She was not in love in spite of all enchantments. She had her own life to live and she meant to be sensible

and levelheaded. The very fact of Peter's rash impulsiveness made it the more imperative. She would not be carried away by the first wild call of youth.

But the beauty of the garden still held her, and she was reluctant to leave it. She felt restless, almost too much alive. Perhaps it was the nervous reaction from her previous weariness, but sleep seemed very far away. She would have liked to have run down to the still pool below the rocks and plunge into the cool depths to still the feverish urge within her.

It was out of the question of course; she did not know the place well enough and she could not reach the garden from the balcony unless she climbed down the stem of the magnolia. She measured the distance to the terrace and discarded the idea. It would be even more difficult to climb up again, and doubtless the doors were all locked for the night.

"Perhaps—another time!" she murmured to herself, as she turned unwillingly away.

She would have to be prosaic and go to bed though she could hardly bear to leave the splendour behind. On a sudden impulse she wheeled back and clasped the lemon-scented blossom again and pressed her lips closely to the pure petals. It would probably have fallen before the morning sun awoke her. Then, half-chiding herself for such childishness, she turned inwards and re-entered her room.

The moment she did so, a sudden sense of shock came upon her, a violent awareness of an unexpected presence. She actually halted with one bare foot upon the lintel, but an instant later her hesitation was circumvented. A narrow, sinewy hand fastened upon her and drew her in.

"Sst!" whispered Gaspare. "It is only I."

"You!" she gasped in amazement.

His long fingers met about her wrist as she recoiled. "It is all right," he said, speaking in an undertone that had in it something of a hiss. "We are friends, you and I. Why should I not come to your room, carissima? Or you to mine?"

She was speechless for the moment. The audacity of the question seemed to take her by the throat. Then: "Please, Count!" she said. "I must ask you to go. We shall meet again in the morning."

It was bravely uttered, for there was something pulsing within her that was like a trapped thing leaping wildly to escape. She stood perfectly still, but soul and body alike shrank in a nameless horror from his touch.

“Ah, but how foolish you are!” he said softly. “So small and young and unsophisticated!”

“But why are you here?” she broke in. “It’s late. Don’t you realize? What do you want with me now?”

“What do I want?” he said, and in the moonlight she saw him smile with that gleam in his eyes which she had caught a little earlier. “Why am I here? You ask me that!”

“Yes.” She spoke with a clear decision that astounded herself. “I should like to know.”

His lips drew back and she saw his shining teeth. “Buena! I will tell you,” he said. “I came to bring you your winnings, but you were not in your room. So I followed and I saw you—little white girl—standing on the balcony with the white flowers all around you. And then—and then, carissima—I could not go away.”

“You will go at once, please!” Gabrielle said with swift determination. “I don’t want my winnings. You can take them with you. Please leave me! I wish to be alone.”

“Leave you!” he said. “Leave you!” His hand suddenly tightened and drew her to him. “I will not. You are too beautiful. I saw you kiss that flower. Just so—just so—in a moment—shall you kiss me!”

She was caught to him in a muffling embrace before she had time to resist. Her puny efforts to free herself were as those of a child. She tried to cry out, but with a lightning movement he flung her backwards over one arm while his other hand with its cruel fingers gripped her throat.

She struggled voicelessly for a space, and then the moonlight became a surging mist about her; her chest seemed to swell as if it would burst, and she sank helpless, a roaring as of great waters in her ears.

Instantly his hold relaxed, and she breathed again in great choking gasps.

“Ah! That is better,” he said, closely watching her with those burning eyes that seemed to scorch and consume. “Now you will not be foolish any more. I have you in my power. See how weak you are! I can do—whatever I will.”

She struggled to speak, but only faint broken sounds came from her.

He bent and with wiry strength lifted her bodily into his arms. Her head hung back upon his shoulder, and he pressed his lips to her pulsing throat as he bore her across the room and laid her down upon the bed.

She lay like one stunned till slowly those devouring lips relaxed. Then, while she still gasped piteously, he drew the torn covering from her breast and for a few unutterable moments his lips clung there also.

Later it seemed to her that sheer horror brought back her full faculties, enabling her to push his head away and sit up. But instinct warned her that any further open resistance would be madness, nor had she the strength for it. Instead, she broke into a wild and desperate pleading that tore her like a physical agony from head to foot.

“Count! Gaspare! Please—oh, please! You can’t treat me like this. I can’t bear it. It—it will kill me. Oh, do go—I beg you—I beg you—to go!”

He leaned over her while she shivered on the bed, trying to cover her bosom with her shaking hands.

“Little white flower bud!” he whispered softly over her shrinking head. “Just opening to the sun! Why should not the first sweetness be mine? I adore you. Turn that lovely face up to mine and let me kiss it into full blossom till it is a bud no longer! No, no! Why should you wish to escape? Once opened, the flower will never ask to be a bud again.”

His hand glided over her with a gentle insistence, like a crawling thing. She shrank from it, drawing herself together with a smothered cry.

“Sst!” he said again, and suddenly the coaxing note was gone from his voice. “We will have no screaming.” His fingers caressed her throat with the words. “I know how to stop that, and you will still be mine—as you are already. But it will be better for you—it will be much better for you—to give yourself to me of your own free will. Then I will be kind to you—as a lover, carissima. But—otherwise”—she heard the breath hiss between his teeth—“you will compel me to become your master. And a master—is not so kind.”

His hands were on her shoulders now, urging her back upon the pillows. In another moment she felt that all her strength—her very will power—would be gone. But somehow, with a last, frantic effort she gathered herself together, slipped by sheer unexpectedness from the smooth, ruthless grasp, and fell on the ground at his feet in an anguish of supplication that took even him by surprise.

He bent to lift her, but she clung about his knees, winding her arms so tightly that without violence he could not break her clasp. And in that attitude she poured out to him so passionate and beseeching an entreaty that it could not be ignored. He had to pause to listen.

“I will do anything—anything on earth for you,” she told him wildly, “only

let me go! I can't—I can't do this. But there's nothing else I won't do. I'm young—I'm young. Let me stay young a little longer! If you really do care at all for me, wait! Let me learn what love is—find out for myself what it means! Don't take me as I am now! Don't spoil my whole life before it's even begun!" And then suddenly she ceased to supplicate him and broke into frantic prayer. "O God, make him listen to me! Make him understand! O God, deliver me from this horrible evil! Take the devil away from him! Or else kill him before he does this wrong! For Christ's sake, O God!"

The words came from her with a spiritual clearness as though they had been uttered before an altar. Desperate as she was, the moment she turned to prayer, all incoherence—and the mad searching for words wherewith to move him—vanished. She prayed as perhaps only a soul out of the depths can pray. . . . And into that moonlit room it was as though a Presence entered and stood.

The man's arm went up before his eyes as if to ward off something—a drawn Sword, it might be—that he could not see.

There fell a silence, and the girl's hold relaxed and she sank prone upon the floor.

The silence grew and lengthened till it seemed like the infinite shining space between the stars. It had in it something that was awful—something that was holy.

And at length there came a movement as that of a shrinking animal—the stealthy opening and shutting of the door.

Minutes later, Gabrielle raised herself and looked around her. The room was flood-lit with the glory of the moon; and she was alone.

## CHAPTER VI

### *In the Grotto*

THE MORNING LIGHT was streaming in through the wide-open French windows when Gabrielle awoke from a sleep so deep and dreamless that for several seconds she lay gazing out from her pillow, scarcely realizing where she was. Then, as memory surged back upon her, she turned and hid her face in her arms for a while, quivering and ashamed, while the horror of the night before swept her anew. What was going to happen next? What could she possibly do to make life tolerable after that revolting experience? The very thought of meeting Gaspare again filled her with a sense of nausea. Yet the meeting was bound to take place.

Her recollection of the manner of his going was so confused that she thought she must have fainted. Only her prayer and the great silence that had followed it remained in her mind, and she had a dim memory of coming out of a strange oblivion and creeping into bed in utter exhaustion of mind and body. That had now passed, and as she slowly braced herself to meet the new day, a thankfulness that was beyond all utterance filled her spirit. She got up and crossed the room to the window and lifted her face to the sun.

Something of the glory of the morning entered into her, and her courage began to revive. She had been marvellously sheltered from harm and she would not be faithless and afraid. The horror and the humiliation slipped away from her and she resolutely turned her back upon them. She would go straight forward and be brave.

She determined upon one thing while she dressed. Her mother must know nothing of what had passed. Remembering her agitation of the previous evening, it seemed sheer cruelty to add anything further to her apprehensions. It was evident that she had already good reason for fearing and distrusting Gaspare, and in the calm light of day Gabrielle decided that she would do nothing to increase that anxiety. Her mother had implored her to go, and she was forced to admit to herself that it was scarcely possible for her to remain; but she resolved to do nothing in haste. The immediate danger was over, and she had a curiously strong conviction that it would not recur of itself. At least she would know within the next few hours what she might expect. And it was at this point in her musings that a small stone struck the frame of her window

and she heard a low whistle below.

Her heart gave a sharp jerk. That was Gaspare himself—she was certain of it—down in the garden, summoning her.

She had not expected so swift a confrontation, and for a moment the feeling of nausea came over her again. She clung to a chair, almost powerless.

Then the low whistle came again, clear and compelling, and her strength returned. With a movement that was half-defiant because of her weakness, she stepped out on to the balcony.

He was there below her on the terrace, looking up with a kind of insolent amusement in his dark eyes. They did not kindle at sight of her. They merely gazed with a fixed, half-smiling intentness. He was dressed in white linen, and his handsome virility gave him an air of youth which oddly she had never noticed before. But in the same glance she noted the deep, cruel line of the mouth which no smile could hide.

She stood mutely in the sunshine, staring down upon him, until with an imperious gesture he raised a thin brown hand and pointed towards the pines.

“I shall wait for you in the grotto,” he said briefly, and with that he turned his back and walked arrogantly away along the terrace and down the steps.

She watched him go with a sensation she could not have described. It was astonishment rather than fear that she felt, but uppermost was a feeling of relief, as though a burden had been lifted from her. His madness had passed apparently, and he had betrayed no resentment. He had even succeeded in retaining his dignity, and for that she was most thankful. Any barrier was welcome in that moment. She made a rapid decision that she also would be dignified, come what might.

She usually went to her mother’s room for petit déjeuner as soon as she was dressed, but Gaspare’s summons could not be ignored. The interview was one which would not bear postponement. She went swiftly out into the heavy fragrance of the garden, not waiting even to cover her head from the already burning rays of the morning sun.

But when she reached the foot of the steps she moved more slowly, and as the shade of the trees enveloped her something of her former apprehension returned. She put it firmly from her, but her carriage stiffened, and as she heard the tinkling water of the fairy grotto her face went pale and masklike.

The place was green and airless—like a cave. Gaspare stood on the edge of the cascade, awaiting her, erect and cynical, a slender black cigar between his

lips.

He removed this as he made her a ceremonious bow.

She returned the courtesy with absolute convention, her bearing one of unwavering composure. It was almost like a set scene on a stage. They were both acting, and neither had the faintest inkling as to what was happening in the other's mind.

Gaspare spoke with a suavity which plainly concealed no vestige of anxiety. "Good morning, signorina! I am obliged to you for coming so promptly."

She faced him without a tremor but she wished the atmosphere had not been so artificial. It seemed to conceal with uncanny persistence so much at which she could but dimly guess. "I understand you have something to say to me," she said, and though she spoke without effort her lips felt strangely cold.

He smiled faintly and took a puff at his cigar. "That is true. I have. First, allow me to give you this!" He held out to her a roll of paper secured by an elastic band. "It is your own property of which I have no intention of depriving you."

She looked at the packet with a sense of revulsion. "I do not regard it as mine," she said. "It was won with your money."

"By you," he supplemented. "I could not possibly accept it from you, signorina. Also, I have no need of it."

His hand remained outstretched. She took the roll, feeling in some fashion compelled. "I, too, have no wish to be under any obligation," she said.

He raised his brows slightly. "That," he observed, "is a different matter, and—between friends—of small account. It is true I provided the stake, but you accepted it. You can repay the amount if you wish but you cannot wipe out the fact that you did accept my humble assistance and you would not have played without it."

"I see," she said slowly. "You wish me to remain your debtor."

He regarded her with inscrutable eyes. "I fear I cannot prevent it, signorina. We cannot undo the past—however deeply we may regret it."

Was he in earnest? Or was he mocking her? It was impossible to tell. But a quiver went through her at his words. She seemed to feel again the ruthless pressure of his hand upon her throat.

She turned towards the rushing cascade that raced below in a miniature



torrent to a deeper stream beyond, and with an absolutely deliberate gesture she dropped the packet she held into the running water. It was whirled away in a moment and lost to sight under a low rustic bridge.

Then she turned again to Gaspare. He had not stirred, but as she faced him anew he laughed.

“That was your last chance,” he said. “What a pity you threw it away!”

“I will repay you,” she said proudly, “what you advanced me, and then I shall be out of your debt.”

He shook his head. “You have thrown away your only chance of freedom. But comfort yourself, signorina! You shall pay me back in service. If you had kept those notes, you would have been a rich woman. As it is, you will need to work, and you shall work—for me.” His lips went back a little with the words and she saw the flash of his white teeth. “You will do anything on earth for me,” he said. “That was your promise—was it not? And the English always keep their promises. So I have been told.”

She looked at him with the trapped feeling returning upon her but she kept it valiantly under control. It seemed to her that there must be a measure of bravado in his attitude; it could not be wholly genuine.

“I am not sure,” she said, “that I quite understand you.”

He flicked his cigar ash into the foaming water. “I will explain,” he said, “if you desire it. Last night you accepted all that I had to offer you—up to a point. You smiled upon me. You advanced, you retreated, you—coquetted with me. You are young, and doubtless very innocent, but you know how to be bewitching. You have learned already how to tempt men and to lead them on.”

“How—dare you?” she said almost involuntarily.

His black eyes met hers with merciless domination. “Oh yes, you will deny it,” he said. “I expect that of you. It is the refuge of the virtuous. But your denial makes no difference. Perhaps you will also tell me that I am your first conquest—that no man has ever kissed you before.” A sudden deep wave of passion suffused his face. “Sapristi!” he said. “It is you who dare the most.”

She shrank sharply. It was inevitable. His curt sentences were like the cuts of a whip; they stung her unbearably. “You have completely misunderstood me,” she said, but somehow the protest lacked conviction even to herself. His bitter scepticism had found its mark.

He checked further remonstrance with an imperious movement. “We will not waste any more time over this episode,” he said. “Your promise remains.

You will not—I think—deny that at least.”

She felt the hot blood mounting over her neck and face. Yes, she had made him a promise in her extremity, and now he meant to keep her to it. He had been worsted, and he meant to punish her. She wondered if he hated her, but there was nothing in those fixed, emotionless eyes to tell her.

“Your promise!” he said again with smooth persistence. “Have you forgotten it?”

She did not want to answer him but she had no choice. “No. I haven’t forgotten,” she said in a low voice.

“Excellent!” he said almost kindly. “The English are always true to their word. So we now put all frivolities behind us and enter upon a business relationship. Your mother is my secretary. You shall be my envoy, and I do not think you will find the task too arduous. Perhaps I should do well to explain to you that I belong to a company in which absolute secrecy, expedition and devotion to duty are essential. I am sure that I can rely upon you for these, and in observing such principles you will not be a loser.” He held out his hand to her unexpectedly. “Shall we seal a new partnership and forget the past?”

Forget the unforgettable! The thought flashed through her mind, but she could not utter it. Neither could she refuse that extended hand. But as the thin fingers closed upon her own a throb of cold repugnance went through her as though she had been compelled to touch a reptile.

He smiled at her again, and she felt that his smile was meant to be reassuring. “There is one other thing,” he said. “I think that too great an intimacy with the English cousin should be avoided. He is doubtless very worthy but he is impetuous and hotheaded. I think you will agree with me in that respect?”

She could not disagree. “It—is rather hard to say,” she said.

He retained her hand. “I understand. He has fired your imagination, and a young girl’s imagination is perhaps her favourite toy. But let me tell you this! He is not all that he seems, and I should not approve of a close friendship between you. It would not be good for you, and it might be—very bad—for him. I will not say more than that for I am sure that there is no need. You and I, signorina, are beginning to understand each other without words, which is a very useful state of affairs.”

He turned her hand gently upwards and took the cigar from his mouth. The next instant she started back, wresting her hand away from him with an involuntary cry, for he had tipped the red-hot ash on to her wrist.

“Oh, pardon me!” he said. “What an accident! What carelessness! Let me see!” He caught her hand again and lightly brushed away the faint grey powder that remained. “No, no! You are not hurt—only a little frightened. There is no mark. See! It does not hurt you now—tell me!”

She looked down at a tiny red mark on her wrist, and freed her hand from his fingers almost as if she were shaking off some clinging thing. “No, it’s nothing,” she said. “I was startled, that’s all.”

“How it would hurt to be branded,” he said meditatively, “when even a spark can be so painful! Have you ever thought of that? A mere twinge thus magnified might become an agony, might it not? Bueno, I will not keep you now. I trust I am forgiven. We shall meet later when there may be something that you can do for me. I can count upon your service, signorina—your loyal service?”

Her lips felt dry as she answered, “I will do anything within my power.”

He laughed softly and resumed his cigar. “I shall not ask for anything beyond that. And you will remember my friendly caution regarding the English cousin and refrain from indiscreet confidences of any kind—which—I assure you—would be dangerous—far more dangerous for him than for you.”

“I shall remember,” she said stiffly.

He made a polite gesture of leave-taking. “How nice,” he said, “to have come to so amiable an understanding! And the pain is quite gone now? I am glad of that—I am very glad. I should be greatly distressed if you were really hurt. Please believe that that will never happen as long as you are under my protection and loyalty serving my interests!”

He was gone. It was as if the greenness had swallowed him. She heard no sound of departing footsteps and yet she knew that she was alone.

The dreaded interview was over. And how had it left her? Bewildered, uncertain, very far from triumphant. It seemed incredible that he could have so easily vindicated himself and assumed the upper hand. The horror he had made her endure the night before was to him obviously a mere trifle. She had escaped in one direction only to be cut off in another. His power to control her remained unshaken. Only by flight could she hope to evade it, and he knew—as did she—that flight was impossible.

Though her mother might urge it upon her, she could never bring herself to consider it so long as that mother remained behind. A sudden wild self-reproach swept through her. Why had she flung away those notes? They might have procured freedom for them both. She had considered only her own pride,

and what was that compared with the urgent necessity for freedom for them both? That her mother might refuse to leave was a possibility which now seemed almost negligible. If only she had not thrown away the notes!

Were they already far beyond any hope of recovery? Or could any lucky chance have swept them into some cranny in the rock from which she might retrieve them? The thought flashed through her like a torch of hope suddenly uplifted. She would go and search. Fate might yet be kind and place deliverance within her reach.

Quivering with a new eagerness, she turned to the gurgling water. She would follow it down to the very shore. The odds were in her favour. The stream wound its tortuous course through many twists and turns. At any one of these the treasure might have found a resting place. He had called it her only chance of freedom, and as such she now regarded it. She would pursue her quest down to the very edge of the sea if need be, and a strong conviction came upon her that she would find what she sought. It could not have gone far, and the tideless, monotonous Mediterranean would not swiftly wash it away. There was time—she was sure there was time yet to counteract that rash deed of hers. She paused no longer, but plunged straight down into the soft undergrowth that bounded the stream in pursuit of that last chance which she had so proudly flung away.

## CHAPTER VII

### *The Treasure*

IT WAS rather like life, that winding stream. It went through so many phases. Here it leaped and danced in the sunshine, there it laughed in the shallows; and a little further on it ran deep and mysterious, darkly shaded, almost without a ripple, yet never still. At any other time it would have interested her merely to explore its many varying stages. But today she had but one object in view and she pursued it with a feverish earnestness.

There was a spot on her wrist that burned as though it had been stung, but she scarcely heeded it. Her whole mind was concentrated upon the one urgent purpose of finding the treasure that she had cast away. With it she felt she might almost challenge the world, but without it she was a powerless creature caught in a net from which there could be no hope of escape.

Down the edge of the stream she made her way, scrambling over rough places, often pausing to search the miniature boulders around which the water foamed. The brook gathered in width and volume as she descended. It was thickly overhung by ferns in many places, and it was difficult to see into every crevice. But she was as agile as a boy and she suffered no obstacle to deter her. Though the swirling bubbles seemed to mock her, she would not be discouraged. There was too much at stake. She could not believe that the precious packet had been swept away in so short a time.

She came at length to a small torrent by which the stream emptied itself into a darker channel with steep sides down which it was almost impossible to climb. She could only walk along the top of the bank, stumbling among ferns and tree roots, for here the place was deeply shadowed and no glint of sunshine pierced through. She had no idea as to how far she had come but she had a feeling that she would not be able to follow her course much further. A wall of brown rock appeared in front of her, and with a sinking heart she saw that the stream ran into a deep tunnel which marked the end of all progress. The sound of falling water told her that there was a considerable drop here. It might even be that this was the actual point where the stream fell into the sea. If that were so, then all her efforts had been in vain. She stood still at last, hot and breathless, gazing downwards. And in that moment she saw flung up in an eddy against the rock a white oblong object that bobbed to and fro below her

as if caught in a backwash against the rocky bank.

Her heart gave a great throb of wild excitement. Dim as was the light, she had no doubt as to the identify of that little packet. She saw her lost treasure almost within her grasp, and she swung herself down over the rocky edge, slipping among stones and spiky bushes, slithering on ooze, very nearly toppling over into the brown water, but saving herself just in time. Then finally she reached a ledge of rock and stretched herself at full length upon it, holding on in some fashion by her feet while she reached down to rescue the small dancing roll of paper that meant so much to her.

For seconds it eluded her in the ripples, sometimes washed within a few inches of her fingers, sometimes whisked a foot or two away. Then a sudden swirl of the water brought it within reach and with a violent effort she captured it. At the same moment from somewhere high above her among the trees she was startled by a man's voice uttering a peal of laughter that rang and echoed through the hollows with an eerie persistence that made it sound almost insane.

She barely saved herself from falling head first into the tumbling wavelets, but she clung to her prize notwithstanding, and as the silence closed about her again she gradually recovered her balance and drew herself with difficulty up the slanting wall of rock to a kneeling position on the edge. Then, every muscle quivering with exertion and excitement, she examined the soaked packet in her hands.

She knew in a second that she had not been mistaken. It was the roll which Gaspere had forced upon her in the grotto. She recognized the dirty five-franc note on the outside, bound by an elastic band. The bundle within was too tightly packed to be saturated. She pulled off the band with trembling fingers.

Two five-franc notes! And the rest—— She drew in her breath in one great gasp and sat tense—as though the thing she held had turned into some poisonous composition which she scarcely dared to handle. The inside of the roll was composed of torn rags of newspaper—nothing else.

Moment by moment slipped away. There was no sound but the gurgling water, until at last mechanically she breathed again with slow, heaving effort. So he had tricked her! He had not chosen that she should have any money at her command. He intended that she should be entirely dependent upon him, as was her mother.

Her mind went groping back, half-stunned, to the scene in the grotto. If she had kept the packet and opened it in his presence, what would have happened? But then she realized swiftly that he had known she would not open it. Had she taken it and discovered the trick later, he would have accused someone—one

of the servants—perhaps Marta—of theft. He would perhaps have made a generous gesture towards herself and restored a certain amount of the missing money. She had no idea as to how much she had won, but she was certain it was a large sum. If she had accepted it from him she would have been placed under a still heavier obligation.

But it might be that he had anticipated her action and decided to minimize the risk of loss. He had guessed that she would be in no conciliatory mood, and it had not suited him to place any considerable sum at her disposal. And so he had done this thing.

She dropped the roll with a sudden gesture of helplessness and it fell in scattered fragments of paper down into the rushing water, while her hands went up over her eyes, which felt hot and smarting, as if they could not bear to look any longer.

He had been foiled once and he had tricked her in return, but in such a fashion that there was no redress. All that was left to her, and this dawned slowly with a sense of relief after almost overpowering shock, was the knowledge that she had refused to accept any concession from him. She was not in his debt. She owed him no allegiance. The promise upon which he had insisted was valueless in the face of this. She knew him now to be as utterly unscrupulous as he was merciless. For her mother's sake she dared not treat him as an open enemy. How much did her mother know? She shrank even from guessing. She realized now that there could be no confidence between them on this subject. They were both in his power, and for what purpose did he mean to exercise it?

Of one thing only was she tolerably certain. The hideous danger of the night before could never recur. She had been delivered from that by a Force against which he would never again pit himself. Whatever other evil he might have in his mind, he would never risk a second defeat. He was a man who, if baffled in one direction, would instantly turn in another. He was determined to establish an ascendancy over her, but it would not be by the easy way of winning her trust and then betraying it. In that respect she was safe. His desire had been succeeded by another impulse—perhaps hatred. She did not know.

She shuddered as her thoughts went back and back through all his dealings with her. He was plausible. He had humiliated her with vile accusations which she had been unable to refute. He was terribly strong, and there was something of hypnotism in his strength. If she attempted to resist his authority, he would laugh, and somehow he would compel.

She remembered that laugh that she had heard and raised her head like a

hunted creature, listening. But there was no sound but the gurgle of the stream and the sad, distant murmur of the sea. She was alone in a garden of such exquisite perfection that she could hardly believe that any evil existed there.

Slowly at length she rose to her feet. She looked downwards and saw some scraps of paper still eddying in the water—all that remained of her high hopes of deliverance. And then, as she gazed, another thought came to her. If Gaspare could find other weapons to his hand, so could she. There was Peter ready to help her. She was not friendless. He would grudge her nothing in service. He loved her with a clean, pure love. He only wanted to be of use. But dared she accept his help? Was it fair to him? She must not—she would not—take that which she could never repay. Nor would she be the means of drawing him further into Gaspare's net. They were antagonistic already, and Gaspare's deliberate warning came back to her. She felt again the sting upon her wrist. He had intended that warning to be impressive. If harm should ever come to Peter through her, she would never forgive herself.

But she shook the thought away like an evil thing. How could Peter be harmed? What was this man who thought he could choose or discard her friends for her? The notion was absurd; she would not harbour it. Gaspare might threaten, but he could never carry out his threats. Surely his power over herself was only such as she permitted through weakness of will! She would assert herself. She would be strong. Most emphatically she would not submit so far as Peter was concerned. She would not be scared by any bombastic dictums. She would follow her own course and she would meet Peter. Perhaps she would not ask him to befriend her just yet, but if matters became serious she would not be afraid to turn to him. It was her mother's earnest desire that she should, and no prohibitions of Gaspare's should keep her from doing so.

Something of the burden that had so nearly overwhelmed her seemed to be lifted from her with this decision. She turned to climb back up the edge of the stream and as she went up towards the sunlight the horror that had gripped her gradually fell away.

She began to view matters from a less fevered aspect. The count was just a passionate foreigner with whose temperament she had been quite unacquainted. Now that she had had some experience of it, she would be more wary. Never, never again would he be able to accuse her of trifling with him. He was crooked and vindictive, and she knew now that he must be kept at a safe distance. Had she known him better she would have been infinitely more cautious from the beginning. Well, caution should now be her watchword at every point. There should be no weak spot in her defences where he was concerned. When her mother was really better, perhaps she would yield to



persuasion and go back to England and find some work to do. If Peter chose to accompany her—well, she felt convinced that he would never be unmanageable. If she loved him, she would marry him. But she did not love him yet. She was sure of that. And even if she did, she would hardly dare to admit it in this luscious southern paradise where everything seemed a little exaggerated and out of proportion.

No, she would not be swept off her feet. She would be very circumspect and entirely sensible. She had not seen enough of life yet to make any vital decisions of that nature. If Peter really wanted her, he must learn to be a friend to her first.

Yes, a friend—in spite of Gaspare and his menacing warning!

What was that sudden coldness that came over her as at last she reached the path? A strange and unaccountable shadow seemed to have fallen. She felt again that sense of indescribable shrinking that had affected her the previous afternoon—the sense as of something evil very near at hand.

With a sharp jerk she broke into a run, passed the grotto, and fled on under the palm trees till she reached the terrace steps. Then in the full blaze of the sun she paused to take breath. But she did not look back. She knew that there was nothing to be seen.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *The Blow*

“A LITTLE TIRED TODAY, darling,” said Gabrielle’s mother in her slow, weary voice. “But it will pass. Tell me all about last night! Whom did you meet?”

“I think the waiter was the nicest part of yesterday evening’s entertainment,” said Gabrielle, smiling. “He was a dear little man. I met a very grand person called Prince Bruno Saffari and a dreadful woman—a friend of his—Madame Silvestre. I didn’t see much of them, luckily. Do you know them?”

“Yes, I know them, dearest. Like you, I don’t much care for them,” said her mother gently. “But we must not tell the count that. They are his friends.”

“Oh, we won’t tread on anybody’s corns,” said Gabrielle lightly. “I’m not going to stay long talking because you’re tired.” She munched her roll reflectively. “And I wasn’t so lucky as I thought I had been, or else somebody stole my winnings.”

“That is quite likely,” her mother observed.

Gabrielle made a faint grimace. “Yes. A couple of five-franc notes was all that the count managed to produce this morning. Don’t say anything to him about it! I shouldn’t like him to think I was disappointed about it.”

“I am sorry you were disappointed, dear,” her mother said. “But it is very often so at the tables. You were lucky not to be a loser.”

“There is that point of view,” Gabrielle agreed, sipping her coffee. “I don’t think I shall go again. I would rather stay here with you till you are well enough for a change. When do you think that will be?”

Her mother shook her head. “You mustn’t wait for me, Gabrielle. My work is here. But not yours! You have other work waiting for you, and I want you to go to it. When will you be seeing Peter again?”

Gabrielle hesitated. It was on her lips to speak of that evening’s tryst, but something held her back. It was her secret and Peter’s, and such it had better remain.

“Oh, quite soon, I expect,” she said airily. “But I really hardly know what

to say to him when we do meet. I couldn't go off with him into the blue and leave you here."

"My dear"—there was sudden decision in the quiet voice that answered her—"that is exactly what I want you to do. He has convinced me of his trustworthiness, and I am not happy about you. This is no place for a young girl. I want you to take the plunge for my sake—and I want you to do it soon."

Gabrielle looked at her steadily. "Mother," she said, "you needn't try to hide things from me. I'm not a child any more. You are afraid of the count."

Her mother made a quick, restraining gesture. "My child," she said in answer, "if I hide things from you, it is because it is not good for you to know them. I think of you—you—and only you—all the time. I myself have nothing to fear. But this place is bad for you. I should never have brought you here myself. I shall know no peace until you are gone again." She paused a moment, then under her breath, very earnestly, "What I said yesterday, I repeat," she said. "I beg you—I implore you—to go!"

"Poor darling!" Gabrielle whispered almost involuntarily. "Well, I will go—if you wish it so much. But I shall have to come back sometimes and see you. I can't go for good."

Her mother's hand was on her heart. "When I am better, I will come to Paris," she murmured. "We will meet there—my precious child—if God wills. I think—when I know you are safely gone—I shall feel better. It is this terrible anxiety that is so hard to bear."

"I understand," Gabrielle said, her eyes still fixed upon the drawn face. "I'm making it worse for you instead of better. I understand—quite a lot."

A sharp quiver contracted her mother's face. "I don't want you to understand—too much," she whispered piteously. "Life is very difficult, my Gabrielle—just a mass of conflict. There are things I can never tell you—dangers of which you have no suspicion. They will not touch me, but they might surround you and drag you down. You are so young, and I want your life to be a beautiful one. There! I can't say any more. We must stop talking. I am too tired. But you have promised—you have promised." She lay back with a sigh of great weariness and closed her eyes.

Gabrielle sat and watched her, and again the vague fear that had assailed her when she had seen that beautiful face in the moonlight the night before stirred within her consciousness. The beauty did not seem to be of earth. It was of a sort that the lines of sadness and suffering could not mar.

"How lovely she is!" was the thought that came into her mind, and the next

moment she almost wished that the loveliness had been less striking, less spiritual, more human.

The eyes opened again and smiled at her, and she felt reassured. "Finish your breakfast, darling!" her mother said. "I must get up and dress. Perhaps I shall be able to do a little work for the count presently, if he will let me."

It was on Gabrielle's lips to ask a blunt and very direct question concerning the count's work, but something held her back. There was a quiet and steadfast loyalty in her mother's attitude which checked her. She determined that she would not be the cause of any further distress. It was evident that no amount of argument or persuasion would help her there. There was much that she did not know. She was fighting in the dark and she was powerless to impose her will upon forces that she could not see.

She finished her coffee and got up. "I expect Cesari will be coming before long," she said. "I will go and do a little study down in the summerhouse."

And she went from the room with a feeling of deep unrest and wandered out into the sunshine where the flowers were already beginning to droop a little as if under the burning kiss of too ardent a lover.

She was glad when Cesari presently made his appearance for she was tired of useless conjecture and still more useless apprehension. She gave her mind to the business in hand with a practical determination that compelled him to do the same, meeting all ardent glances with a stubborn unresponsiveness that completely baffled him. She decided that he was not a very formidable young man and welcomed the thought that here at least was someone who was not beyond her management.

He was quite patient and painstaking throughout the lesson, and in spite of her resolution it was she who tired the first.

At the end of an hour she leaned back in her chair with a sigh. "You are tired, signorina," he said in his slow, rather precise English. "It is anxiety that wearies you, is it not? You are troubled for the poor signora."

She looked at him in some surprise at this open solicitude. "Well, I am rather," she admitted. "But no doubt she will soon be better. It's the heat that upsets her."

He shook his head slowly. "Is that all that they tell you, signorina?"

"What do you mean?" Gabrielle said, straightening herself sharply.

He dropped his eyes from her face to the books he held. "It is not for me to say," he said.

“What isn’t? Tell me!” Gabrielle’s look became a stare. “What do you know about it?” she demanded. “Tell me! I have a right to know.” But even as she uttered the words, her heart turned suddenly cold with misgiving.

Cesari did not raise his eyes. “I think you have a right also,” he said. “But the signora herself, they say, must not be told. It is the heart, signorina. They say there is no cure.”

“No—cure!” Gabrielle repeated the words incredulously, and her hand was pressed all unconsciously to her own as she uttered them. “No—cure! Cesari, do you know what you’re saying?”

He looked up at her with grave concern in his gleaming dark eyes. “Yes, signorina, I know—though perhaps I should not have told you like this. You will please remember that it is private information. The doctor said last week that there was nothing to be done and no hope of recovery. The end may not come yet but it cannot be long delayed.”

The end! Gabrielle rose with a sudden desperate movement. Something seemed to be choking her. She moved blindly to the balustrade where the passionflowers clustered in purple masses of bloom and leaned there as if trying to breathe. Somehow she could not doubt for a second the truth of what she had just heard. There was that within her which confirmed it too strongly. She saw again that look of the spirit on her mother’s face, and she knew beyond all question what it meant. But why had they kept it from her? Why? Why?

She turned to ask the question and found Cesari close to her, his eyes ablaze with sympathy.

“Poor signorina!” he said softly.

She made a backward gesture and commanded herself with an effort. She did not want any demonstrations from Cesari.

“Why have I not been told before?” she asked in a voice that sounded strangely metallic and emotionless even to herself.

He made a dramatic gesture. “Il Conte did not wish to give you pain. But I—I do not agree. I think it is more cruel that you should not know.”

“Of course I ought to know!” Gabrielle said in the same mechanical tone. It was as if something outside herself were speaking the words. “What is the use of living in a fool’s paradise?”

“Ah!” Cesari said. “But that is life, signorina. One must live—and hide the pain. Above all, the signora must not know. And Il Conte must not know that

you know, either. One must wear a mask—even to one’s friends.”

“You are afraid of Il Conte,” she said, not contemptuously but merely as if stating a fact.

He drew himself up. “I would not endure that from any but you, signorina,” he told her. “You can go to Il Conte and tell him—if you desire to do so.”

His dignity rebuked her. She felt a moment’s compunction in the midst of her tragedy. “I’m sorry,” she said. “There’s not much point in telling him, anyway. Do you mind leaving me now? I want to think.”

Cesari hesitated, as though he had hardly expected this request. “I fear—it is not in my power to comfort you,” he said. “But—can I do nothing to help?”

Her eyes looked through him and over him, blue and distant. “Thank you,” she said. “I don’t see how anyone could help, do you?”

“I have not done wrong to tell you?” he persisted almost pathetically.

“Oh no,” Gabrielle answered. “I am grateful to you for that. I was bound to know sooner or later, wasn’t I?”

Cesari regarded her as if her frozen composure were beyond his comprehension. “I do not like to leave you thus,” he murmured.

A queer little smile touched her lips; she suddenly realized that he had visualized himself in the role of soother and comforter to one in a state of hysterical distress. She was not acting up to expectations, and he was bitterly disappointed.

The conviction made her feel more icebound than ever. Perhaps she had been through too much in the past twelve hours to be capable of any further acute suffering for a time. “Please don’t consider that!” she said. “To leave me alone is the greatest service you can do me just now. You see, I am rather tired and I don’t want to talk.”

“Poor signorina!” he said again fervently. “But you will tell me if there should be anything—anything at all—that I can do for you?”

“Thank you, I will,” Gabrielle said with chill courtesy.

He bowed low and turned from her with a sigh. From the table, as he gathered up some books, he spoke again.

“I am always ready to serve you, signorina. You are first in my thoughts at all times. To comfort you in sorrow would be my greatest privilege. Even to die for you would not be too hard. Need I say more?”

“Please don’t!” Gabrielle said, and leaned further out among the passionflowers with a very definite movement of withdrawal.

He sighed again. “Signorina! If you only knew!”

A species of cold frenzy came upon Gabrielle. She spoke without turning her head, with stinging brevity. “Oh, can’t you understand? I don’t want to know. Please go!”

There was a moment’s silence behind her, and then there came the martial sound of clicking heels.

“As you wish, signorina!” said Cesari stiffly, and marched away as if to the roll of drums.

She heard him depart with measured tread, and as the sound of his feet died in the distance she leaned her head against the stone pillar and closed her eyes with a movement that was half-shrug, half-shiver.

“There goes another enemy!” she said.

And she reflected that he had dealt her the hardest blow of all.

# PART III



# CHAPTER I

## *The Tryst*

THE WATERS of the pool were very still and deeply shadowed. Out in the distance beyond the Point the rising moon silvered the sea, but under the pine-clad rocks lay a mysterious twilight and a silence that was very secret, like a spell. The lights of the town were not visible from the pool. It lay in a tiny bay over which the pines seemed to keep vigil. Here and there a star gleamed through, casting an unbroken reflection upon the glassy surface of the water, but though this came and went and came again, there was no perceptible movement in the treetops. They stood like sentinels guarding a tomb.

The boat that was drawn up close under the rocky landing stage was quite motionless also, caught in the magic hush that lay upon all around. And the dim figure in the boat was still also, still and tense, seeming to listen perpetually for a sound that was long delayed. The whole scene somewhat resembled the dark back cloth of a stage all set and ready for a drama that might have a fateful ending.

It was growing late, and the boat had been there for a long time. There were other boats far away, out in the open, and now and then faint echoes of voices that might have travelled from another world floated across to that silent spot, but they only served to emphasize the pall-like stillness where none came or went. The motionless boatman seemed unaware of them. It was as if he too were caught in the spell where time itself might have ceased to exist.

Only at length when there came a slight rustling far above him did his head move sharply and his face turn upwards with a swift attention that testified to the fact that his senses were keenly alert. He made no other movement, merely waited with an almost grim expectancy for further developments.

The rustling increased, drawing nearer. There came the faint sound of feet moving softly over the pine needles. Once they halted and silence reigned again. Then they crept forward once more, slithering a little on the downward track.

Finally they paused, and from a point several feet above the water a low voice spoke. "Peter! Are you there?"

Instantly the listening figure in the boat stirred and answered in hushed

tones. “Yes, waiting for you. Can you get down?”

“Yes. I’m coming,” answered the voice, and there was a further slipping noise among the trees.

In the end a dim figure emerged on a flat rock about six feet above the boat.

Peter stood up, steadying himself and the boat against the dark wall of stone. “Mind how you come!” he said. “There are two crevices for your feet. Wait! I’ve got a torch.”

“Don’t! Don’t!” she whispered hurriedly. “I’ll find them. You can catch me if I slip.”

She did not slip, but he caught her notwithstanding. The boat swayed a little, the water rippled; but he held her firmly in his arms.

“Oh, Peter!” she said rather shakily. “Be very careful! Let me sit down! And keep in the shadow! Don’t row out into the open yet!”

He helped her down into the stern and took his own seat, facing her. Then with a boat hook, he began to feel his way along the rocky wall, gently propelling the boat down the edge of the pool until the little landing stage was several yards away.

The girl sat huddled in a grey cloak, her head bent. He realized that for some reason she wanted absolute silence. And so, without a word, he worked the boat shorewards through the deep shadow, passing round the inner curve that bounded the pool, and finally emerging into the rippling waters beyond.

Then he pushed off and took out the oars. In a few seconds the Point des Sirènes no longer loomed above them like a sinister fortress. They were drawing away from it with long, even strokes on a slanting course that brought them steadily nearer to the moonlight and nearer to the shore.

Gabrielle lifted her head and spoke in an urgent undertone. “Row straight out! Never mind about landing yet! Get right away!”

He obeyed her without question, rowing parallel to the shore, while she after a brief, half-secret glance over her shoulder subsided again, pulling the hood of her cloak right over her head.

When they reached the moonlit sea at length they were two hundred yards away from the mass of rock with its shrouding trees. Peter rowed on in silence through the silver ripples. A sound of dance music floated across from the shore, and other boats skimmed the water here and there at no great distance

with a splash of oars or a buzz of motors. But yet they seemed to be alone, and the festoons of coloured lights that marked the edge of the beach were like brilliant chains holding back the material world from the silvered splendour through which they passed.

After several minutes the little crouching figure in the stern moved, and Peter caught the gleam of her golden hair as the hood slipped back.

She drew a deep, slow breath. “We’re safe now,” she said.

He paused in his rowing, and the boat shot smoothly forward and stopped, rocking very slightly in a sparkle of radiant wavelets. “Out of bullet range?” he suggested drily. “But I should think a knife in the dark would be more in his line—if he dared.”

She shivered uncontrollably. “I hope no one saw us. I shouldn’t have come. Only I knew you’d be waiting there.”

“I should have gone on waiting all night,” he told her. “Or gone ashore to look for you.”

“Yes,” she murmured rather breathlessly. “I knew you would.”

“Thanks for that, anyway,” said Peter. “And thanks for coming! Now tell me what’s been happening!”

She was silent for a space, her eyes glancing to and fro as if in some uncertainty. At length, “Peter,” she said, “I’m in terrible trouble—about my mother. But I don’t think we can stay and talk out here. Someone might pass and see us. Where can we go?”

“I’m going to take you to a place I know of,” he said, “where it’s absolutely quiet, and where you’ll see Pierre. You wanted to meet him, didn’t you?”

She looked at him as if slightly bewildered. Perhaps she had forgotten Pierre, or perhaps the fact that he ignored her allusion to her mother surprised her. “Yes,” she said finally. “We must get undercover somewhere. You mustn’t risk being seen with me.”

Peter made a faint, scoffing sound. “Which is absurd,” he added gently. “But never mind! I’ll take care of you and myself too. Don’t you worry!”

He bent again with energy to his rowing, and the boat glided swiftly towards the shore.

Gabrielle watched anxiously. To land in the midst of those dancing lights with the possibility of meeting Cesari or even the count himself face to face

seemed to her the height of imprudence, but before she could utter any further warning Peter had swerved away towards a little jutting-out quay beyond which the illuminations ceased.

He brought the boat round to the further side, and shipped his oars, for here was a tiny landing stage to which he fastened the mooring rope. Then he stooped and offered her his hand.

“It’s only a stone’s throw away,” he said. “Child, how cold you are!”

Her fingers were like ice but they did not linger in his. They slipped free the moment her feet were on the quay. She went up some crumbling stone steps to a palm-shadowed path without help. But Peter was closely following. He came up with her as she reached the top and pushed his hand through the folds of her cloak so that he held her arm.

“It’s just a few yards away,” he said; “a gate on the left. It leads to Pierre’s private lair.”

She suffered the guiding touch in silence. Something seemed to have gone from her since that one low-spoken confidence, either the power to direct her own actions or the desire to confide anything further. She went with Peter without speaking, her feet moving almost soundlessly beside his.

They came after about two minutes’ walking along the chequered pathway to the gate of which Peter had spoken, a low iron-barred affair that jangled as he pushed it open.

“That’s Pierre’s burglar alarm,” he murmured. “Can you see where you’re going?”

She moved through the gateway without replying, and passed slowly on through a tiny orange grove while he stopped to latch the gate.

Again he overtook her, and again very lightly held her arm. “Don’t forget we’re friends, dear!” he said softly.

She answered him in a muffled voice, almost like one in a dream. “I shouldn’t be here if I had.”

But she did not turn towards him, and he made no further overture; simply leading her forward till they came to a very dark arched doorway.

Here for a second he paused and gave one low knock followed by two more in rapid succession, then he found a handle and opened the door.

A vague light from a door beyond, which was half-open, shone in front of them, and as they entered, this door swung back and disclosed a room. A trim,

slight figure stood before them. “Entrez!” said a voice.

Peter stopped to fasten the door. Gabrielle half-mechanically moved forward.

Then with a brief, incredulous exclamation she stood still.

Instantly a quiet and courteous voice greeted her in English. “No, mademoiselle! You do not know me. I am only of a type—yes. There are a great many Frenchmen like me. There is nothing strange in that. You see—I am French. My name—Pierre Ronceau!”

She gazed at him in wide-eyed wonder, but his look with its smiling insistence baffled her. It was rather like a flashing weapon, except that there was nothing hostile about it.

“It is such a great pleasure to meet you,” he said. “My little brother—the other Peter whom you know—has told me enough to sharpen my curiosity. Will you not be seated, mademoiselle? You smoke, yes?”

He was offering her his cigarette case and ushering her into a chair all in one graceful gesture.

She took a cigarette, murmuring her thanks. Was it true that he was, as he said, of a type? Was it true that she had not seen him before—only the previous evening, waiting upon her, bringing her coffee?

She could not decide, but the entrance of Peter an instant later checked her wild surmisings. He came to Pierre’s side and thrust a fraternal arm around his shoulders, and in a moment she saw that unmistakable look of kinship between them though she could not have told wherein it lay.

“He has introduced himself, has he?” said Peter. “The brazen old blackguard! He’s full of push but a good chap all the same. You’ll enjoy Pierre.” And then he saw the trouble in her eyes and dropped his bantering tone. “That’s right. Have a smoke!” he said. “And we’ll have some coffee. It’ll do you good. You’re cold.”

Pierre stooped to light her cigarette, and there was quick sympathy in his look. “I hope that nothing has happened to distress you,” he said, “chez Voltano.”

She turned to him instinctively, as though to a known and trusted friend. She thought his eyes were the kindest she had ever seen in a man.

“It’s my mother,” she said. “Peter has probably told you. She is the count’s secretary. She is very ill, and I have been told”—she faltered a little—“I’ve

been told that it's incurable—a disease of the heart.”

“Who told you?” came sharply from Peter.

Pierre said nothing. He only looked gravely concerned.

She began to smoke half-heartedly, yet with an odd feeling of comfort. The atmosphere of friendliness gave her a sense of confidence that was like the shedding of a heavy burden.

“Cesari told me,” she said, “this morning. I don't know why he told me. I don't trust him. Yet somehow—I feel it's true.”

“If it is true,” Pierre said gently, “it is better—certainly—that you should know.”

“Yes,” Gabrielle agreed and relaxed in her chair with a sigh of weariness.

The room in which she found herself was small and the brown walls were incongruously decorated with iron hooks and brackets, as though it might once have been a harness room. But it had been furnished with a table and easy chairs, and there was a carpet under her feet. The light came from an oil lamp that swung from the ceiling. The windows were shuttered and curtainless.

She cast a slow look around her. “It feels so safe here,” she said.

“It is—quite safe,” said Pierre in the same hushed tone, as though he were speaking to a startled child. “You are very tired, pauvre petite. Sit still and rest until Peter brings you some coffee!”

She obeyed him instinctively, yielding to a reaction which she scarcely realized. Pierre himself lit a cigarette and sat down, so completely conveying the idea that he expected nothing from her that she made no attempt to talk. Though Peter had gone from the room she could not feel herself to be alone with a stranger. They smoked together for several quiet minutes as though they were friends of long standing. Afterwards, looking back, she marvelled at the extraordinary influence which this man exercised upon her from the very beginning. It was a sort of beneficent emanation, indescribably soothing, unlike anything with which she had ever before come into contact. The combination of alertness and composure in him gave forth a sense of security that was as balm to her troubled spirit. No words were needed to establish between them the understanding of friends. They were friends from the outset.

The return of Peter put an end to a strangely restful period. She felt steadied and no longer bewildered.

She smiled at him when he brought her coffee. “Thank you so much.

You're awfully kind."

She sat up to drink it, the grey cloak falling back from her shoulders. She had the confiding look of a lost child brought into warmth and shelter.

"You're feeling better," said Peter.

"Much better, thank you." She sipped the coffee with appreciation. "Yes, it's lovely. Aren't you going to have some?"

"Rather!" said Peter. "Come along, Pierre! Your turn next! As black as ink, I suppose?"

"Avec sugar," smiled Pierre. "Thanks, mon ami! Now help yourself and let's be comfortable! And sit down, please, and you will not look so big!"

Peter dropped into a chair. "He always talks like that," he observed. "But it isn't looks that count. He's much more of an outsize than I am in everything else."

"I expect he is," Gabrielle said, feeling that this description somehow tallied with her own impression.

"Do not believe it!" said Pierre. "I am just an ordinary little Frenchman."

"With an enormous brain and a heart of gold," put in Peter. "Sorry, Pierre! I've done now. Have another cigarette, my dear! It's good for the nerves."

But Gabrielle refused. "My nerves don't need any more," she said. "I feel ready for anything. And, Peter, I mustn't stay too long. I only came because I promised."

"We will get you safely back," said Pierre reassuringly. "Have no fear of that!"

"Oh I love being here," she said, "so long as no one finds out. You see, the count doesn't like Peter."

"Damn good compliment!" said Peter.

But Pierre shook his head at him. "No, it is a very bad one. I should be much happier if he loved you like a brother."

"So should I," said Gabrielle. "I don't like all this secrecy and hiding. It—complicates matters so. Does he dislike you too?" she asked Pierre.

"He does not know me very well," said Pierre.

Peter uttered a brief laugh. "Wait till he does! But tell us, Gabrielle! What has been happening at the villa since I was kicked out two days ago? You were

dining out with them that night and going to the gaming tables.”

“Oh yes, we went.” Gabrielle hesitated a little; she was looking at Pierre, but his face expressed only quiet attention. “I gambled and I won. I never knew how much. The count had it all.”

“The swine!” said Peter.

“It was his money,” she said. “I suppose he had a right to it. Anyway, I’m rather glad now. I should hate to feel in his debt. It’s bad enough as it is.”

“In what way?” asked Pierre gently.

Again she hesitated. “He is rather—a dominating person,” she said. “I certainly shouldn’t be his guest by choice. But—you see—my mother is so ill, and I don’t see how I can leave her.”

“You think that she is too ill to leave the villa?” said Pierre.

Gabrielle bent her head. “I am sure she wouldn’t think of it—though she doesn’t want me to stay on. In fact, I promised her I wouldn’t; but now that I know—now that I know——” she stopped and was silent.

“It’s an infernal position,” said Peter forcibly. “She must be got away somehow. There’s that convent hospital up on the hill. Why couldn’t we——”

Gabrielle looked up at him. “We couldn’t,” she said with decision. “There would be opposition, and she isn’t equal to it. I know—I can’t tell you how—but I do.”

“Why should there be opposition?” asked Pierre. “Surely Voltano would wish her to have the best treatment it would be possible to obtain!”

“I don’t think she would want to go,” Gabrielle said. “I’m not even sure that she realizes how seriously ill she is, and if she doesn’t—it wouldn’t be good for her to know.”

“And if she does?” said Pierre.

She made a small, hopeless gesture. “I’m afraid it wouldn’t make any difference. She doesn’t seem to think about herself at all—only me. She keeps urging me to go. But—how can I?”

“Why does she want you to go?” asked Pierre.

Gabrielle paused for a moment, but his kindly look encouraged her and she finally replied. “She says it is a wrong atmosphere for me. Of course I am not used to foreigners. I don’t understand their ways.” She halted suddenly. “I beg your pardon, I ought not to put it like that.”



His quick smile set her at her ease. "But that is exactly what I would choose. It shows that you do not regard me—like that, does it not? I think your mother is quite right. The villa is not the place for you. It is natural that you should not wish to leave her, but her peace of mind comes first with you, yes?"

"I couldn't leave her," Gabrielle said with swift earnestness. "You mustn't try to persuade me to do that now."

"Not if it were her last—her greatest—wish?" said Pierre.

She turned from him with a movement of distress. "I couldn't," she said again. "You don't understand. If once I left, he might shut the gates upon me and refuse ever to let me see her again."

"Damn the fellow!" said Peter.

Pierre lifted a restraining hand. "Why should he do that, mademoiselle? Have you any actual reason for believing that he would do that?"

She kept her face averted to hide her rising tears. "I don't know. Yes, I think I have. Anyhow, I daren't risk it. I should be so horribly afraid."

"Pauvre petite!" he said again. "I do not think—in one way or another—that you have received much kindness at the villa."

She swallowed her agitation with an effort. "That doesn't matter, does it? After all, I'm not looking for happiness, am I? I'm thinking of her and I'll put up with anything to stay with her. You see—I don't think—somehow—it will be for very long."

Peter broke in again. "But, my dear girl, the man is such an utter scoundrel. No, dash it, Pierre! What does it matter? She knows it already. He might do anything—make love to you—insult you—and there's no one to protect you."

Gabrielle's look changed a little. Something of youth went out of it and something of womanly experience took its place. "He will not do that," she said quietly. "There are some things he can't do, and that's one of them."

The absolute conviction with which she spoke checked Peter inexplicably. He made a discontented sound, but pressed the matter no further.

It was Pierre who after a moment turned back to the previous problem. "You will not leave your mother in her present state and you think that it is impossible to move her from the villa. Eh bien, mademoiselle, we must think of some other way of helping you. You have trusted us with your friendship and so you will not refuse to accept our help."

"I am very grateful to you," Gabrielle said, "but I don't see what anyone

can do. I have got to go through it by myself. Afterwards—if you will help me to get back to England—perhaps. But I can't think of that yet. I must take each day as it comes."

"I see," said Pierre. "And you do not anticipate that there is any danger of his asking anything of you? You think that you will be left in complete freedom to tend your mother?"

He spoke gravely, considerately, but his eyes searched her face with their unflinching keenness, and she drew back a little from their probing scrutiny.

"You seem to know him better than I do," she said.

"That is very probable," Pierre admitted. "I know many—very disreputable people, mademoiselle, with whom it would not be wise for you to associate. But I think that you have already discovered for yourself that this Voltano is a dangerous man and you would not place yourself trop facilement in his power. I see that you do not trust him. And I say to you—trust no one into whose society he may attempt to draw you! Have no dealings of any kind with him or with his friends! Be very prudent, mademoiselle! Be on your guard! Accept nothing and give nothing! You will not be tempted to go with him to the tables again," he added with a smile, "so I need not warn you against that."

"No," Gabrielle said. "But I am not in a position to quarrel with him. I am living at his expense."

Pierre raised his shoulders slightly, and Peter growled inarticulately under his breath.

Gabrielle's look came to him, and she gathered her cloak about her. "It's all very difficult," she said with a sigh, "but you mustn't worry about me. I shall stay with my mother as much as possible. Peter mustn't come to the villa. It will only make things worse. I ought to be going back there now. I don't want him to find out anything. He is very set against—my English cousin."

"Confound the brute!" said Peter. "He may have good reason to be before I've done with him."

She stood up. "No, Peter! You are not to have anything to do with him. It would only make matters worse for everybody. You are to keep away. Please, I must insist on that. And I don't want you to come with me now. I am going back by myself."

"Are you?" said Peter.

"Yes, I am." She turned appealingly to Pierre. "Don't let him come with me! I am going to walk back. I have taken Marta's keys and I can let myself in

without being seen. Please don't let him come! It isn't safe."

"Safe!" scoffed Peter.

But Pierre put a hand on his shoulder. "Mon ami, you have a proverb about discretion. I think we will observe that proverb tonight. With Mademoiselle's permission, I shall give myself the pleasure of following her back."

"The devil you will!" ejaculated Peter.

His brother's hand pressed upon him, drawing him slightly round to face him. "Devil or no," he said whimsically, "that is my intention. I go now to fetch my hat and cloak. You will await me here."

He gave Peter a very direct look with the words, and before it Peter's expression changed. He made a sudden gesture of submission. "I suppose you'll have your own way as usual, though why in hell you should——"

"That is just it," rejoined Pierre cheerily. "We are not in hell and so we need not argue about it. Voulez-vous m'excuser, mademoiselle? I shall return in two minutes."

He smiled upon her with a brief bow and turned to the door. There was something rather princely about his exit as if he were leaving two subordinates behind him of whose compliance with his wishes he was fully assured. He shut the door with decision as one who would imply that he had no doubts as to their loyalty, and Gabrielle and Peter stood in the little brown room and looked at one another in silence.

## CHAPTER II

### *Friendship*

IT WAS GABRIELLE who spoke first, unexpectedly, almost involuntarily, it seemed. "I'm sorry, Peter. I didn't really want either of you to come."

His moodiness vanished like the sudden passing of a cloud. "I suppose he's threatening me with a violent death if you exchange a single word with me, is that it?" he said. "And you don't want me to the violently. Thanks for that, anyway."

"If any harm came to you through me, I should never forgive myself," she said, refusing to smile at his levity.

He came a step nearer. "Darling, don't get cold feet on my account!" he said. "If you look like that, I shall have to take you in my arms and comfort you."

She regarded him dubiously. "No, don't, please, Peter! I don't feel strong enough. We are only friends, you know. You promised we might be just that, didn't you?"

He came close to her and took her gently by the shoulders. "Well?" he said. "And haven't I been true to my promise? Have I disappointed you in any way? You're not—not afraid of me, Gabrielle?"

She looked up at him with troubled eyes. "Not of you," she said. "Rather for you. I'm only afraid of disappointing you. Don't you understand?"

"Oh, never mind that!" he said. "You've too many other things to think about. Besides," he was bending towards her, "you can't help my loving you. It's done and can't be undone. It's no fault of yours. It's my own damn silliness—if you choose to call it so."

She smiled unwillingly. "But you mustn't—ever—misunderstand me, Peter," she said. "Being friends is one thing, but loving each other—like that—is quite another."

"I haven't asked you to love me," he said. "Only to let me love you—which, as a matter of fact, you can't prevent—any more than I can. I know I'm not a romantic sort of chap, Gabrielle. I haven't any attractions to offer you. I'm just solid, that's all. Whatever you do or feel, I shall never change. I'm

made that way.”

She shook her head slightly. “I think you’re very impulsive. You don’t even know me yet. Suppose you find out presently that I’m hard and self-centred, incapable of really loving anybody! That would hurt you, wouldn’t it?”

Peter stooped abruptly and kissed her forehead. “I can’t help it, darling,” he said. “Suppose you suddenly turned into a black woman, I should still love you.”

She laughed rather tremulously, setting her hand against his breast. “Then you must be quite mad,” she said. “That’s all I’ve got to say. I’m glad you have a brother to look after you, for you need a keeper badly.”

“Or a nice calm levelheaded wife!” suggested Peter daringly. “That’s really what I’m most in need of, but I never realized it before I met you. You’d keep me in order all right, wouldn’t you? You’ve begun already.”

She stopped him with a sigh. “Peter, you’re hopeless. I’m not going to marry you. I probably shan’t ever marry anyone. I’m not at all keen on the idea.”

“Why not?” he said.

“I don’t know,” she said rather wearily. “Marriage is such a mix-up of soul and body, and I think I should be rather afraid that the body might win, and the other part—the spiritual part—get crowded out.”

“What makes you think that?” Peter demanded.

She was silent, but something in her face moved him. He still held her before him, but her eyes were downcast. She had the look of a sorrowful child, a look that went straight to his heart.

“Darling, look at me!” he said gently.

She raised her eyes slowly, not very willingly, to his. “Yes, I know,” she said. “You think I’m too young to understand, but I’m not.”

“No, I don’t think that,” Peter said. “But I think—someone—has been trying to make love to you in the wrong way. Am I right?”

His lips were stern as he asked the question, but his voice and his hold remained very gentle.

She did not shrink from replying. “We won’t call it love,” she said. “And you needn’t have any fear on that account. It will never happen again.”

Peter swallowed something hard. “Who was it? Voltano?”

“It will never happen again,” she repeated with steady conviction. “I have told you, there are some things he can’t do.”

“What makes you so sure of that?” he said, impressed in spite of himself.

She answered him with a curious sort of detachment, almost as though she herself were scarcely aware of uttering the words. “Because I believe in God—and so does he.”

Peter started a little. She had taken him by surprise, and for a moment he was at a loss. Then, “You think that of the devil?” he said.

“Yes, I do.” An odd starry smile lighted her eyes for a moment. “Even the devils believe, you know—and tremble sometimes. He is that sort.”

Peter considered her for a second or two, and then instinctively decided to shift to more familiar ground. “He’s the vilest swine that ever breathed! If I only got the chance, I’d choke the life out of him. P’raps I’ll have it some day.”

Instantly her look was sombre again. “I hope you never will,” she said. “I don’t want either his blood—or yours—on my hands. Don’t you see, Peter? That sort of thing doesn’t help. And I should be responsible either way. If you really care for me—unselfishly, I mean—you will never do anything like that.”

“Oh!” said Peter. “You think my love for you is mere selfish desire, do you?”

“I don’t know what it is,” she answered. “I’ve had no chance of knowing. But I hope it isn’t—I hope it isn’t.”

“But you think it is all the same,” he insisted, “because I want to kiss you and hold you in my arms. You think that is common passion—not real love.”

“No.” Rather unexpectedly she answered him. “It might be either. I don’t believe you or I can possibly tell at present. It’s rather like a newborn child, Peter. No one knows what it may develop into. It’s too young—too new—at present. But, my dear,” she smiled faintly, wistfully, as she uttered the term, “whatever it is, I’m not ready for it yet. Perhaps I never shall be. That’s why I want to stop you caring too much. I would hate you to be hurt and disappointed.”

“That’s something, anyway,” commented Peter. “But I’ve told you I’m willing to take the risk. In fact, it’s too late to do anything else. Never mind, darling! I won’t make a damned nuisance of myself. If I get hurt, it’s no one’s

fault but my own. I'm not turning back on that account."

"I wish you were a little older," she said with a sigh.

"Hoots!" said Peter, and laughed. "I'm not as new as all that, dash it all! My past may not be a very lurid one, but it's been long enough to give me a little insight into human nature. You think me an awful ass because I fell for you so quickly, but even the best people do that sometimes and get away with it without a stain on their characters. It isn't always a sign of weak-mindedness."

"No, I didn't mean that," she said. "I think it's dreadfully nice of you, Peter. I only hope you won't suffer for it. It would hurt me too if you did."

He bent again and kissed her hair. "Well, darling, no one can say I haven't been warned. P'raps a little suffering would be good for me. Who knows? It might turn me into the sort of man you could love."

Her eyes filled with sudden tears. "Oh, Peter," she said, "you have a very generous heart. You make me feel terribly unworthy."

"Not a bit of it!" said Peter. "T'other way round entirely! You mustn't get tragic over me. You've got enough to worry you without that. But don't forget I'm standing by, whatever happens, ready to help you at every turn! I shan't put my foot in it—you needn't be afraid—and I shan't ask for any return. I wouldn't take anything from you that you didn't give of your own free will."

"I know that," she said. "And it's no good saying thank you, is it? But I feel it, all the same."

"Bless the child!" said Peter. "No, you must never say thank you to me. I'm only doing what I was meant to do. And—don't forget!—it's good for me. I hate letting you go back though I know you've got to go. Promise me if you want help you'll somehow let me know! I shall be here—at the Beau Rivage—always within reach. You will promise me, darling? For friendship's sake!"

She looked at him steadily. "All right, Peter; if you'll promise not to run any awful risks, I'll do that," she said. "You'll be guided by Pierre, won't you?"

He grinned at that. "I'm always guided by Pierre when he's anywhere about. I can't help myself there. He's a most managing person, as you may have gathered. It's a bargain, then. Let me hold your little hand in mine just for a minute—to ratify and confirm the same!"

She held out both her hands to him with a rather quivering smile, and he took them, held them, lifted them to his lips.

“God bless you, little sweetheart!” he whispered almost inaudibly over them.

There came a quiet knock at the door, followed by two more. He looked up and let her go.

“Here comes Pierre—tactful as usual! Wonderful man—Pierre! Come in, old bird!” He raised his voice. “You needn’t stand on ceremony. The lady is quite ready to go.”

The door opened and Pierre stood smiling before them. He was wearing a black cloak, and he carried an official-looking peaked cap with some silver lettering on the front which he held up for inspection.

“See!” he said. “What a find! The hotel porter is off duty, and so—I borrow his chapeau. It becomes me very well. Mademoiselle has a hood to her cloak with which she conceals her face, and I—I follow behind with an attaché case. Et voilà! All is safe.”

He stuck the cap on his head with an air of triumph, and the words Beau Rivage stood out in bold relief.

Peter gave a guffaw of laughter, “Pierre, you’re priceless—as usual. He’s the greatest borrower I’ve ever come across,” he added to Gabrielle. “He’ll be borrowing that cloak of yours one of these days.”

“That is not impossible,” smiled Pierre. “Would you lend it to me, mademoiselle, if I asked for it?”

Gabrielle smiled herself at the question. He seemed to possess an astounding faculty for inspiring confidence. The moment he entered the room her anxieties were lightened. “Of course—anything!” she said. “But I don’t think it would take you very far.”

“One never knows,” said Pierre. “Enfin, you have said your adieux. I am at your service, mademoiselle.”

He stood aside, opening the door for her with a humorous sparkle in his eyes.

She glanced back at Peter who was watching for her look. “Good-bye!” she said.

He raised his hand to his forehead in a gesture of homage that contained something more than gallantry. “Au revoir, fairy queen!” he said. “Though you haven’t told me when we shall meet again.”

She hesitated an instant. “Oh, I don’t know,” she said, and turned back



half-instinctively to Pierre.

“We will arrange that,” said Pierre. “It will not be difficult when we have established our lines of communication.”

She had no idea what he meant but she accepted the assurance with a fugitive smile of gratitude. His fashion of dominating the situation without the faintest suggestion of effort or arrogance filled her with a confidence for which it was impossible to account. She passed out into the shadowy orange grove with a feeling of complete security.

## CHAPTER III

### *The Return*

IT WAS not until they reached the gate that Pierre spoke softly to the girl at his side.

“Before we go any further, mademoiselle, there is one thing I want to say. You trust me, yes?”

She paused, turning fully towards him. “Yes, of course.”

“As if I were Peter?” he asked whimsically.

“Perhaps—in a way—more,” she said.

“Ah, but Peter is a good boy,” he said. “He will never fail you. There is nothing he would not do for you.”

“I know,” Gabrielle said. “I know.” And then, rather nervously: “I rather wish he weren’t so—so ardent. It troubles me.”

Pierre’s hand was on the gate. The moonlight shining on his face under the porter’s cap showed her a gleam of sympathy in his eyes, half-quizzical, half-compassionate. “Poor Peter!” he said gently. “He has never loved before. He has had everything else in his life except that which is beyond price. He will be the richer for it, mademoiselle, even if it brings him pain. You need have no fear for him. He is very brave, very chivalrous. He is capable of sacrifice.”

“I know,” she said again. “But—don’t you see—that makes it worse?”

“No, I do not see,” said Pierre with his quick, twinkling smile. “I think it is not Peter that you fear, but life. When a great gift is offered to us, mademoiselle, we may not—perhaps—be able to accept it all at once. But we should not shrink from it. If we lack courage, it may never come again.”

Gabrielle smiled also faintly. “I’m afraid I haven’t time to fall in love just now,” she said. “And though I like Peter very much, I think he’s rather young.”

“Oh, là là!” expostulated Pierre. “But he is growing very fast. Soon I shall not have a little brother any longer. He will be a stout, middle-aged Englishman—so grave, so solid—and I shall be left to cut my absurd capers by myself.”

She laughed involuntarily. There was something irresistibly funny in the picture he conjured up. "I'm sure you couldn't be absurd if you tried," she said.

He looked reproachful through his merriment. "Ah, but I do try—so hard!" he protested. "I am sure your judgment is at fault. You do not know either Peter or me."

"Perhaps not," she conceded, becoming serious again. "Can we truly say that we really know anyone, I wonder?"

"Ah, why do you say that?" he asked.

She answered him with sad simplicity. "I was thinking just then of my mother. There is so much that I don't know about her. We have lived apart so entirely. I can't understand her position in the least. Why won't she leave this man now that she is too ill to work for him? Why is she almost a prisoner in his house?"

"I think it is by her own wish, mademoiselle," Pierre said, and there was a note of pity in his voice.

"But why—why?" Gabrielle persisted. "What is he? What is his hold over her? Why can't she come away with me out of his clutches?"

Her words had a desperate ring, but she did not look at Pierre as she uttered them. Her eyes were fixed upon the glimmering sheen of the moonlit sea visible between the palm trees. It was almost as if she were afraid to look at him.

There fell a silence—a poignant, palpitating silence that seemed to hold a sentence that could not be uttered. Then with a quiet movement Pierre opened the rusty gate just far enough for her to slip through.

"We will not open it too wide," he said. "It makes so hideous a sound."

And Gabrielle passed out on to the path as though she had received her answer.

The coloured lights had been put out. The band had ceased to play. She moved towards the sea half-mechanically, as if dazed.

Suddenly she stopped and spoke in a vehement undertone. "Oh, why does God let such wicked people exist?"

Pierre came up to her. "There is no answer to that," he said. "It is for us to fight the wickedness and be brave."

She put her hand up to her head with a helpless gesture. "To fight—and to

lose!" she said.

"No, mademoiselle!" he answered firmly. "To fight—and to win!"

She stood motionless, as though all consciousness of time and place had gone from her.

"Listen!" Pierre said. "There is no need for despair. You will not be left to fight alone. Help will never be far away. Peter and I will be working for you, and—there is always le bon Dieu to protect His little ones."

She made a vague movement, then slowly, gropingly, held out her hand. "Will you help me, Pierre?" she said.

"But yes!" he answered instantly, and his fingers closed strongly, sustainingly, about her own. "I make my plans already to be near you. Have no fear, petite! You will not perhaps always know it, but—I shall be there."

She left her hand in his, and it was as if a new strength flowed into her from that steady grasp. "You do help," she said wonderingly.

He smiled at her. "And you will not feel alone in the dark any more? You will say to yourself, 'Pierre is there. He is a good comrade. I shall trust him.' Will you remember to say all that, mademoiselle?"

She looked at him, met the keen brightness of his eyes, and bent her head. "Yes, I shall remember."

"Good!" he said. "And thus we will go on bravely, ready to fight and win. Now will you tell me a little about the household? You say you have Marta's keys with you. Marta is the old Italian woman who opens the door?"

"Yes. She is rather deaf," Gabrielle said. "She does a good many things and looks after my mother as well. Then there is Victor in the kitchen. He is just a boy. He does the cooking and sometimes waits upon us."

"And then again there is a chauffeur?" questioned Pierre.

"Yes, Antonio. But he doesn't live at the villa, or the gardener either. There are two gardeners—one a very old man who peers about at the flowers and never seems to see anything else. He is French, I believe. They call him François. He doesn't work very hard. He is too old and bent. I call him Old Beetle Back. The other is a younger man called Louis, who comes and goes. He works like a fury when he is there, but quite often he is nowhere to be seen, and when he comes back old François curses him, and he just grins and shrugs his shoulders."

She shrugged her own expressively with an outward gesture of the hands,

and Pierre chuckled in appreciation. “Ah! I see him! And that is all?”

“All—except Cesari,” she said. “He too comes and goes. I sometimes think he is in the count’s employ, but I don’t know in what way. I have Italian lessons with him.”

“But you do not like him, no!” said Pierre decidedly.

“I don’t like any of them,” she replied with candour. “Cesari may mean well. At least, he tries to make me think so.”

“And Voltano?” Pierre asked her point-blank. “Does he treat you as a gentleman should? Or does he frighten you?”

She hesitated. “He was friendly at first,” she said.

“Too friendly, hein?” suggested Pierre.

She turned and began to walk along the narrow path between the palm trees. “Perhaps that was partly my fault,” she said after a moment. “I didn’t understand. I do now and I am on my guard.”

“You are not afraid, then?” said Pierre.

She raised her head. “Of that, no! But I agree with you. He is secret and dangerous. I would never trust him.”

“In that,” said Pierre, “you are wise. Stay with your mother as much as possible and do not be persuaded to leave her!”

Gabrielle glanced at him. “You know much more than I do,” she observed. “I wonder why you won’t trust me.”

“Ah! It is not that!” he said swiftly. “Trust you? Ma chère, naturally I trust you. You have the innocence and the sweetness of an angel. It is only that it is not good for you to know too much. It might bring you into danger. Even your friendship with me must be always a secret from that man. But I dare not give you his secrets while you are living in his house. There are some things I do not tell even to Peter.”

“I can understand that,” Gabrielle said. “Peter is so explosive. But I am different. I can hide things.”

“Eh bien!” he said. “It is better that you should not have too much to hide. It does not give peace of mind, that. We are coming to the *plage* now, mademoiselle. It will be better for you to walk in front.”

She obeyed him in silence, reflecting that it was strange that he should have won her confidence so completely when he gave so little in return.

They came out into the full moonlight to find the shore practically deserted. One or two people loitered here and there, but none accosted them. She walked with a quiet, assured step, and Pierre followed close behind in his black cloak and porter's cap and the attaché case in his hand.

The night was cool with a faint chill wind. The silvered water lapped softly against the wall, sometimes with a gurgle as of secret laughter, sometimes quite soundless, full of mystery. Their footsteps echoed with a strange loudness, especially Pierre's, for he had fallen into the definite trudge of the hired servant, shuffling, monotonous, with something of a drag.

It was a journey which to Gabrielle had a peculiar eeriness. It was as if some phantom moved with her—a thing inescapable, a sort of spiritual dread in which physical fear had no part. She had the utmost faith in Pierre's protection, but the darkness of the future was like a black abyss, the edge of which was hidden from her. It seemed that she was in the grip of a destiny that must ultimately engulf her. There was nothing in what Pierre had told her which had not already begun to take some sort of shadowy form in her mind. Doubts and suspicions were fitting into one another like the moving prisms of a kaleidoscope. But yet through it all her loyalty to her mother still held. She could not leave her. She was fettered by her love which no evil or disillusion could overthrow. She was certain that that at least would endure to the end. It was a part of her very self, born in her and impossible of eradication. Her experience of Voltano, moreover, had been an initiation into something so darkly terrible that she was inclined to invest the man with almost super-human powers. She could believe him capable of exercising a hypnotism which very few would have the strength to resist. Her mother—her beautiful, gentle mother—who could say by what devilish ingenuity she might have been enslaved?

But these were thoughts which could only be dwelt upon in solitude. She had a feeling that she must keep the phantom at bay until she could face it alone. Then she would meet it, wrestle with it, perhaps overthrow it.

With a sigh of thankfulness she realized that the tree-clad Point des Sirènes was at no great distance. They had accomplished two thirds of the journey along the path that ran between the palm trees and the sea.

On the road above them a car swished by and was gone. Its passage was like the sudden wash of a wave, and the silence closed behind it again as though it had never been broken.

They came at length to the end of the little *plage* where a flight of rough steps led upwards to an avenue of trees. The coast curved outwards here

towards the rocky point. They passed into deep shadow and the sea sank out of sight.

At the top of the steps the road wound steeply up to the stone wall of the villa. Gabrielle slackened her pace, but Pierre did not overtake her. His gait merely became more shambling and laborious. When at last through the over-arching trees she reached the door in the wall, he was several paces behind.

She waited for him, and the scent of a multitude of flowers came drifting over with an almost cloying sweetness. For the first time it repelled her as though it had been a poisonous narcotic saturating her senses. A cold breath of air swept down the narrow lane, and she drew her cloak more closely about her.

Then Pierre was beside her, speaking in rapid whispers. "Give me the key, mademoiselle! There must be no noise. The car went up the hill, but it may return. It is possible that he is looking for you. You have another key by which you can enter the villa?"

"Yes," she whispered back. "A door at the side. I need not go near the front. Was that the count who went by? Are you sure?"

He did not answer her. He had taken the key of the door and fitted it stealthily into the lock. He turned it with noiseless dexterity.

"Vite—vite!" he said. "He has not seen you. But we must not lose a moment. See! You can enter now. Go quickly—quickly, mademoiselle!"

The door was ajar. He pushed her through with an urgency that admitted of no delay. She went in startled obedience, and immediately he closed the door behind her. It was not the main entrance, but the door through which Peter had been ejected by Cesari and used mainly by the servants. She found herself in a maze of evergreens, and paused for a moment in bewilderment. Then she discerned the winding path before her and crept along it, feeling as if Pierre were still impelling her. As she went she heard his feet—treading carelessly, like the feet of a slouching man—descending the hill again, and the first bars of the "Marseillaise" reached her like the clear whistle of a bird.

Then in the far distance up the hill she heard the rush of an approaching car. Her heart gave a swift leap of apprehension, and she fled along the path like a hunted thing.

It was almost by instinct that she found the side door into the villa, but the key was in her hand and she remembered to use it cautiously. The rest was easy, for she knew her way, and the flooding moonlight helped her.

She had taken the key from Marta's tiny office close to the kitchen and she stole thither and hung it on its nail. Then like a gliding shadow she slipped through the silent passages and up to her own room, which was also locked.

There, as she softly closed and re-locked the door, she drew a deep breath that ended in a gasp as she remembered that she had left the key of the door that led into the garden with Pierre. But it was impossible then to retrace her steps, and Pierre had gone. She wondered if it was by set intention that he had carried away the key in his pocket.



## CHAPTER IV

### *The Closing Net*

WHEN GABRIELLE AWOKE on the following morning she was instantly aware of a change in the atmosphere, and, going to her window, it seemed to her that the whole world had altered in the night. A southeast wind was blowing hard over the garden, and the sky was grey and ominous. Looking forth at the writhing trees and whipping creepers, she felt as if a giant had laid a devastating hand upon the magic scene, and the very flowers crouched before the blast. The sound of the sea was no longer a murmur but a deep, persistent roar. She was a little startled by the sudden transformation though she knew that there was nothing unusual about it, but as she dressed, she reassured herself with the reflection that the drop of temperature would be a relief to her mother upon whose strength the recent heat had had so disastrous an effect.

The thought of that mother had been with her all through the night, but, dreaming or waking, it had been unaccompanied by any bitterness or harshness of judgment. It was simply out of her power to regard her with anything but the utmost tenderness. What she knew and what she guessed, combined with Pierre's grave silence of the night before, had brought her very near to the truth, and the blind idolatry of her childhood had passed for ever. But in its place something that was deeper and more enduring had arisen. Her love had taken another form—a form that hurt her as though a flame burned inwardly, an almost fierce compassion in which sorrow and a fixed determination to protect and comfort were the main elements. She had worshipped her mother in the old days almost as a being from another sphere. Today she loved her with a yearning beyond her own understanding—the yearning of strength over weakness, the indestructible devotion that is beyond all human explanation—the fire immortal.

It possessed her very nearly to the exclusion of everything else. She felt consumed by it. All other experiences were sunk into the background.

“She has suffered,” she whispered to herself. “She has suffered terribly. And much of it—most of it—may have been for me.”

She dressed quickly and made her way along the passage that led to her mother's bedroom. The wind from the rising storm was whistling shrilly through the villa; it was like a presage of coming evil. The light that filtered in

through shivering magnolia leaves had a greenish hue. Suddenly it was pierced by a blinding flash of lightning, and immediately a crash of thunder shook the house.

Gabrielle started back involuntarily. It was like the bursting of a shell. For a moment or two she was half-dazed; and then, before she had time to recover herself, a figure came swiftly out of a room close to her, and she was confronted by Gaspare. The lurid light on his face gave it an extraordinary pallor, and she thought there was a gleam of anger in his dark eyes though, if so, he veiled it instantly.

“Ah! You are awake!” he said and smiled at her in a fashion that she did not find reassuring. “What a storm! But it will be over in an hour or two.”

She summoned her composure with a sharp effort. “I am just going to my mother,” she said.

He put out an intercepting hand, without touching her. “I am sorry,” he said smoothly. “But your mother was not well last night. We sent for the doctor and he has given her a quieting drug with strict orders that she is not to be disturbed.”

“Not well!” Gabrielle stood as if turned to stone. “What happened?” Her voice came in a tense whisper; it was as much as she could do to utter the words. “Why was I not told?”

He made a suave gesture with his outstretched hand. “My dear signorina, Marta went to your door, but it was locked, and she could not make you hear. There is, however, no cause for immediate anxiety. The attack has passed, but rest is imperative.”

Gabrielle looked at him in mingled suspicion and distress. “When will the doctor come again?” she managed to ask.

Gaspare continued to smile. “Do not be so anxious! I am satisfied that all will be well. It would be useless for you to see the doctor as he does not speak your language.”

He was completely baffling, as lacking in sympathy as though he viewed her from a great height; but what he said was quite unanswerable. She stood, pale and irresolute, debating with herself.

There came another vivid lightning flash and again the thunder roared like a dropped bomb. Her hands went up to her head in a piteous bewilderment. It was impossible to think in such a din.

As it died away Gaspare spoke with calm decision. “We will have our petit

déjeuner together in my room downstairs. There is nothing else that we can do here. Marta is a good nurse. You can trust her.”

“Why should I not take her place?” said Gabrielle, recovering her poise again with a feeling of contempt for her own weakness.

He snapped his fingers imperiously. “You are too young. You have no experience. No, signorina, you must have patience. Later—perhaps this evening—you shall be allowed to see her. But I cannot allow any risks to be taken. She must be kept absolutely quiet.”

His voice was peremptory, strictly impersonal. There was nothing in his manner to tell her if he were aware of her absence on the previous evening or not. The rushing storm made anything in the way of sustained conversation impossible. Already the rain was battering upon the roof and windows as if a thousand demons were fighting for entrance. The difficulty of making herself heard through the tumult made her relinquish any further attempt at protest for the moment. She accepted his decree and walked down the winding white stone stairs with their wrought-iron balustrade in silence.

He followed her, rang a bell and gave an order to the white-capped Victor and ushered her into a room she had not before entered—an official-looking apartment of no great size, in which stood a table, a large desk and two or three tapestry-covered chairs.

He waved her to one of them with a sort of nonchalant courtesy as if his mind were on other things and went himself to the desk, where he took up some papers and looked through them by the window.

The gloom deepened, and Gabrielle sat waiting while the lightning glimmered intermittently and the thunder crashed overhead. She felt stunned and at a loss, oppressed by a dread that the storm in some fashion served to intensify. Her very fingertips were tingling as if the electricity in the air were giving her tiny pinpricks of shock. The teeming darkness with that lurid light flashing through it had in it a quality of terror, unreasonable yet none the less insistent.

Victor came in with coffee and rolls and a dish of fruit on a tray, which he placed on the table, and he then disappeared again, dragging his carpet slippers along the floor.

Gabrielle sat motionless, in a state of nervous tension that was almost unbearable. If she had been alone she felt that she could have borne it more easily, but the suspense in the midst of that raging tempest seemed to try her endurance to breaking point. She thought that Gaspare was deliberately driving

her to a state of desperation.

He moved at last, folded the papers together and placed them in a wallet. Then with his agile, sinuous gait he left the window and came to the table. Again it appeared to her that the lightning flickering across his face gave it a curiously inhuman look. There was something inexorable in the smile he turned upon her.

The intolerable din of rain and thunder rendered any ordinary conversation impossible. He made an imperious sign to her to remain where she was and proceeded to pour out coffee into two cups, one of which he brought to the corner of the table by her side.

She thanked him, but shook her head at the roll he offered her, and he brought her fruit instead. She took a pear, but her hands were trembling so that she could scarcely peel it, and she was horribly aware that his eyes dwelt upon her and noted the fact.

He sat down himself at the table and made a brief meal, perfunctorily, as if his mind were completely engrossed with other matters—with her, she strongly suspected, though, having attended to her wants, he paid no further apparent attention to her.

The storm swept on its appointed course, and gradually its violence abated, but it continued to rain heavily and gusts of wind moaned desolately through the trees. The gloom lessened somewhat, but the pallid light was scarcely more reassuring. It seemed to convey an uncanny suggestion of some evil waiting, masked, in the background.

The thunder still echoed overhead in long reverberations and flickers of lightning shot across the grey sky, but the fierce uproar had died down; it was possible to hear other sounds.

The striking of a match made Gabrielle glance up sharply. Gaspare was lighting one of his thin cigars.

His look met hers through a veil of smoke—a look so insolent and so confident that she instantly averted her own.

He laughed softly, superciliously. “Well, signorina? You have satisfied your hunger? Not a very difficult matter, I imagine. I trust that your nerves are recovering from the storm. How fortunate that it did not break a few hours earlier!”

The words seemed to hold a taunt, but Gabrielle ignored them. She had recovered her composure and she was determined that whatever he might

suspect he should not take her at a disadvantage.

“I should like,” she said firmly, “to hear all about my mother. She had an attack, you tell me. What sort of an attack?”

“Surely you know all about her!” he rejoined. “There is some slight heart trouble. It is probable that the coming storm affected her.”

“Is it slight?” Gabrielle asked with a quivering heart.

He made a noncommittal gesture. “Quien sabe? The heart is a delicate instrument. But we must hope for the best. Rest is the only remedy. So the doctor assures me. And, as I have said, you can trust Marta to take care of her.”

Gabrielle summoned the whole of her strength. “Marta is old,” she said, “and deaf. I am going to take care of her myself.”

Again she looked at him and saw his baffling smile. “No, signorina,” he said. “I am sorry to frustrate so filial a desire. But she does not wish it, and her wishes must be respected. She is accustomed to Marta, and she could not be in better hands. You—pardon me for saying so—know nothing about illness. It would not be good for her, and I think I am right in believing that her welfare comes first with us both.” She felt as if his eyes were mocking her through the haze of smoke that hung between them. “You are young, but I am sure that you have no desire to be wilful or selfish, especially in such a matter as this. I think it possible that she may have told you already that she has no desire to keep you at her side.”

The truth of the statement was like a sword piercing her. Her reply was almost as involuntary as a cry. “She wants me to leave her and go back to England.”

He waved his hand again, this time with a movement of restraint. “That I can understand. But, in consideration of her state of health, your own desire—naturally—is to remain. In that case, signorina, a middle course would seem to be advisable. You can remain and see her occasionally. You can calm her with assurances that arrangements are being made but are not yet complete. And in the meantime”—his eyes glowed suddenly—“you can be of some slight service to me. That was your wish, was it not?”

Her spirit shrank instinctively, but she kept her body rigid. “I do not see,” she said slowly, “how we can go on like that—indeinitely.”

His look was like a kindled flame, but he gave no sign of emotion. His features remained quite inflexible as he said, “Nothing is indefinite, signorina—neither your life, nor mine, nor that of your mother—perhaps hers the least

of all. I merely suggest an expedient to meet the present need. Like you, I desire to spare her any unnecessary strain, and I think, if you truly care for her, that you will realize that it is very essential that she should be so spared. Her strength is very low, and she is not fit for any distress of mind. It rests with you to keep her calm and peaceful, for you are her main anxiety. If you desire to remain near her at this critical time, there is no other alternative that I can see.”

It was suavely spoken, yet with a determination so impregnable that it seemed that acquiescence was the only course. Gabrielle sat in silence, considering the situation, feeling herself as much a prisoner as if she had been locked in a cell. The pungent smell of his cigar smoke affected her like a drug. It was like an encircling spell—a closing net—around her, compelling, overwhelming her.

Gaspare leaned back in his chair, completely at his ease, but his eyes never left her. They watched incessantly.

A kind of horror crept upon her at length. The silence became unendurable. She clasped her hands very tightly together. “Very well!” she said in a low voice. “I will take your advice—for the present.”

“I congratulate you, signorina,” he returned, without moving, “upon your good sense. It will be my pleasant task to guide you in the right direction. We will tell your mother—if she desires to know—that arrangements are being made for your return to England, but that your English cousin”—his teeth gleamed momentarily—“has not yet been able to complete them. That will satisfy her, I think, and it is very important, remember, that she should be satisfied. As to your work, I shall acquaint you in a short time as to what I shall require of you. You will not find it very arduous.” His smile was condescending rather than triumphant. “Cesari will be your assistant. He will be here soon, and you may have the use of this room for your lesson. I hope you will make good progress.”

He rose with the words, made her a brief bow, and turned to the door. It closed noiselessly behind him, and she was left wondering—wondering—at the Fate that hemmed her in.

## CHAPTER V

### *Old Beetle Back*

THE LESSON with Cesari was the most conventional that had yet taken place. He was impersonal, somewhat abstracted, and Gabrielle felt that they were rather like two automatons reacting to a master will. She could not urge herself to any enthusiasm, and Cesari evidently had no desire to urge her. It was obvious that his dignity had been affronted by her rebuff of the day before and his attitude was one of frigid politeness. She herself was too engrossed with thoughts of her mother to give her mind to anything else. Throughout the lesson she was listening for a sound—a summons, but none came.

The storm clouds passed, but the wind still blew in sharply from the sea—a wind that sometimes came in a hot gust like a breath from the desert. The garden was in a sort of uneasy turmoil. The flowers lay crushed and the trees swayed over them with a grief-laden sound, as though they mourned the ruined loveliness.

By midday a burning sun was shining, and only the fitful wind remained as a rear guard of the tempest.

Gabrielle leaned back in her chair. No summons had come to her, but she could endure inaction no longer.

“I think we have done enough,” she said.

Cesari gave her a look half-fiery, half-sullen. “We have done very little, signorina,” he returned. “But the time has passed.”

There was a covert rebuke in his words, and she raised her brows. But she made no reply in words, merely closed her books and laid them together with quiet precision.

After a moment he spoke again with a hint of wistfulness. “I am sorry,” he said, “that my presence should be associated continually with anything so boring as lessons. You ride, signorina?”

The question took her by surprise. His dignity was evidently beginning to waver, and her own slackened almost instinctively in response. She was aware of a strong desire to abandon hostilities and attain some semblance of peace.

“I can ride, yes,” she said. “But——”

A hint of the old ardour flashed back into his handsome face. “Signorina, why should we not ride together? You would enjoy that. There are beautiful woods and hills above Ste Margu rite that you have never seen. On a good horse——”

She interrupted him. “You forget—my mother. I can never go far away because of her.”

He looked frustrated for a second, then suddenly he smiled at her with a rather boyish expression. “The country of which I speak is not far away,” he said. “I can find a horse for you to ride. We would go for an hour perhaps, and then we would return, while your mother rested. She cannot need you close to her all the time. There is Marta.”

She realized the truth of this. Though she longed to be at her mother’s side, this had been denied her. She could not force herself into the position she would have chosen to occupy. But another insuperable obstacle occurred to her.

“I can’t possibly go riding,” she said. “I haven’t any kit.” Then, as he looked puzzled, she laughed involuntarily for the first time. “I can’t ride in a skirt—or a bathing suit, so I’m afraid that’s out of the question.”

His face cleared. “Oh, but that is easy. You can buy anything you need at Pontaumer. It is but a few miles distant. I could motor you there.”

But Gabrielle shook her head. “No—no! It’s quite impossible. I haven’t the money to spend.”

“No money!” He regarded her in astonishment. “But—your winnings, signorina! I thought——”

She met his look with a certain shrewdness. Most emphatically she had no intention of making a confidant of this man. “No, it wouldn’t do,” she said. “Nice of you to think of it. I don’t suppose I could manage a French horse, either. In any case, it’s no good thinking of it.”

He looked disconsolate, but after brief consideration brightened again. “I have a motorcar, signorina—a small one. Will you not give me the great honour to take you out for a short drive? I would be very careful not to alarm you.”

She lifted her chin a little. Did he think her such a coward? She hovered over the suggestion, half-attracted, half-repelled. She had never felt the faintest fear of Cesari and the sense of captivity irked her. With him as escort she could escape from Gaspare’s proximity without stealth or contrivance, and though



she might not trust Cesari very far it might be advisable to cultivate at least a surface friendship with him. He could always be kept at whatever distance she desired.

“I would be very careful,” he said again persuasively. “Let me call for you this evening, signorina, if the Signora has no need of you!”

She saw no reason to refuse the humbly-proffered request. Cesari was not formidable, and at least he presented some means of escape from an impossible environment.

She hesitated a moment longer, and then yielded. “Well, thank you. Just for a very short time, perhaps—if my mother is not needing me.”

He looked overjoyed. “Signorina, I am deeply honoured. I will call for you at five, and it will be my pleasure to show you some of the beauties of this so beautiful place.”

He smiled upon her, all his stiffness departed, and she felt inexplicably—though he mattered so little—as if a cloud had been lifted. Perhaps he would not prove to be an enemy after all.

They parted amicably, and she went away to listen at her mother’s door where reigned a silence upon which she did not dare to intrude.

Gaspare did not appear for luncheon, and she had the meal alone, waited upon by the slipper-footed Victor, who spoke no English and looked like a peculiarly ill-made robot.

When that was over, she put on a hat and went out into the ravaged garden, which was heavy with a humid heat. The wind had died, and everything was steaming. The perfume of the battered flowers was almost suffocating, like the smoke from a funeral pyre. She wandered down on to the terrace, seeing ruin in all directions. The belladonna lilies were lying flat below the wall, and magnolia petals, crushed and sodden, were scattered on the stones. She stood by the balustrade debating with herself whether she would descend to the lower terrace and the pagoda summerhouse and thence to the sea in search of air untainted by the scent of dying flowers, and had just decided to do so when she caught sight of something moving immediately below her and discovered a man in a dirty yellow cotton shirt and ragged trousers bending over a trailing rose that had been torn from its moorings.

She looked down upon the stooping figure with mingled compassion and amusement. Poor Old Beetle Back—mourning over the destruction! He lifted himself as she watched him, and she saw his stubby grey-black beard wagging as though he were murmuring unmentionable things.

A sudden impulse moved her. She leaned down towards him. “Quel dommage!” she said sympathetically. “Je suis si fâché.”

Her French was very limited, but her smile conveyed much. The man looked up at her sharply, but he did not burst into a flood of incomprehensible patois as she half-expected. He merely made a beckoning gesture as if to call her down to view the devastation from his own standpoint.

Smiling a little, she obeyed the summons. She had never seen old François close at hand before, and he interested her. He had very thick, shaggy brows and he reminded her at close quarters of a gorilla.

She passed down the petal-strewn steps on to the sodden, steaming grass. He moved in an ungainly fashion towards her, and they met at an angle of the stone wall where a purple passionflower hung forlornly, its blossoms torn and smirched.

He stooped and picked up one of its long tendrils. “Quel dommage en effet, mademoiselle!” he said, and something in his voice—something in his quiet gesture—pierced Gabrielle just as the vivid lightning flashes had pierced her nerves a little earlier.

She uttered a short gasp. “You!” she said.

He spoke in English in a low, restrained tone. “Myself—yes, mademoiselle! I told you I should be near—to take care of you.”

She had a strange moment in which she felt as though she had been suddenly lifted up. Behind that curious monkeylike make-up she saw the eyes of a friend. “You—are marvellous!” she said.

She saw his quick smile through the disguising hair. “That,” he said, “has yet to be proved. It will not be me always. Sometimes it will be your Old Beetle Back—François. But tell me—what has happened today? You were discovered last night, yes?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I think—I am nearly sure—he knew I went out, but he didn’t ask anything. My mother had a heart attack, and I haven’t been allowed to see her yet. They say she has been given a sedative and must not be disturbed. I had a lesson with Cesari and I am going out in his car this evening if I am not wanted.”

“Ah! So?” he said, and was silent.

“Oughtn’t I to go?” she questioned under her breath. “It was difficult to refuse, but I need not.”

He did not answer her. "And Voltano?" he said. "You have seen him?"

"Yes. He wants me to do something for him, I don't yet know what. Cesari is to help when the time comes." She poured out the words in a swift whisper while he stood smoothing the torn creeper between his hands, his shaggy face quite inscrutable. "Pierre!" she said urgently as he did not speak. "What does it all mean? Is there something awful behind it? What is this man? An anarchist?"

He humped his back a little further in a sort of shrug. "We must be very careful," he said in a mumbling undertone. "But you need not be afraid. I shall protect you. Go for your drive with Cesari! It will allay suspicion. Now I must bind some of these fallen flowers or my brother François will be annoyed with me. He is of a strange species. He does not work himself but he does not like that others should be idle."

He bent to his task with a discontented grunt, and Gabrielle became aware of a drifting aroma of cigar smoke on the terrace above. It conveyed a warning which she dared not ignore. She turned aside and slipped away into the shelter of the wood.

She was certain that they could not have been observed, but the bare suggestion of Gaspare's proximity sent a wave of apprehension through her that urged her to flight. If Pierre's presence were discovered she felt as if the whole world would crash.

But when she reached the lower terrace, where the hot sunshine smote full upon the dazzling white of the pagoda, some measure of confidence returned to her. There was safety in the very daring of Pierre's scheme. She knew instinctively that here was a master brain that could cope fearlessly with any emergency. Pierre's plans would have the solidity of earthworks most carefully prepared and capable of the most skilful defence. He was not headlong and rash like Peter. He would calculate everything beforehand and make all secure.

A strong sense of protection took the place of her fears and with it there came a warm thrill of admiration for the man. He would not fail either her or himself. He knew exactly what he was doing and he would not blunder, would never under any circumstances lose his head.

As she passed into the welcome shadow of the summerhouse, it came to her that in this man, Gaspare had met his match. And his kindness to her, his trust in her, sent a curious sweetness to her heart. She felt proud to be associated with him. In all the strange happenings of the past few days he stood out in almost startling relief. There was something more than brilliance about him. There was a greatness.

She sat down with her face to the purple sea. She had never seen a more intense depth of colour. She feasted her eyes upon it and was conscious of a curious kind of comfort welling within her. A new and very staying influence had come into her life. The bewilderment and dread were slowly merging into a peace of mind which a few hours earlier would have seemed to her sheer madness. There was no hallucination about it. She felt as if an unknown knight had suddenly entered the lists on her behalf, and, whatever the dangers that surrounded her, she was no longer alone.

Some time passed, and she began to wonder if it would be safe to return. Gaspare was not a man to spend long in one place. If he had come out in search of her, he would probably have found her before this; and if not, he would have gone away again on that secret business of his which had begun to fill her with such misgiving.

She stood up and moved to the entrance between the white pillars. The certainty of a friend near at hand gave her a newborn courage. She decided to return to the upper terrace. Even a distant glimpse of that friend would give her the keenest satisfaction. She would not approach him unless he made some sign.

The glory of the Mediterranean in that rain-washed atmosphere held her for a moment or two longer as she stood there. There were dark clouds on the horizon, but they did not seem to be rising. It was like gazing into the heart of some immense, mystic jewel the flashing splendour of which so mesmerized her that she could hardly bring herself to turn away. Under different conditions it would have filled her with ecstasy. Perhaps it was this underlying knowledge which awoke in her a vague longing which she could not define. It was as if the amazing beauty spread out at her feet were an offering thrown away. Its matchless perfection left her with a feeling of something wanting, possibly in herself. Back in England, safe back in the humdrum paths which she had followed all her life, she knew that she would think of this peerless scene with regret.

England! The grey vicarage under the downs, the homely folk, the quiet landscape, the feeding cattle, the uneventful peace! Had she been so uprooted from all these things that they would never appeal to her again? The wonder took vague shape in her mind, and she thought of Peter. Peter was England personified. Did she want undiluted England—and Peter? She could not picture it.

Slowly she descended the gleaming marble steps.

## CHAPTER VI

### *At Pontaumer*

SHE SAW the old yellow shirt still hovering like a grotesque butterfly along the ruined flower border. The shaggy head was bent, the back humped, and the torn creepers in as great a state of confusion as ever.

She paused in the corner by the passionflower, but beyond a sour glance he paid no attention to her, seeming completely absorbed in the trail of disaster at his feet.

Gabrielle went on up the steps. It was evidently no moment for confidences, and as she reached the terrace she discovered the reason. Gaspare was sitting in the shade cast by a stunted cedar tree at the further corner.

He looked up and motioned her imperiously to him, rising as she approached.

“Just a word!” he said with easy arrogance. “No, there is no further news,” in answer to the question in her eyes. “Your mother is still resting. But I have seen Cesari. He tells me that you would like to ride with him. I am quite willing that you should do so. You can procure a riding dress this evening.”

To her surprise he held out to her a small roll of notes. She stood looking at him, not offering to take it.

“Come!” he said. “It is my wish. You will get all that you need at Pontaumer. Cesari will escort you.”

His tone was a command. Against her will she took the money from his outstretched hand, feeling like some small, impotent creature in the grip of a giant.

He waited a moment, but no word of thanks came from her. She stood mute.

“It will be better for you,” he said, as if by the words he were easing some pressure upon her, “to ride with Cesari than to spend your time alone in the garden. I hope that you will enjoy it.”

And with that he swung upon his heel and walked away into the villa. It was as if he had bestowed a gratuity upon a servant, and as she stood there

motionless it came to her that this was the relation in which henceforth she was to stand to him. He would exact implicit obedience from her, but beyond that she was of no account. He had withdrawn all pretensions to friendship, and of that she supposed she was glad. But his new attitude with its overbearing domination had in it a rather terrible quality. By this impersonal assumption of authority he seemed to have established a far more complete ascendancy over her than before. She felt like a bit of machinery compelled irresistibly to carry out his will.

She looked down at the money in her hand as though it had been a packet of deadly poison, but she knew that she would not throw it away or do with it other than he had desired.

She wanted to go to the balustrade and look for Pierre, but the feeling of being watched was strong upon her and she refrained. She turned and gazed up at her mother's windows instead, but they were shaded with the green blinds and told her nothing. With a sigh she entered the villa and mounted to her own room. She went out on to the balcony, but the yellow shirt was invisible from that angle, and the glare speedily drove her back. She lay down on her bed and slept.

When she awoke, the shadows were lengthening and the intense heat of afternoon had begun to wane. She sat up with a start and listened; then, hearing no sound, she left her room and went along the passage to her mother's door. There was no sign of any movement within, but she suddenly decided that further delay was intolerable. Whether Gaspare were lurking near or not, she determined to break through the barrier of silence. She lifted her hand and very gently knocked.

There was a brief pause, and then a low voice—her mother's voice—spoke. "Gabrielle—is that you?"

Her fingers found the handle and softly turned it. The next moment she was in the room.

Her mother was lying on a couch, propped up with pillows, by one of the windows. At first sight, though pale, her face looked much as usual; but as Gabrielle came softly near she saw that the purple shadows about her eyes had deepened and the eyes themselves gazed forth at her out of dark caverns.

Gabrielle knelt down by her side. "I wanted to come before," she said, "but you were resting."

Her mother's eyes were fixed upon her with a strange glow that seemed to come from some hidden fire that consumed her inwardly. "Yes, I was—"

resting, dearest,” she said, her words scarcely more than a whisper. “I shall soon be stronger. Gabrielle—have you seen Peter?”

“Yes, darling, yes.” Soothingly Gabrielle answered her, for there was something in those burning eyes that filled her with apprehension. “Everything will be all right. Don’t worry!”

She clasped the blue-veined hand and felt its slenderness with a throb of anguish but she kept all sign of emotion from her face. She even smiled into those haunted eyes.

“When are you going?” the pale lips whispered.

“Soon, darling.” She found herself whispering also, almost as though she communed with a spirit already departed. “Quite soon now. Peter will make arrangements. You can trust him.”

“Yes, I trust Peter.” The sentence was a mere breath, barely audible; the eyelids began to droop. “I am very tired,” she murmured. “Marta will give you tea. Good night, my darling!”

It was at that moment that Marta entered with the tea tray. She glanced at Gabrielle and then gave a side nod towards the door, muttering something about “Il Conte.” But Gabrielle firmly shook her head and the old woman presented her with a cup of tea with a shrug before waiting upon her mistress.

She made it quite evident, however, that in respect of the latter Gabrielle’s presence was wholly superfluous, and the girl herself realized it with tragic clearness. It was obvious that her mother was so accustomed to Marta’s ministrations as to need no other, and the fear of distressing her kept Gabrielle in the background.

She drank her tea and crept quietly away, feeling that it was kinder to leave her undisturbed.

She was determined notwithstanding that she would not be long absent from her and she told Cesari so when he arrived soon after in a narrow red racing car shaped like a torpedo.

“Oh, we shall be very quick,” he said reassuringly. “But the more she is quiet, the better she will be. It is always so with the heart, is it not?”

She was glad that he made no attempt to express any further sympathy, for she could not have borne it from him. The memory of that pale, exhausted face went with her all through the masterly dash along the seabound road and she was aware of neither hairbreadth risks nor enjoyment, though she appreciated the speed at which they travelled. The radiant coastline made no impression

upon her, and she was scarcely even conscious of her companion, who was too bent upon making an impression with his driving to give his attention to anything beyond this exhibition of skill.

They reached Pontaumer in what Cesari pronounced to be record time. It was a town of wide streets and promenades and a general air of portliness. Nearly all its roads were lined with palms, and cafés overflowed on to its walks.

Behind it wooded hills rose steeply, and beyond these a ragged line of mountain tops quivered in the sunlight. It had several blatant-looking hotels with tennis courts which looked upon a large public garden with fountains. A band played vigorously in one corner, and the paths were full of people. Screaming children swarmed along the edge of the water, and the whole place was a babel of sound.

The casino which Gabrielle had only seen previously by night seemed to brood over all in pillared dignity. She looked up at it in some wonder and a certain amount of repulsion, as though it had been a heathen temple in which unpleasant rites were practised.

“Ah! We will go there again one evening together,” suggested Cesari, having brought his car to a smoothly gliding progress among a host of others.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Gabrielle returned promptly. “It really doesn’t appeal to me.”

And there she broke off sharply, for a voice had hailed them and she found herself looking up at Prince Bruno Saffari, immaculately attired in white linen and holding his Panama in his hand.

So far as she was concerned, it was a most undesirable encounter, but Cesari was obviously delighted.

He stopped the car and expressed his pleasure in Italian, but reverted immediately into English for her benefit. “The Signorina has come in with me to visit the shops. You will remember Prince Bruno Saffari, signorina?”

Gabrielle felt constrained to extend her hand, and he bent over it with the grace of a courtier. “I am charmed,” he said, “to meet you again. Perhaps, when you have made your purchases, you will join me at the Café Rouge et Noir for a glass of wine?”

“We shall have to hurry back,” Gabrielle began, “because——”

He stopped her with a raised finger, smiling above his little pointed black beard. “You hurry too much, signorina. You must not run away so fast. I will



not detain you long, and, with Cesari to drive, you will never be late anywhere.”

His narrow, aristocratic face with its curiously high forehead gave her an impression of exultant self-sufficiency. He seemed quite sure of her compliance, and somehow she found it impossible to extricate herself.

“It must be for only a very few minutes then, please,” she said.

And he laughed and ratified the appointment with Cesari, telling him where to leave the car.

She felt as if everything had been arranged over her head, and a few minutes later she was walking towards the principal shops and making rapid mental efforts to translate her wants into intelligible French.

Fortunately for her, it was a slack hour, and she was able to command the full attention of the tailleur to whom she presented herself. Still more fortunately, he had a smattering of English and seemed to know by instinct the type of outfit which would appeal to one of her nationality. Her petitesse seemed to appeal to him immensely, and he swiftly produced with many smiles a riding suit which would have fitted a girl of fifteen.

Gabrielle tried it on hastily, found it wearable and purchased it, though it gave her not the slightest pleasure. Her one object was to spend as little time as possible over the transaction, and when she rejoined Cesari, who was awaiting her in the doorway, she saw that he was astonished at the expedition with which she had carried it out.

“I do want to be quick,” she urged him as he took the package from her. “Don’t let us sit and talk for ages! I must get back.”

“You shall do exactly as you wish,” he assured her. “Prince Bruno is very considerate. He will not want to detain you.”

She did not wholly believe him in this respect, but as they made their way through the gardens to the Café Rouge et Noir she determined that, whatever his attitude, nothing should induce her to linger a moment longer than ordinary politeness demanded.

This resolution was increased to a grim rigidity of purpose when she saw that Prince Bruno was no longer alone. A gaunt figure in black with a leopard-skin wrap flung across one shoulder was seated at a table beside him, and as Gabrielle and Cesari approached, the former was aware of a cold stare from the sphinxlike eyes of Madame Silvestre.

It seemed to go right through her, but she steeled herself to meet it with

indifference, and the older woman coughed and murmured something in a scornful aside to her companion.

Prince Bruno rose to receive them with much urbanity. "You know Madame, I think?" he said to Gabrielle. "You met her on the evening of your grand coup."

"When the poor frightened lamb chased the wolves," supplemented Madame Silvestre with an exceedingly bitter smile. "We are all waiting to know when you will repeat the experience."

"I have not the faintest wish to play again," Gabrielle said, unwillingly accepting the chair by her side to which Prince Bruno conducted her.

The Frenchwoman uttered a disdainful laugh. "Still so discreet? Perhaps you are right. We must offer you other amusements. Have you yet tried pigeon shooting? Ah, but you would enjoy that—to see the white feathers all soaked in blood!" She spoke with a sort of affected vivacity, as one offering a treat to an unsophisticated child.

Gabrielle gave her a quick glance of horror and turned aside. "No, I shouldn't enjoy it," she said.

"Ah! You are too delicate," protested the mocking voice. "Toujours l'ingénue! You have much to learn. The prince is a wonderful shot. He misses never."

Gabrielle froze into complete unresponsiveness. She realized that she was being baited and retreated into a shell of reserve that provoked another contemptuous laugh from the woman beside her.

Prince Bruno placed a glass of wine before her with the air of an accomplished host. "Let us drink to our better acquaintance!" he said, and she was constrained to lift it to her lips though she would gladly have left it untasted.

"And how is my good friend Gaspare?" he pursued when the small ceremony was over.

She answered him from behind her icy barrier. "Quite well, I believe."

He passed on with smiling ease. "And you will be riding with Cesari, I hear. I hope he will find you a good horse."

"It will be my very great pleasure to do that," put in Cesari earnestly.

She found herself looking at him as if he were her one friend in a group of strangers. He was certainly the only one with whom she felt in the smallest

measure at ease.

And then, before she could speak, her glance suddenly went beyond him, and a great burst of colour rushed up over her face.

For there, close to her under the trees, waiting with a certain sternness of demeanour to be recognized, she saw Peter.

## CHAPTER VII

### *Scandal*

EVERYONE AT THE TABLE turned to view the cause of Gabrielle's swift change of countenance, but Gabrielle herself was already on her feet, eagerly welcoming him.

"Why, Peter! I never expected to see you here. What are you doing?"

He stepped forward and took her outstretched hand. "Oh, just messing about," he said. "I ran over in a car."

A strong suspicion that he had followed her visited Gabrielle, and she laughed rather breathlessly.

Peter was supremely free from any embarrassment. He regarded the party with the pleasantly stolid air of the Briton who cannot imagine himself to be unwelcome, and, his look lighting upon Cesari, he greeted him with breezy familiarity.

"Hullo, Montello! Nice to see you again. Been hustling any more trespassers off the count's premises lately?"

Cesari gave him a haughty glance, and Madame Silvestre broke into a laugh of malicious enjoyment.

Gabrielle, still flushed, took charge of the situation. "Prince Bruno, this is my English cousin—Mr Dunrobert. Peter—Prince Bruno Saffari!"

Prince Bruno bowed with condescending ceremony, Peter with an expression of subdued humour that drew another gurgle of mirth from the Frenchwoman.

"Present him to me also!" she commanded.

"Mr Dunrobert—Madame Silvestre!" responded Gabrielle tersely.

"So please' to meet you!" declared the lady with a hitch of her leopard skin. "And you are cousin to la petite amie du comte? But how interesting!"

"Yes, isn't it?" said Peter with a grin so sudden that it looked almost like a snap. "Specially for the count! A man of remarkable hospitality! I am sure you have found him so."

"I!" said Madame Silvestre, regarding him with a sort of glittering curiosity. "No, I am not one of his protégés. But I agree with you that he is remarkable. His taste"—her eyes flickered towards Gabrielle—"is in my opinion of the most extraordinary."

"Will you not sit down?" suggested Prince Bruno amiably. "And you will drink wine with us?"

Peter sat down between Madame Silvestre and Gabrielle. "Thanks, I don't take wine," he said with simplicity. "Please carry on, everybody! I'll smoke if I may."

He pulled a pipe from his pocket with the words.

"How you are English!" murmured the Frenchwoman. "You do not drink—non, non, jamais! But you smoke your pipe—always!"

"Any objection to a pipe?" asked Peter, with the stem between his teeth.

"You would not prefer a cigar?" asked Prince Bruno with somewhat satirical courtesy.

"Thanks, no!" said Peter. "Afraid I should loathe it. Well, Gabrielle, you've been shopping, I see. What have you been buying? Clothes?"

"Si, signer! Clothes!" Cesari flung at him sharply across the table.

Peter ignored him, his smile firmly riveted upon Gabrielle. "Anything interesting?" he said in the tone of one who claimed a right to enquire.

Gabrielle was about to reply when, with an abruptness that was like a rapier thrust, Madame Silvestre intervened. "Interesting! But very interesting!" she declared. "A riding dress, monsieur, in which to ride—quelquefois avec ce bon Cesari et quelquefois avec le comte."

"How jolly!" said Peter without turning. "Et quelquefois avec moi, peut-être?"

Gabrielle's eyes met his doubtfully and found reassurance. "Perhaps, someday, Peter," she said. "But I shan't be able to ride with anyone if my mother needs me."

"Of course not!" he said, and in a moment it seemed that they two were alone and the rest shut out. "Isn't she so well?"

Gabrielle shook her head. "I must be getting back to her. I never like to be long away."

"Shall I take you back?" he said.

“No,” she answered. “I am with Cesari. But I am glad to have seen you.”

Cesari bent forward in sudden fury. “Will you understand, please,” he said, “that the Signorina is in my charge? She came with me and with me she will return.”

Peter turned and gave him a hard, deliberate stare. “Thanks for mentioning it,” he said. “But I presume she can do as she likes even in this country.”

Cesari seemed as if he were on the verge of spitting at him but he restrained himself. “Yes. She will do as she likes,” he agreed. “She will come with me.”

Peter continued to stare with a faint smile. “She will do one or the other, but not both,” he commented.

Gabrielle’s hand pressed his arm. “I am going with Cesari,” she said. “And—if nobody minds—we ought to start at once. I want to get back.”

“So soon?” interposed Prince Bruno, still courteous and still slightly satirical. “You have not finished your wine, signorina.”

“May I leave it, please?” she said, rising. “Come, Cesari! You promised that there should be no delay.”

Her tone was slightly imperious. She did not look at Peter, but her fingers squeezed his arm for an instant.

“But—so soon!” protested Prince Bruno. “How shall I learn to know this little English lady who always runs away?”

Gabrielle faced him with clear, unfaltering eyes. “You know that my mother is very ill, don’t you?” she said. “I only came out here to be with her.”

“Ah, but how sad!” he said, and there was the quiver of a sneer about his lips. “But she could not wish to deprive you of all amusement. I hope that you will enjoy your rides with Cesari.”

“Thank you,” Gabrielle said. “Everything depends upon her state of health. I never like to be away for long.”

She glanced at Cesari, who was gulping down his wine with somewhat indignant haste.

“Such devotion!” murmured Madame Silvestre. “It is touching in one so young.”

Peter, who had risen with Gabrielle, turned and looked down upon her. Their eyes met as if with a clash of invisible steel. He seemed to be on the

verge of saying something but he suppressed it and gave her another sudden smile instead.

“But you are not her escort,” she said, with a faint glimmer of half-scoffing cordiality in return. “Will you not remain with us for a few minutes more?”

“Thanks!” he returned. “I will if I may. Good-bye, Gabrielle! We shall meet again soon.”

Gabrielle gave him a swift look, but she betrayed no surprise. “Good-bye!” she returned gravely.

She offered her hand to Prince Bruno, who bent over it with his usual gallantry, and bowed very slightly to the Frenchwoman, who returned the compliment without removing her eyes from Peter. Then, with that unconscious grace of hers which gave her a curious distinction which no lack of height could mar, she detached herself from the group and walked quietly down into the garden, leaving Cesari to follow.

“But what an air!” commented Madame Silvestre. “I fear you have offended la cousine anglaise.”

Peter’s eyes followed the queenly little figure for a second or two. Then he sat down again and took a good pull at his pipe. “No, I don’t think so,” he said with wholesome unconcern. “Hurry up, Montello! I shouldn’t keep her waiting if I were you.”

Cesari glared at him and grabbed his hat. His farewells were hasty and did not include Peter, who continued to smoke with the contented air of a man whose pipe was drawing well.

Madame Silvestre gave vent to her amused gurgle as he hurried away. “Le pource Cesari! He is so impressionable. But the flower is not for him. She has been appropriated already if I mistake not.”

Peter looked at her with bland noncomprehension. “I hope the fellow’s head is steady enough for driving after that wine,” he observed.

“Oh, là là!” she protested with some impatience. “There is no danger if he goes in the right direction. And he would not dare to do otherwise. I tell you, monsieur, your little cousin is the protégée of Monsieur le Comte.”

“Yes. So I heard,” returned Peter, unmoved. “Very decent of him to take the trouble. She needs someone to take care of her at a time like this.”

“Decent!” she echoed, and suddenly he saw the wolf in her eyes as Gabrielle had seen it at the gaming table. “But it is not decent that the daughter

should succeed the mother in the affections of le comte! Do you not understand, monsieur? It is well known. It is an open scandal.”

“Oh!” said Peter. He seemed to awake slowly and rather regretfully from the state of amiable obtuseness into which he had allowed himself to drift. “We’re talking scandal, are we? But, madame, why should we sully our pure minds with anything so unpleasant—especially on an evening like this? I am sure the prince agrees with me?” He looked towards his host with brows raised in interrogation.

Madame Silvestre made a sound expressive of deep annoyance, while Prince Bruno smiled.

“Yes, I agree with him, Jacqueline. Besides, what is scandal if we are not shocked by it? It is quite evident that you cannot tell Mr Dunrobert anything that he does not know already.”

“Ah! That is it! He knows!” Her displeasure vanished like a passing cloud. “But how stupid! I ought to have realized that.”

Peter’s teeth closed very firmly upon his pipe. “You don’t realize quite everything, madame,” he said. “It’s hardly to be expected that you should. But I can assure you that your scandal is entirely without foundation.” He removed his pipe and gave her a very level look. “It is not true—and it never could be true.”

Her eyelids narrowed. “Are you so sure of that, Mr Dunrobert? What is that proverb of yours—there is no smoke without a fire?”

“The people who light the fires are usually responsible for the smoke,” said Peter. “It’s a dirty job—lighting fires, madame. Don’t you think so?”

She twitched her wrap with a haughty movement. “I do not understand you,” she said.

Peter smiled straight into her face. “Sorry I’m so complicated,” he said. “Can’t we talk of something simpler? This ‘Boule’ game, for instance! What is the quickest way of making a fortune? Do you double your stakes—or halve them and take away the number you first thought of?”

She shrugged her shoulders with an expressive gesture. “I have no advice to offer you,” she said. “But I do not think you will make a fortune, monsieur, try as you may.”

“That’s a pity,” said Peter. “I was thinking of employing the latter method as being the least complicated.”



“And you will lose,” she snapped.

“I shan’t lose anything that I really value,” he responded with conviction. “I have one virtue, anyway.”

“And what is that?” she asked ironically.

He replied with the utmost seriousness. “That of knowing when to stop, madame. I am quite strong-minded in that respect, and that is how I manage to hold my own.”

“Ah!” she scoffed. “Very discreet! Very English!”

Peter smiled again with almost childish simplicity. “Yes, quite definitely English,” he agreed, “though I have an uneasy suspicion that discretion may not always be my strong suit. You haven’t accused me of being young yet, have you? But that’s probably the whole root of the trouble. I expect I take myself too seriously, don’t you?”

She gave him an enigmatic look. “Perhaps you think too much of yourself altogether, monsieur,” she said.

“An egoist, what? By Jove, I hadn’t thought of that,” said Peter. “I believe you’re right. Let’s stop thinking of me, then, and think of you instead. Much more fun! When are you going to make your fortune, madame? *Aujourd’hui—demain—quelque jour—jamais!*”

Prince Bruno laughed. “You are right; but we cannot believe in the *jamais*. If we could, the bank would be the poorer.”

“He is wrong,” said Madame Silvestre coldly and distinctly. “It is only those who will never dare a risk who can never hope to win. For them indeed it is *jamais—jamais—jamais!*”

“*Et puis encore—jamais!*” said Peter flippantly. “Yes, I’ve learnt that word, and I realize that I am not destined to break the bank. Which means that I keep my money in my pocket, which, after all, is the chief thing.”

“It is much the wisest thing,” observed Prince Bruno. “But I fear you will not convince Madame in that respect.”

She rose with a movement so abrupt that it was almost violent. “No, I am not convinced,” she said. “We are all gamblers in one way or another. It is human nature. *La petite cousine, par exemple!* You were not with her that night. You did not see her winning and winning with *Monsieur le Comte* standing behind her to encourage. She—she is a born gambler.”

Peter got up also. “And a born winner too apparently,” he said. “Good-bye!”

Many thanks for everything. I've enjoyed meeting you.”

He smiled his imperturbable British smile, and took his leave, strolling away with his impregnable air of being at peace with all the world. He was in fact rather pleased with himself. He felt that for once he had behaved quite a la Pierre, as he would have expressed it.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *The Tool Shed*

“WE WILL RIDE TOMORROW,” said Cesari at parting. “It shall be a holiday, signorina. I will find two good horses, and we will take some food with us and rest up in the hills during the afternoon and return in the evening.”

“Oh, not all day, I think,” Gabrielle said.

“If the Signora is better,” he said persuasively.

“We shall see,” she answered. “I will let you know in the morning.”

“Please!” said Cesari very earnestly. “I hope you will come. I know a place—it is named Colline des Chênes—where you will dream that you are in England. That is where I would take you.”

“I will let you know,” Gabrielle said again.

He looked at her with deep pleading in his eyes. “And there is a château—very beautiful. It is a ruin—le Château Perdu. I would show you that also, signorina. It would make you very happy. You would forget all your troubles there.”

“You see, I don’t want to forget,” Gabrielle said gravely.

“Only for a few hours!” he said. “If the Signora is better. There are flowers there—sweet flowers that you would love. When you have been there once, you will want to go again and again.”

Gabrielle smiled faintly at the wheedling persistence of his tone. “We must wait till tomorrow,” she said.

His eyes shone as though her words had lighted a lamp. “Till tomorrow!” he repeated. “Buono, signorina! I shall live for tomorrow.”

And with that very courteously he left her.

Old Marta admitted her, but to her halting enquiry she made only a vague sign. When Gabrielle would have gone to her mother’s room, however, she shook her head with emphasis, mumbling incoherently.

Gabrielle turned aside and wandered out by the side door into the garden. The coolness of evening had begun to spread from the west though the sun was

still above the horizon. She went on to the terrace and looked over the balustrade. Some of the battered lilies had been lifted and tied to sticks, and here and there a torn creeper had been restored to its original niche. She saw no sign of the yellow shirt, but as she stood there in doubt she heard a subdued whistling coming from somewhere below her, and she suddenly remembered the existence of a wooden tool shed away on the left, concealed among bushes.

A throb of eagerness went through her. If he should be there! She felt that she must find out, whatever the risk; but she compelled herself to caution.

Slowly she approached the steps and slowly descended. Then, subduing the fever of impatience that urged her, she paced along the entire length of the flower border as though buried in thought.

Gradually she approached the sheltered corner in which the shed stood. The whistling was fitful—a somewhat dreary rendering of the “Marseillaise,” and it failed altogether when she was five yards from the spot.

The shed was of the roughest description, a mere jumble of boards nailed together, and she guessed that she had been observed through one of its many crevices. The entrance was on the farther side, and she could not reach it without pushing between the screening bushes. Her heart was beating very fast as she paused.

Then, as if to encourage her, a very quavering old man’s voice began to sing. It was like a direct message to Gabrielle, and she hesitated no longer. Swiftly she made her way through the intervening undergrowth and found herself in front of the hut.

He was sitting on a low box, whittling the end of a stick to a point with an old knife. He did not rise at her appearance, but looked up at her, rather like an old dog peering through a mass of shaggy hair.

For an instant uncertainty caught her, but the next she was reassured. Those gleaming dark eyes with their humorous interrogation were the eyes of the man who was there to protect her.

“Mademoiselle?” he questioned.

And, “Oh, Pierre!” she said simultaneously with a rush of feeling that was almost overwhelming.

He lifted one finger admonishingly. “Yes, it is Pierre—the brother of François, who is ill. Bien, you know me.” He got to his feet with stiff, aged movements. “Ciel! I have had a hard day. The lazy dog Louis has been en fête.”

She looked at him, curiously between tears and laughter. It was odd how his disguise seemed to belittle his stature, at no time very remarkable. He looked small and insignificant, and yet to her he might have been a knight in armour.

“Oh, it is nice to see you!” she said impulsively. “I have only just got back. We have been to Pontaumer. We saw Prince Bruno and that dreadful woman—Madame Silvestre.”

“Ha!” he said. “La belle Jacqueline! La reine des loups! Et puis?”

“What makes you call her that?” Gabrielle asked, startled.

He shrugged his shoulders. “Why not—if it suits? Was there anyone else?”

“Yes. Peter. I believe he must have followed us. Did he?” She asked the question suddenly, for Pierre’s eyes were twinkling.

“How should I know?” he said. “And you spoke to him? I hope he conducted himself well?”

“Oh, very,” she said. “I left him with them. Of course Cesari hates him, but that’s natural.”

“Very—very natural,” agreed Pierre, still looking quizzical. “And you have bought your riding dress—and tomorrow you go riding, hein?”

“You heard!” she said. “Yes, he wants me to go with him on horseback to a place called Colline des Chênes. He says there is a ruined château there. I’m afraid I shall have to go.”

“There is no need for fear,” he said gently. “You will be quite safe.”

“Oh, don’t let Peter turn up again!” she said in swift anxiety. “I don’t want a fight.”

He shook his head, smiling. “There will be no fighting, ma chère. Peter loves you too much to disturb your tranquillity. His desire is only to serve you.”

“Oh, I know,” she said. “But that is just what makes it so difficult. He is so apt to be headlong.”

“No—no, mademoiselle! Peter is quite trustworthy,” he assured her. “You can lean on him. He will never disappoint you.”

“Do call me Gabrielle!” she broke in rather irrelevantly. “We’re not strangers.”

His look flashed over her. “Indeed, no—since I hope one day to call myself

your big brother.”

She held out her hand to him. “I hope we are friends in any case,” she said, “not just because of Peter.”

He grasped her hand firmly. “But naturally—Gabrielle!” he said. “I am your friend for always. C’est entendu, n’est-ce pas?”

“Even if I find I can’t love Peter?” she insisted.

“Ma chère petite,” he said, “I would be your friend if you had none other in the world. I am very proud to be your friend.”

“That’s one comfort, anyway,” Gabrielle said. “Thank you for that. It helps.”

“And now,” he said briskly, “we must make our plans for the future. First, I will give you this.”

He turned and rummaged in the pocket of an old coat that hung on a nail and produced a key.

“Ah!” Gabrielle said. “You had it, after all.”

He nodded cheerily. “And it is in its accustomed place. My brother François took it home with him—quite by mistake—last night. I brought it back this morning. But this is for you, so that you may come and go as you will. Keep it safe!”

“You really are wonderful,” she said.

“Only careful!” he rejoined with that magic smile of his which no disguise could impair. “And now I have a message for you from Peter. He will bring the boat to the pool under the rocks and stay there till the moon rises every night. You need not feel obliged to go to him, but—he will be there.”

Something like dismay seized upon Gabrielle. “Oh, don’t let him!” she said. “He may be discovered. It’s very dangerous.”

“Peter is not afraid of danger,” he answered. “And—I doubt if I could prevent him if I were to try.”

“But you must try—please, you must!” she urged. “His being there can do no good. The count would be furious if he knew. He might do him an injury. Don’t let him risk it! Please don’t!”

“I do not think the danger is very great,” said Pierre. “But I will tell him what you say—if you think it will make any difference.”

“That isn’t enough,” Gabrielle said. “Tell him—tell him I shan’t go down

—that it’s no earthly use his coming—that I’d rather—far rather—he didn’t.”

“In fact, that you do not want to see him?” suggested Pierre gravely.

There was no reproach in his tone, yet she felt in some fashion rebuked. “Oh, it isn’t that,” she said. “Only—why should he run risks for nothing? It’s so unnecessary. I may be watched, and he might easily be discovered. If there were anything to be gained by it——”

“There might be something to be gained,” Pierre said. “Not tonight, perhaps. But tomorrow—I shall not be here. You may have something to communicate. Would it not console you to know that there is a friend near you—a friend whom you can trust?”

“I don’t know,” she said rather miserably.

His eyes rallied her. “Eh bien!” he said. “We will not be unhappy. He will not expect you tonight—or any night. But he will be there in case of necessity, that is all. Will you excuse me now? I go to receive my salary.”

It was impossible to remain downcast in his presence. There was an underlying gaiety in all that he said and did that had an infectious quality.

She smiled in spite of herself. “Don’t think me horrid!” she said. “I’m very grateful to you—and Peter. You know I am.”

He wagged his beard at her. “Indeed, I could never think you anything but charming,” he assured her. “And we have no claim upon your gratitude. We ask only to serve you and if we succeed that will be our reward.”

He threw the ancient coat over his shoulder with a grimace and hunched his back in a fashion that provoked a laugh from Gabrielle.

“Au revoir, Monsieur Beetle Back!” she said.

“Bon soir, mademoiselle!” he returned in the tremulous voice of an aged man and he stumped away with his head down along a side path that led to the kitchen quarters of the villa.

She would have liked to have followed and seen him draw his wage for the day’s work, but prudence forbade, and she turned in the opposite direction and wandered down to a spot under the pine trees where she could see the deep blue water of the pool with its encircling rocks.

It had the stillness of a lagoon, and there was no boat to cause the faintest ripple upon its glassy surface. She stood gazing downwards for some moments as if watching the crystal clearness of the water, but in reality she was going over in her mind the conversation that had just taken place.

It had made an impression upon her which she could not wholly define. But she wished that Pierre did not make her feel that he regarded her as Peter's property. It was a wrong idea entirely, yet one which she found it curiously difficult to refute. It was as if Peter had staked his claim, and Pierre acknowledged and approved it, without any reference on the part of either to herself. She could not feel that protest made much difference. It was almost impossible to argue with Peter. He was so secure in his love for her that she found him quite immovable.

"But I'm not in love with him," she told herself with somewhat wistful emphasis. "I'm not—I'm not—I'm not! It's no good my meeting him. Why couldn't Pierre come instead? He's so much easier to deal with."

Yes, Pierre was easier. He had a wider understanding backed by a strength that seemed to carry all before it. His sympathy alone was a support. There was a greatness about him that placed him on a different footing. He called himself a type, but instinctively she realized that he was not like other men. As Peter had said of him, he had brains and a heart of gold. Whatever he did would be well done, with no heroic gesture but with the sincerity of one who would scorn to give less than the best that was in him. Perhaps that was the secret of his magnetism—complete singleness of purpose and the concentration of a will power that encountered obstacles but to overcome them.

With a queer twist of the imagination she compared him with Gaspare, and a strange thought flashed through her mind, almost as if it had been projected there from some outside source.

"St Michael and the Dragon!" she said, and was conscious of a sense of awe.

But it merged into confidence a moment later, for she knew beyond all question that, whatever the odds might be, Pierre would emerge triumphant. The Dragon would be defeated.



## CHAPTER IX

### *In the Night*

GABRIELLE made no further attempt to see her mother that night. She returned to the villa dispirited and was almost glad when clouds swept up from the sea and the evening set in with rain that promised to last for some hours. At least Peter would not be expecting her, and she was not in the mood for any more clandestine meetings.

Gaspare was out, and she dined alone, waited upon by the capable Victor who shambled in and out in his carpet slippers but served an excellent meal. When it was over, she went to her room and sat listening to the falling rain with a weary sense of futility. She tried to read one of Cesari's Italian books but she could not fix her attention and she made no headway.

What would Pierre be doing on the morrow? She longed to know. The mystery that hung over all things was like a cloud and it oppressed her. There was so much that was hidden from her. She felt like a person wandering in a dense fog, perpetually returning to the same spot, girt around by unseen dangers and frustrated at every turn. And through it all the thought of her mother weighed her down with a crushing force that seemed almost physical—that mother for whom she could do nothing whatever and whose sole desire was that she should leave her.

Sitting there, reviewing the cruel tangle that Fate had woven about her, she began to feel almost dazed. Was she making a mistake? Would it be better to go? Was it right to let herself become a source of anxiety and risk to others? Since she was powerless to help, was she justified in remaining?

But even as the questions poured in upon her, she knew that she could not drag herself away. The one beloved being still held her bound, despite disillusion and despair, with cords that nothing could break. She had idolized her mother from earliest childhood; and though the idol had fallen, the unswerving devotion remained. It was indestructible, and nothing could alter it—it was an essential part of her very self. She knew that however long she lived she would cling to the memory of that gracious and beautiful woman who had sinned so deeply and yet had never ceased to love her and provide for her.

The sadness of it all went through Gabrielle in a great surge of sorrow and

tenderness, and she laid her head upon her arms and wept. No, she could not leave her. She could only blindly wait and pray that the end might be merciful. In some strange fashion she was very firmly convinced that the end was not far off.

She went to bed at last and slept with the weariness of a child. The problems of life had worn her out.

It was after midnight that something awoke her, and she sat up with a sense of urgency that was certainly not the outcome of a dream. Some sound had smitten her consciousness like the crack of a whip, arousing her from a slumber so deep that she could hardly believe that she had not been asleep for hours.

The rain was still pattering on the leaves outside her window with monotonous regularity. She wondered for a moment or two if a storm were coming up, but the quiet downpour soon convinced her that it was no sudden burst of thunder that had awakened her. There was no feeling of storm in the atmosphere, and there was no wind.

She could see the outline of the window and realized that the moon had risen but was obscured by clouds. That meant that the garden was in semidarkness. Her thoughts flew to Peter. Surely he could not be so mad as to be awaiting her down in the rocky cove at this hour! Yet somehow the conviction pressed upon her that the sound she had heard was in some fashion connected with him.

She sat for a space listening in tense apprehension, hearing only the rustle of the steadily falling rain. And then suddenly, breaking through the silence, there came again a sharp sound that sent the blood to her heart. What was it? It might have been a burst tire—the backfiring of a car—or a distant revolver shot. Deep within her she was certain that it was the latter, for it came from the direction of the sea. Yet who could be firing in that darkness? Even if Peter were there, he would not be visible.

Desperately she sought to reassure herself, but the torturing doubt remained. Had he betrayed himself? Was Gaspare prowling about among those dripping trees firing at shadows? The very thought of the man sent a hard shiver through her. His ruthlessness, his vindictiveness were beginning to wear upon her nerves. In her imagination he assumed almost fiendish proportions. As she crouched there listening, she was horribly afraid.

But gradually, as the silence lengthened, she grew calmer. Perhaps she was alarming herself for nothing. There had been no cry, no sound of voices. And the veiling darkness was a protection. Even if it were revolver shots that she

had heard, it was extremely unlikely that they had found their mark. It was also very unlikely that Peter could have waited so long for her. She hoped earnestly that he would never come again and wondered how she could possibly convey a message to that effect.

She was still debating the point when out of the soft rushing of the rain there came a noise that there was no mistaking—the tread of feet upon the terrace below her window.

It startled her into quivering activity. She slipped from her bed and crept across the room. The curtain swayed against her, clammy with moisture, and she clutched it and stood listening.

Someone was passing below her with no attempt at concealment. She knew the step with its arrogant self-assertion. Immediately beneath her balcony it stopped, and there was a deathly pause. She clung there, not breathing, waiting, listening, tingling with a nameless dread.

And then, at the end of an interval that seemed interminable, she heard a soft, deliberate laugh and she felt as if an evil spirit had paused to mock her. She sent up a frantic, voiceless prayer, gripping her hands together on the curtain. She was trembling so violently that she could hardly stand but she made no sound. She told herself that he could not possibly know that she was there, listening. But she had a terrifying suspicion that she was wrong. He could see in the dark.

Then to her infinite relief she heard him move. He strode on along the terrace, and as his footsteps receded she swayed back into the room, feeling faint and powerless.

She was sure that he had come up from the garden. Those revolver shots had been fired by him, but at whom? Had he taken Peter by surprise? Had he done him an injury?

Again desperately she called her common sense to her aid. It was most improbable. He might have fired those shots as a warning to any possible intruders. He could not have discovered Peter in that darkness. She would not believe it. She did not believe it. Peter would never suffer himself to be caught like that. Perhaps it was merely another devilish method of torture devised for her benefit. She made a valiant effort to steady her nerves. She must not exaggerate. She must not let herself be scared.

Peter was safe. Pierre would see to that. The thought of Pierre came upon her with a deep sense of comfort. Of course Pierre would guard against all risks! He knew all the dangers and he had the quick wit as well as the courage

of his race. Her panic died. She felt ashamed, recalling his magnetic personality, his assurances of protection. Pierre with his chaffing eyes and the sincerity shining through! Pierre with his warm handclasp and unfailing support!

She went back to her bed, vaguely reproaching herself for having been disturbed. There was nothing to fear. Had he not said it? She gathered the memory of him close to her anxious heart and was conscious of a strange sweetness that was like the slow dawning of a dream. Yes, she would trust Pierre. His vigilance would never slacken. His friendship was as a steady flame that nothing could quench. He would guard Peter as well as herself. All would yet be well.

A greater peace stole upon her—a curious feeling that had in it an element of happiness such as she had never known before. How ludicrous he had been in that old yellow shirt and at the same time how charming! She did not think that any disguise would conceal him from her. She would recognize those shrewd, smiling eyes of his through any mask. Their gleaming humour, their alertness, their kindness were imprinted indelibly upon her mind. She saw them even now with her inner vision, and a soft glow went through her. She felt as if he were in some fashion on guard—a God-sent sentry who could not fail her, and, holding to the thought like a child in the darkness, her fears slowly faded and she fell asleep.

## CHAPTER X

### *The Ride*

IN THE MORNING the sun shone again, and the night alarm had shrunk into insignificance. The more she reflected upon the matter, the more convinced did Gabrielle feel of Peter's safety, and as she donned her riding suit she determined that she would keep her nerves in strict order and not allow herself to be perturbed without due cause. It was probably part of Gaspare's plan to keep her in a state of anxiety, his way of maintaining a hold upon her, and she would not give him the satisfaction of imagining that he had succeeded.

He met her in the corridor when at length she emerged from her room and surveyed her in her new costume with his dark smile which to her always hid more than it revealed.

"Bueno!" he said. "I congratulate you. It is most becoming, signorina. I hope you have slept well?"

"Splendidly, thank you," she replied without effort.

"I am pleased to hear it," he rejoined, and she fancied that she detected a flicker of amusement in his eyes. "Your mother is better, but I am afraid you must not see her as your presence seems to agitate her so much."

Gabrielle looked at him steadily. "I must see her," she said.

He made a nonchalant gesture, as if brushing aside something of supreme insignificance. "Perhaps this evening. Certainly not now. You are spending the day with Cesari, I understand. I hope you will enjoy it."

Gabrielle remained firmly facing him. "I shall not go out till I have seen her," she said.

His smile vanished. He gave her a piercing glance. "Signorina," he said with curt emphasis, "you will go out as arranged. That is my wish and it will be done. When you return—if I think it advisable—you shall see her. But not before."

She was vanquished and she knew it but she gave no sign of discomfiture. "Very well," she said. "Tonight, then!"

"Perhaps!" said Gaspare. "There is, however, one thing which you may do

before you go out with Cesari. I may require you to undertake a small mission for me which will involve a train journey by night. Have a suitcase packed in readiness with anything which you may need!”

“A train journey!” She gasped a little in spite of herself. “Why? Where do you want me to go?”

He laughed a little and waved his hand. “Now I have surprised you! But I give my instructions only as they are needed. You will observe strict secrecy, signorina. Remember, you are my confidential agent, but no one must know it. If you betray my trust in you, it is not you alone who will suffer.”

He paused, but Gabrielle had nothing to say. He surprised her at every turn, but she realized that to defy him was to court disaster. For her mother’s sake she dared not take that risk.

“You understand me?” he said pleasantly. “Everything is quite clear? Bueno! I will send Victor to your room with petit déjeuner, and you can make your preparations before you go out. You will not need to take much with you for one night, or perhaps two. You shall see your mother this evening if she is strong enough. If not, when you return.”

He snapped his fingers airily as if dismissing her and the subject in one comprehensive gesture and, with his customary brief bow, walked away.

She went back to her room, startled and bewildered, but conscious that she must fulfil his behest or pay the penalty he had not troubled to define. Her resolution to restrain the agitation which he always awoke in her was sorely shaken, but with all her strength she kept it in check, realizing that by calmness alone could she hope to maintain any control of the situation.

“I won’t be afraid—I won’t be afraid,” she reiterated to herself, and again her thoughts went to Pierre.

Where would he be today? What would he say if he knew?

As she began to collect the few belongings which a brief absence demanded, she seemed to hear him speaking to her and again she felt comforted, as if he were close at hand.

“Have no fear! All will be well.” Those were his words, and it was as if some cord of telepathy had vibrated in her heart, making her hear them, so certain was she that they were not the outcome of imagination. Perhaps they were kindred spirits, she thought whimsically. Certainly no other man had imbued her with so deep and lasting a sense of confidence before. She felt sure that by some means he would manage to meet her that day.

When Cesari arrived half an hour later, she was ready for him and able to greet him with serenity.

The animal he had brought for her was a serious-looking brown mare who accepted her in the saddle with the utmost indifference and showed not the faintest disposition to cut any capers.

“Very, very quiet,” Cesari assured her, and Gabrielle accepted the fact with a hint of disdain.

His own mount was a larger-sized and more cheery creature and showed some signs of impatience. “So—if you run away—I shall catch you easily,” said Cesari facetiously, and it occurred to her to wonder whether there were some truth behind the words.

“You don’t think I ought to be on a leading rein, do you?” she asked as they rode away.

He laughed at the question. “No—no! You lead and I follow—always,” he said.

To which piece of gallantry she made no rejoinder. She had no desire to antagonize him, however, and when they had skirted the little town and were riding up a narrow road that wound between vineyards towards the hills at the back she allowed him to draw her into desultory conversation. The country was beautiful, and she enjoyed the sense of freedom and change after the many hours she had spent in the garden of the villa. Cesari also was quite a pleasant companion and he was evidently determined to exert himself to give her pleasure. He had an adaptable mind and was willing to interest himself in anything that attracted her attention. He pointed out various landmarks to her, and when she paused to look back upon the purple sea and the white town with its pines and palms that nestled at its edge, he was full of sympathetic appreciation.

“But the higher we go, the more beautiful it becomes,” he told her. “This is only the beginning. A little further, you will say it is like a dream.”

He was right. As they ascended and the road became a track they came into a paradise of flowers that rioted in a wild profusion on all sides, flowers such as Gabrielle had never seen, tropical in splendour yet with all the glory of the uncultivated. The buzzing of thousands of insects filled the air like a perpetual orchestra. She stopped and gazed and listened in amazed admiration.

“You like it?” said Cesari, smiling.

She nodded and then involuntarily she sighed.

“Ah, why?” he questioned softly.

She turned the mare’s head and rode slowly on. “It makes one’s heart ache rather,” she said. “It’s the loveliest place I have ever been in, but I can’t really enjoy it.”

“I wish I could bear your burden for you,” he said.

“No one can do that,” she answered soberly.

The heat of the day increased. The sun’s rays beat mercilessly down upon them. At Cesari’s suggestion they left the track and rode obliquely across the slope towards a stretch of wooded country above which vague mountaintops shone through a shimmering haze that was like a silver veil. It was a day of unearthly beauty—a day for dreams; but realities pressed upon Gabrielle and she could not shake them off.

Did Cesari know of the mysterious mission which she was to undertake, she wondered? Gaspare’s warning restrained her from asking, and she had no wish to make a confidant of her companion. He was already inclined to be too solicitous on her account.

No; she would wait for Pierre’s appearance. It was curious how the conviction that she would see him persisted. Her thoughts turned to him perpetually. It was as if some invisible bond stretched between them. All through the ride she had the feeling that somewhere, in some guise, he was awaiting her.

They reached the welcome shade of the trees and found another winding track that led downwards between masses of thick undergrowth, but here they were attacked by myriads of flies that swarmed about the two animals and made them so restive that they could only hurry forward.

“The Colline des Chênes is on the other side of the valley,” said Cesari. “It is cooler there and more open. We shall soon be there.”

The path descended steeply to a shallow, sluggish stream through which they splashed, and then they were once more on rising ground and climbing swiftly towards a clearing.

They emerged on the side of a hill with a glorious expanse of country stretching out before them—a country of trees and flowers and wide green spaces with a gleaming river curving away into the quiet distance that displayed no hint of habitation.

“How very lovely!” Gabrielle said.



Cesari's eyes flashed pleasure. "I knew you would think so. This is the Colline des Chênes, and the ruined château is over there quite hidden among the trees. But we will not go there yet. Shall we dismount and rest and eat? The air is so beautiful here."

He was right. An exquisite draught that was like a breath of dawn blew down from the mountains. Gabrielle took off her hat and let it sweep through her hair.

Cesari gazed at her with eyes of shining admiration. "You are not sorry that you came?" he said.

She gave him a faint smile. "No. I am glad. Yes, let us sit down and rest and get quite cool!"

She slid to the ground before he could spring to help her. He took her horse and fastened it with his own to a tree. Then he unpacked the saddle wallets and brought them to Gabrielle, who had dropped down upon the grass.

She looked at her watch. "It's quite early, Cesari—only just after eleven. If we eat and drink now there'll be nothing left for lunch."

He laughed. "Ah, that is my business. You are hungry—and thirsty too. Bueno! We will eat and drink."

It was quite true. She had eaten very little that day, and the unaccustomed exercise and change of air had awakened her appetite. The packets of sandwiches and flasks of white wine that he produced were quite a cheering sight.

"We ought to have let the horses drink," she said, as he spread out the meal before her.

"We will take them down to the river afterwards," he said. "Now, my beautiful princess, please enjoy everything and be happy!"

She leaned upon her elbow and began to eat. His words were silly, she reflected, but she was too indifferent to take him to task. Who could give any serious consideration to Cesari? She had never regarded him as being of any real consequence. Even in his most ardent moods he failed to impress her. In her estimation he was merely a satellite of Gaspare's. She neither liked nor trusted him but she could not feel that he was formidable.

She ignored his sentimental entreaty therefore and proceeded to make a lazy meal almost as if he were not there.

It was a heavenly spot to which he had brought her. There was a scent of

lilies in the air that was like a very pleasant narcotic, and as she ate and drank, stretched out upon the soft bed of grass, a drowsy sense of repose crept upon her that was possibly the sequel to her disturbed night. When she had finished, she yawned.

“You shall rest here,” said Cesari, “and I will take the horses down to the river to drink.”

“Oh, that’s an excellent idea,” she said lazily. “Sure you don’t mind?”

“I would do anything for you,” he said, and she heard him murmur “carissima” under his breath but again she took no notice. It was only Cesari being silly.

She heard him untying the animals and then the tramping of their hoofs as he started on his mission, and she drained her flask and settled down with her head upon her arm. He could stay away as long as he liked; in fact, the longer the better. She wanted to lie quite still and dream of Pierre. Not of course that she was feeling in the least sentimental about him, but he stood out prominently as the most interesting person whom she had ever met, and because he was gay and débonnaire in the face of unknown dangers it rested her mind to think of him.

She had no intention of falling asleep, but as she lay there with the pure air from the mountains blowing across her, sleep crept upon her unawares, and she drifted into a blissful state of complete oblivion which was almost like a trance.

She did not hear the hoofbeats of the returning horses, nor was she aware of Cesari’s burning gaze as he drew near. The charm of the place had caught her, and in that crystal atmosphere she could have slept for hours.

But her awakening was sudden and totally unexpected. One moment she was reclining with suspended consciousness, wholly unaware of her surroundings; and the next she was vividly alert, jerked back into swift awareness by the pressure of hot lips against her cheek.

She sprang up with a cry to find Cesari’s arms flung around her, his fiery eyes blazing down into her own, while a flood of passionate words which she but vaguely comprehended poured from him.

He tried to check her wild effort to free herself and almost succeeded, but Gabrielle, twisting in his hold, spied her riding whip on the ground and snatched it up.

“You beast! You hound!” she gasped furiously and struck him across the

face with it before he even realized that she had found a weapon to her hand.

She was free in an instant, for he flinched from the blow, and she leapt to her feet and stood ready to strike again, almost beside herself with anger.

But he gave her no opening for a second cut. He turned from her with a muffled, inarticulate sound and moved away. She saw him go to the horses and fumble with their bridles as if he hardly knew what he was doing, and though he had behaved unparadoxably the flame of her indignation flickered and died down.

She spoke without moving. "Cesari, what made you do that?"

He jerked his head without turning and muttered something in his own tongue which did not reach her.

She stood motionless, looking at him. "What made you?" she repeated.

He flung round with a gesture half-fierce and half-defensive. There was a red line across his cheek where her blow had fallen.

"Is it my fault that I love you?" he demanded.

"It certainly isn't mine," she said.

He made a violent movement with his hands as if flinging something from him. "No! You love the English cousin," he asserted with passionate emphasis. "But I tell you, signorina, he shall never have you. I will kill him first."

"Oh, don't be an idiot!" Gabrielle said. "I don't love him—and I don't love you either. You've behaved like a cad and if you're a gentleman you'll apologize."

"You don't love him?" questioned Cesari. He came a step nearer, peering at her from under bent brows. "Is that true, signorina? Will you swear that it is true?"

Gabrielle uttered a brief laugh. "I'm not going to swear anything. Why should I? My word is enough. But I'll have no love-making from you, so you can make up your mind to that."

His look slowly changed; the ferocity went out of it. "It is true," he said in a tone of wonder. "Will you forgive me, signorina? I will not offend you again."

Gabrielle hesitated. She was not sure that she ought to allow herself to be conciliated so easily. "I hope you will not," she said with dignity. "I shall never have anything more to do with you if you do."

“Ah, please!” he said persuasively. “You are so beautiful. You could not be so cruel.”

“Those are my conditions,” she rejoined with firmness. “We will say no more about it, but it must never happen again. Now we had better be going on.”

“We will do exactly as you wish,” he said. “But tell me, signorina, are you quite without a heart? Is there no one whom you love?”

An immediate negation sprang to her lips, yet, oddly, something made her pause. She knew that she flushed as she replied. “Even if there were, I should not confide in you.”

He sighed, but his eyes observed the flush. “Pardon me!” he said. “If only I had your confidence, signorina, how much I could do to help you!”

Gabrielle turned aside. Somehow she felt discomfited and embarrassed. Why had she flushed so absurdly for no conceivable reason?

“What could you do?” she asked coldly after a moment.

“I could take your part,” he said earnestly. “I could tell you much that you do not know. I could make it easy for you to see your mother.”

She turned back sharply. “How could you do that?”

She saw his eyes gleam a little as he made reply. “If Il Conte thought that you and I were close friends,” he said, “there would be a great difference in many ways. It would please him if we were friends like that, signorina.”

“What do you mean by ‘like that’?” Gabrielle said.

He lowered his eyes. “If we could—pretend—to be lovers,” he said in a low voice.

“Oh!” said Gabrielle. “That’s what he wants, is it? To get me still further into his power, I suppose?”

“I said ‘pretend,’ signorina,” he pointed out.

“And were you pretending just now?” she demanded scornfully.

He gave her a lightning glance. “No. You are beautiful and I love you. But—for your sake—I am willing to pretend, if you will pretend also. If I can tell Il Conte when we return that we have become lovers, he will be much kinder to you.”

“What a disgusting thought!” Gabrielle said.

His eyes flashed sudden fire. “And why? Am I so distasteful to you? What have I done, signorina, that you should scorn even to appear to be my friend?”

Her look measured him. It held neither anger nor disdain, only a detached sort of interest. “I am sorry,” she said deliberately, “but to my mind the suggestion would be distasteful whoever made it. It’s a horrid idea in any case and I would rather not think about it any more. Shall we go on now?”

She spoke with such finality that he could not ignore it. He swung sullenly back to the horses without another word.

She picked up her hat and put it on, feeling as if the last vestige of enjoyment had gone out of the day. Gaspare’s influence seemed to coil around her whichever way she turned. She began to think that she would never escape it, that her struggles were futile, that she was bound in the end to be entrapped.

But she thrust the thought away from her before it could take firm hold. There was Pierre waiting for her somewhere, and Pierre would never fail her. The warm flush rose again and spread over her face and neck. Yes—there was Pierre.

## CHAPTER XI

### *Le Château Perdu*

THEY RODE FOR SOME TIME in a somewhat embarrassing silence along the shoulder of the hill. The air that swept along the valley had the soft keenness of the mountain heights—a vital quality that quickened the blood like sparkling wine. Again there came to Gabrielle that sense of regret. Such a place to be happy in! Such a paradise on earth! But happiness was not.

When they came to a smooth stretch she put her mare to a canter. She had an urgent longing for solitude, but the heavy hoofbeats of Cesari's horse behind her was like a following of Fate. She had no thought of escape, but he made it very clear to her that escape was impossible. When she finally checked her animal again, he was beside her, silent and morose, no longer a companion but a guard with an unsightly weal across his handsome face.

At the end of an hour she began to feel that the situation was becoming unbearable. She turned towards him abruptly and spoke.

“I don't know why we are going on like this. Is it much further?”

He pointed towards a mass of trees in a distant hollow. “The Château Perdu is down there. The horses will need a rest before we go back, and the afternoon will be too hot for riding.”

She said no more. His uncompromising attitude was in a fashion ominous though she had never considered him formidable before. They rode on at a quiet trot.

But some time later, as they drew nearer to the trees, she had a glimpse of small grey turrets amid the dark green, and her interest revived. They came into a parklike expanse of wooded land where flowers abounded once more—such flowers as she had never seen outside a conservatory. Their horses' feet trod down lilies and orchids and a host of other blossoms that grew in wild profusion everywhere.

There was no path, but Cesari led the way till gradually the trees closed in about them and they found themselves in a green corridor of dwarf oaks and cedars that might once have been an avenue but now was overgrown by an almost tropical mass of verdure.

It was supremely beautiful, but after the freshness of the hillside it felt dank and shut in, and Gabrielle was glad when the trees in front of them thinned and the sunlight filtered through. Then in a few moments they rounded a bend and she caught her breath in sheer admiration. For there before her, like a fairy palace mirrored in a placid lake, the Château Perdu stood.

It did not seem to be a ruin at that distance. Its grey stone turrets were unimpaired and the stately ivy-coloured façade had an imperishable look as though its mediæval beauty were incapable of being marred by time. The lake too was exquisite, a sheet of untroubled water that gave back the perfect image of the perfect picture above it.

“But this is exquisite!” Gabrielle said, speaking almost in spite of herself.

Cesari made no response. He was looking about him as if in search of something.

They rode forward, and as they drew nearer the château seemed to change. The dreamlike loveliness remained unaltered, but traces of decay became apparent. The windows gaped, unshuttered and unglazed, and here and there a gleam of sky shone through from an upper story where the ancient roof had crumbled and fallen away. There were pedestals with broken statues along the low terrace above the lake, and the wide steps leading down from the château were green with moss and crowding weeds. Yet the dignity of the place remained untouched, and so would remain as long as its walls should stand.

They approached the lake and skirted it till they reached one end where stood a mouldering stone summerhouse that overlooked its entire length. At this point a current of air swept down from the hills, and Cesari paused.

“We can fasten the horses here,” he said. “There is a space at the back.”

They dismounted and he took the bridles, while Gabrielle walked to the edge of the water and stood drinking in the freshness and the beauty.

The place appealed to her deeply, in a fashion she could scarcely have described. Far away beyond the trees she could see the mountaintops glistening, crag after crag in rugged grandeur, veiled in mystery, aloof and sublime. How many women of bygone ages, she wondered, had stood as she stood now gazing up with an awe-struck fascination at those dim, eternal shapes? It was as if she had stepped backward into a world of long ago. How many had loved this shining lake and gathered the clustering flowers along its banks? She thought if she waited long enough she would see spirit forms clad in the garb of ancient times wandering in and out among the shadows of the trees.

She forgot Cesari. He was brushed from her mind as one might brush aside an insect. He had never been of the faintest importance, merely part of a background in her life, and now he ceased to be even that. She turned and walked slowly round the head of the lake towards the ruined steps and the silent, forsaken château where once people had lived and loved and died. Le Château Perdu! The lost home standing in all its loveliness, forlorn!

She reached the further side and began to mount the crumbling stones, one by one, past the piteous, broken statues with the green moss creeping around them. An archway gaped at the top where once there had been a door. She passed through it, wrapped in reverie, and then she was in the shadows, standing upon a carpet of leaves and earth that had drifted in during season after season of desolation.

The walls around her were green with lichen, and she saw a lizard darting in and out of some ruined brickwork that once had been a hearth. She stood in what seemed to have been a spacious entrance hall that stretched far back into the interior of the building. There were tall apertures here and there where once there had been doors, but something restrained her from passing through any of them. She felt like a stranger, uncertain of her welcome, deeply impressed, even a trifle afraid.

The spirit of the place seemed to be watching her, marking her intrusion, perhaps preparing to turn her away. Half-involuntarily she wheeled and stood with her face to the garden, looking out over the crystal distances to where the quivering sun haze hung over the far-off mountain peaks.

It was dreamlike and yet real, and she thought she heard the sound of voices that might have been in the air around her or among the clambering riot of forgotten flowers below. Though she had every reason to believe herself to be alone, yet she felt convinced that there was some presence close to her, something that observed her, something that waited in the dimness behind her.

So deep was the impression that she found herself tensely listening, expecting to be accosted at any moment. And when after the passage of many seconds nothing happened she half-turned again, throwing a swift look into the shadows. She saw no more than she had seen before, but she heard a movement—it might have been a shuffling footfall—it might have been a startled rat—far back in the dark interior.

It was a stealthy sound, and it sent an inexplicable chill through her—the fear of the unseen. The impulse to escape came upon her. There was something unfriendly in the atmosphere, and she waited for no more.

Swiftly she stepped out again on to the ruined terrace where rank grass



pushed up between the cracks and giant white convolvulus twined about the broken balustrade. The sun smote down upon her, but she was glad of the warmth. She felt as if an icy hand had touched her, freezing her blood. She moved to the head of the steps and began cautiously to descend.

Caution was very necessary, for here and there her foothold was precarious and she feared that the shattered stones would give way with her.

Halfway down she caught sight of the summerhouse where she had left Cesari, and again—this time quite definitely—she heard the sound of voices. Instinctively she paused, aware of some fresh surprise in store. And in that moment from the same direction there came to her a clear shrill whistling of the first few bars of the “Marseillaise.” A throb of joyful amazement went through her. He had come then! But where was he? And in what guise would he present himself?

She was trembling as she descended the last few steps. She wanted to run forward like a child to find and greet him. But the voices held her back. She forced herself to move deliberately, even to pause and watch a wild waterfowl as it swam across the lake.

Then from the water’s edge she saw a group of three people standing together by the summerhouse and recognized them with a thumping heart; Cesari, Prince Bruno, immaculate in a white suit, and Jacqueline Silvestre wearing a green cloak flung back from her shoulders and displaying a paler green dress beneath. She saw nothing of the whistler, but the cheery tune continued and seemed to come from inside the arbour.

She compelled herself to walk slowly round the head of the lake. If it had not been for the persistently whistled tune she would have felt more inclined to flee in the opposite direction, for the bare thought of meeting the Frenchwoman again filled her with repugnance. But there could have been no retreat for her in any case, and that unseen fourth person in the background drew her like a magnet.

They separated as she drew near, and Prince Bruno moved a few paces to meet her, uncovering his strange, dome-shaped head with a courtly gesture.

“I trust that you will pardon us for disturbing your tête-à-tête with Cesari,” he said. “It is such a wonderful day for an expedition. We have brought a meal with us and we hope that you will join us.”

She saw in a second that the meeting had been prearranged and wondered why Cesari had not told her. Probably he was aware of her aversion to Madame Silvestre and had been afraid that she might have opposed the

scheme. She tried to smile and be gracious while all the time her ears were strained to catch the whistling in the summerhouse. It was not so shrill now, and as she walked up to the other two with Prince Bruno beside her, it ceased altogether.

Madame Silvestre greeted her with a wolfish stare. "So," she said, "Cesari is now the favoured cavalier! How has he managed to dispossess Monsieur le Comte so quickly?"

Gabrielle met her look with haughty eyes and a quickened colour. She did not attempt to answer the taunting question, and Jacqueline laughed ironically.

"Ah! La petite ingénue! Bruno, I pray you, regard the blush! Si naïve, n'est-ce pas? I congratulate you, mademoiselle. You will be a great acquisition if you continue to blush with such ease."

Her laughter was an open insult which Gabrielle decided to ignore. There seemed to be no other method of dealing with the woman.

"Do you mind if I move into the shade?" she said stiffly, turning towards the summerhouse.

Jacqueline turned with her. "But no, Mademoiselle Gabrielle. You must cool those cheeks, naturally. You must not endanger a complexion so delicate—and so valuable. You will find le garçon in the arbour, preparing our meal."

Gabrielle hesitated for an instant. Somehow the thought of meeting Pierre in this woman's company was abhorrent to her. "You have brought a waiter?" she said.

"From the hotel," said Jacqueline. "A useful little man. Naturally, it is a fête for him. We needed someone to carry the hamper. We could not bring the automobile nearer than the gates."

So Pierre had employed himself as a beast of burden! Gabrielle hesitated no longer. She must see him, and she knew how to act.

She entered the summerhouse with Jacqueline. And there in the cool dimness, spreading a repast on the top of a hamper which it must have taken his utmost strength to carry, was the cheery young waiter who had brought her coffee at the casino, very busy in his shirt sleeves, brisk and deft, his dark head bent over his work.

He did not glance round, so intent was he upon his task, but Gabrielle's quiet, "Bon jour!" brought him upright with a jerk.

He flashed her a quick, responsive smile which held no trace of

recognition. “Bon jour, mademoiselle!”

The meal he was spreading was of the most sumptuous description and three champagne bottles gleamed in a corner. Gabrielle marvelled at his endurance.

“I shouldn’t have cared to carry all that through this heat,” she remarked to Jacqueline, who shrugged her shoulders indifferently.

Pierre also shrugged his with a more attractive gesture and returned to his job.

“You need not waste your pity on him,” observed Jacqueline. “He enjoys it. Even if it were otherwise, he is paid, is he not? And he will get a good meal for his trouble.” She looked around with disdain. “What a place! I would have sent him back for the car cushions if I had known, but it is too late now. We will sit on his coat.”

She picked it up with an expression of disgust and threw it along a dusty stone bench that ran around the sides of the arbour.

Gabrielle was aware of a secret glance of humour from the despised waiter but she felt too indignant to be amused. She thought that Jacqueline Silvestre with her thick white powder and blood-red lips was the most revolting personality she had ever encountered. She had no desire to sit down beside her on Pierre’s coat, but common courtesy compelled her.

“And how have you enjoyed your ride?” demanded Jacqueline. “You have found Cesari an interesting companion, yes? But very interesting, mademoiselle?” Her ruthless eyes fixed themselves upon Gabrielle’s face with a leering stare that was almost intolerable.

But Gabrielle did not blush again. She was ready.

“I enjoyed the country very much,” she said coolly. “But Cesari was not specially interesting. Is he supposed to be?”

“Oh, là là, I will tell him that,” giped Jacqueline. “La petite Anglaise likes good entertainment. But tell me, mademoiselle! Has he not made love to you yet? And what is that mark on his face? Is that a souvenir?”

Gabrielle froze into silence. The woman was impossible. She was like an animal with bared fangs.

“Ah—ah!” scoffed Jacqueline. “You will not answer! Then I know what has happened. Cesari is very passionate. It is useless to oppose him. You may resist, yes—mais, enfin, he wins! Passion is fed by resistance. Man prefers

always that which he takes to that which is given. You have already learnt that lesson, mademoiselle l'ingénue?"

Gabrielle folded her hands in her lap and spoke not a word.

Jacqueline's derisive laughter and Pierre's clattering of knives and forks filled the pause.

"Eh bien!" resumed Jacqueline. "We shall not be here long. There is the journey back in the evening. Perhaps you will enjoy that more! And does he accompany you to Paris, mademoiselle?"

"Me!" Gabrielle turned sharply, shaken out of her forced calm. "To Paris?" she questioned. "What do you mean?"

"Ah! You are pretending!" protested Jacqueline. "You go tonight."

"To Paris!" Gabrielle said again and then swiftly recovering herself: "But that is a secret, madame. How did you know?"

"There are no secrets from me," said Jacqueline loftily. "Your secrets are my secrets, mademoiselle. En effet, it is often I—Jacqueline—who attend to their due execution. If you fail to accomplish your duty, it may well be that it will be given to me to punish you. I assure you—I know how to punish."

Something sinister and extraordinarily wicked shone in her eyes with the words—a gleam that was like a blood lust; and Gabrielle made a slight, involuntary movement away from her.

In a second the long clawlike hand with its crimson nails closed upon her arm. Jacqueline's face approached her own.

"But I think you will be very careful that you do not fail," whispered the red, mocking lips. "You who have so much to lose—honour, beauty, liberty! You value these, do you not? And you love life. Yet—I could make you hate it. I could make you pray to die."

A sudden crash stopped her. A parcel of knives and forks had slipped from the waiter's hand and fallen at her feet. She turned upon him with a burst of furious French invective, while he with profuse apologies grovelled upon the floor retrieving the scattered implements.

"Je suis désolé—désolé," he kept repeating. "Quelle bêtise—quelle gaucherie! Pardonnez-moi, madame! Je vous prie—pardonnez! Je suis désolé!"

His flow of apologies outlasted her abuse though the verbal duel continued for many seconds. At the end of it Jacqueline got up, infuriated, and walked

out of the arbour.

And then, still on his knees, vigorously wiping the dust from knife after knife with a napkin, Pierre ceased to apologize and spoke in a quiet undertone.

“Have no fear of that she-dragon! She shall never touch you. Take your passport with you to Paris! And let nothing alarm you. All will be well. And Peter sends his love.”

So Peter was safe! Gabrielle, seated on his coat on the ledge above him, leaned eagerly down to speak, but in the same instant he turned from her and got up, dusting his knees.

“Quelle bêtise!” he said again. “Mais je suis désolé—désolé. Madame ne me pardonnera jamais.”

As Prince Bruno and Cesari entered, he was still shaking his head with pursed lips over the knives and forks and murmuring regrets for his inexcusable clumsiness.

## CHAPTER XII

### *The Shadow*

IT WAS A ROYAL REPAST that had been provided, and they partook of it in the shade of the arbour, with the cool mountain air sweeping in soft breezes across the water at their feet.

Pierre waited upon them with a sort of subdued adroitness, as if he still felt himself to be to a certain extent in disgrace. Could she have banished her uncongenial companions and shared the meal with him Gabrielle felt that it might have been an hour of supreme happiness, but under the circumstances she scarcely dared to look at him, though she saw enough to rouse her deepest admiration for his versatility and aptitude. He was never at a loss and he never failed to observe a want. He reminded her of a perfectly oiled and smooth-running machine. His dexterity with the champagne, which was highly effervescent, was almost a juggling feat. He displayed the utmost deference to Prince Bruno, executing all orders with a dispatch and readiness that marked the well-trained servant at every turn. Even Jacqueline regarded him with less disfavour when he had unobtrusively filled her glass for the second time.

“It was a good idea to bring someone to serve us,” she observed. “There is nothing more *ennuyant* than to serve oneself.”

“You were born to be served,” said Prince Bruno gallantly. “I hope that he appreciates the privilege.”

From Pierre’s wholly unresponsive countenance it was evident that he either did not understand or was paying no heed to their conversation. He pursued his task with unremitting attention, and when at length the meal was finished he cleared everything away with neat rapidity and retired into the background.

They lounged on the bank smoking and idly talking, Gabrielle drawn slightly apart and taking very little share. She was thankful that Jacqueline had ceased to pester her and hoped earnestly that she would not consider it worthwhile to rouse herself from the drowsy mood that had succeeded the champagne to give vent to any further malice. But for this woman’s malignant presence the situation would not have been wholly unpleasant. The two men were talking together in undertones, and Pierre was present, though so tactfully unobtrusive.

About an hour passed in this way while Jacqueline dozed and Gabrielle watched the waterfowl and admired the old grey chateau with its old-world atmosphere of romance and mystery. Perhaps she too was a little drowsy and off her guard. The beauty of the place was so dreamlike, so full of an enchantment which no words could describe. The generous sunshine and the exquisite air had a lulling effect upon her spirit, and her anxieties no longer pressed upon her. Whatever lay before her in the future, she was not alone, and Pierre had told her not to be afraid.

But it was too good to last. Jacqueline suddenly stretched herself like an animal awaking and yawned. Then with a lazy movement she sat up and looked at Gabrielle.

“We are very tranquil,” she observed with that wolfish gleam in her eyes which the girl had come to know as boding some sort of mischief. “Have you yet seen the chateau, ma petite ingénue?”

“Is there anything interesting to see?” countered Gabrielle.

Jacqueline gathered herself together with a lithe movement and got up. “Mais oui! Come with me and I will show you! You cannot leave without seeing it. Cesari has not done his duty.”

Cesari glanced at her with a hint of sullenness. The mark across his face had begun to fade, but his expression was still churlish. He did not look towards Gabrielle.

“Perhaps you will do it for me, madame,” he said.

Jacqueline shrugged her shoulders. “Ah, you are lazy! Come then, Gabrielle! I will show you the frightful secrets of this so ancient chateau. They say that it is haunted by many phantoms of the past, and that is why it is so solitary, so deserted. But you are English and have no fear.”

Gabrielle rose to her feet and glanced round instinctively, but Pierre had effaced himself. She turned from the waterside with no great alacrity.

“I suppose,” she said, “we shall soon be starting back.”

“Not before we have had some tea,” said Jacqueline. “Prince Bruno will send le garçon to bring it. It is in the automobile.”

“Oh, surely he need not do that!” protested Gabrielle quickly. “Why can’t we all walk down and have it at the gates?”

Jacqueline made a peremptory gesture. “Because we shall have it here first,” she responded tartly. “And you and Cesari will ride in the opposite

direction when you depart.”

Gabrielle made no attempt to argue the point. She saw that she had made a mistake in raising it. She could only hope that the distance to the gates was not very great as reluctantly she moved away with her guide.

Jacqueline walked a pace ahead as if to ensure that there should be no turning back. The shadows were beginning to lengthen, and it seemed to Gabrielle as they approached the château that it had taken on a more forbidding aspect than it had possessed a few hours previously.

They did not go round to the steps, but followed a narrow path that wound between ancient yews to the side of the building. Jacqueline was evidently upon familiar ground. She walked with a slightly impatient swing, humming to herself as if to indicate that conversation was superfluous.

They came to a stone archway thickly covered with ivy and passed through it into a courtyard of cobblestones over which a dank moss grew. Grey walls and mullioned windows looked down upon them, and Gabrielle saw that here at least she was not among ruins. Though desolate and timeworn, the ravages of the weather had not wrought such havoc in this more sheltered place. It felt chill and had a smell of mouldy dampness, but the decay had been arrested at the entrance.

She shivered as she followed Jacqueline across the yard to a shadowy doorway that seemed to lead to some stables. The door stood half-open, sagging on its hinges and resting on the floor as though it had not been moved either way for centuries.

Jacqueline paused an instant, glancing at her companion derisively. “You are still there? Shall we enter and seek the spectres? Or are you afraid of them?”

Gabrielle conquered her reluctance. “Of course we will go in!” she said. “It’s an interesting old place.”

“It is—very interesting,” said Jacqueline. “More than you think, *ma chère*. Many have lived here—and many have died.”

“Do you know anything about its history?” Gabrielle asked.

The elder woman laughed with a sort of secretive irony. “I will not tell you all that I know. It might make you flee. There is a deep well here. There are also the dungeons. *Tenez! Suivez-moi!* I will show you.”

She pushed her way round the half-open, immovable door, and Gabrielle followed into a clammy gloom that was like the entrance to a vault.



At first she could see nothing, and then by the light that filtered dimly in through high slits in the wall she discerned the vague remains of what had once been a coach house and stabling.

The rough stones under their feet were all uneven, covered with the silt and slimy growth of ages. Some iron mangers were vaguely visible where stalls had existed, and Jacqueline, treading warily but with obvious knowledge, led her to a darkened space where she saw the rounded brick of an ancient wellhead.

“It is very deep,” said Jacqueline. “But the water is still there. Hist!”

She picked up a loose stone and dropped it over the edge. Some seconds elapsed before a dull splash came up to them.

“One would not choose to fall into that,” commented Jacqueline. “But how safe a hiding place for a corpse! Even the English cousin would not easily find you there.”

Gabrielle drew back. She realized that the woman was merely baiting her, but she could not suppress a certain reaction to her words.

“That sounds rather gruesome,” she said. “Isn’t there anything more cheerful than a disused well to look at? I should like to see the château itself.”

“Come with me!” responded Jacqueline, turning aside.

Once more she led the way down a narrow passage that slanted downwards, Gabrielle stumbling after her and half-wondering why she went.

The light diminished behind them as they progressed, but there was still enough left, when her guide stopped abruptly, for her to see a flight of steps ending in a closed door of blackened oak.

Jacqueline turned sharply and caught the girl by the arm. “See!” she said. “Here is another hiding place which the English cousin would find very difficult to penetrate! Here—in France—we know how to treat those who serve us badly. Beyond that door prisoners have languished and died without any hope of deliverance. No, listen to me!” Gabrielle had made an instinctive movement of recoil. “You *shall* hear. Beyond that door there are instruments of torture of which you have never dreamed. They are still kept there for those who fail. Be warned by me, mademoiselle! And if you are entrusted with a mission, be careful that you do not fail!”

She spoke with a passionate utterance that made Gabrielle doubt her sanity. Her impulse was to wrest herself free, but she checked it. Alone with this wolf-woman, she realized that resistance might lead to disaster.

She stood stock still, neither yielding nor resisting. “Thanks for the warning!” she said in tones of icy restraint. “I am sure it is well meant. Shall we go back now?”

Jacqueline uttered another grim laugh that echoed fiendishly in that ghostly place, and released her. “There is no mercy for those who fail,” she said. “Remember that!”

Gabrielle turned in frozen silence, and walked back towards the light. She was shaken, but she would not show it. The whole business was fantastic, and she gripped her common sense with all her strength. Above all, she must not suffer this woman with her violent antagonism to see her disconcerted.

She went straight out into the mouldering courtyard and then turned and faced her.

“Is there no way into the château itself?” she said. “I think I should enjoy that more than these underground horrors.”

Jacqueline gave her a malicious smile. “You are not tired?” she said. “Then come with me, *ma petite!* We will explore the château together.”

Once more she took the lead, and at the inner end of the courtyard they found another door at the top of a few steps. It had a hanging rusty iron handle which Jacqueline turned, and at her push the door opened, loudly creaking.

Gabrielle saw a lofty passage which gave entrance to a spacious hall in better preservation than anything she had yet seen. But even here the light was poor since it could only enter through diamond-paned, creeper-covered windows.

She looked about her and saw huge ratholes in the wainscot. Dim doorways yawned at intervals, leading into rooms which seemed to her too gloomy to enter.

“These are the kitchens,” said Jacqueline. “That is the way to the reception rooms.”

She pointed to the further end of the hall, and Gabrielle moved towards it with something of the feeling of a person in a nightmare. There seemed to be no course but to press forward, yet there was no knowing what horrors might be awaiting her.

She was already halfway towards a vaulted archway that evidently opened upon the principal part of the château when something in the shadowy space before her caught her eye—something that moved like a shadow but with a curious clumsiness that made her think of some prehistoric creature creeping

soft-footed out of human sight.

It was gone even while she looked; and she had seen no detail, only a shapeless mass that moved.

“What was that?” she said sharply.

“What?” questioned Jacqueline. “Have you seen a spectre already? It is always the newly arrived to whom they appear.”

“I saw—something,” Gabrielle said, still gazing from where she stood.

“But what?” mocked Jacqueline. “Go forward, ma brave petite! Go forward and search!”

Gabrielle looked round at her, caught the gleam of her derisive eyes, and in a moment her pride came to the rescue. Without another word she moved forward towards the archway.

She did not pause to ascertain whether Jacqueline followed her or not. She would not in any case have regarded her as a protector. The woman had infused in her a wholehearted repulsion that nothing could ever eliminate. With a kind of desperation she covered the remaining few yards and passed through the gaping aperture.

There was light beyond though vague and ill-diffused. She found herself in another hall not so spacious but more imposing, with slender pillars of dark polished stone and a wide oak staircase with a heavily carved balustrade that led up to a gallery.

Almost involuntarily she turned her steps towards it. For the place was deserted, and Jacqueline’s mockery was not to be borne. She was already half-convinced that some effect of light and shadow had deceived her, and she was ashamed at having betrayed that momentary nervousness.

She mounted the shallow stairs with a quiet unfaltering tread. Surely there was nothing here to fear—nothing to compare with the hidden dungeons and grim well for creepiness! A pale shaft of sunlight slanted across the gallery above her, and she went up towards it, hearing a mysterious creaking which she thought must be caused by her own weight upon the dim old staircase. She realized as she went that she was no longer accompanied by Jacqueline and she was glad. She felt safer alone.

And then, as she stepped out upon the gallery, a sudden conviction shot through her, whence she knew not, that she was not alone. There came again upon her that irrefutable certainty that someone—something—was watching her, marking her every movement, taking note of her slightest action.

She stood still with the stairs behind her, and a long, dark corridor stretching away into infinite shadow before. And in the silence she heard her own quick heartbeats thudding within her like racing feet. What was this thing that waited and watched in the shadows, that retreated before her yet seemed to draw her on? The silence lengthened, became tense, verged upon the terrible. She wanted to turn and escape as she had escaped that morning, but she could not. She had ascended the stairs almost without her own volition, and now she was impelled to go forward. She heard herself move before she realized that she had done so.

There was a vague light at the far end of the dim corridor and she walked towards it between black oak-panelled walls in which at intervals were deep recesses which seemed to contain doors, but it was too dark to see at a glance if this were the case and she did not pause to ascertain. Her goal was beyond, where that dusty streak of daylight pierced the gloom, and she could not turn aside until it was reached.

So, with only the sound of her own feet to encourage her, she advanced, and the shadows closed in behind her.

There was evidently a window round the corner. She felt a draught of air blowing towards her through the passage. It lifted the hair on her brow and sent a strange chill through her veins. It was like the icy current that blows from the heart of a storm.

But it did not deter her. She was strung to a pitch where there could be no turning back. To flee from the unknown at that stage was not to be thought of.

Only a few feet now remained between her and that mote-laden shaft of light. Whether it came from an open chamber or from a window recess in a right-angle continuation of the corridor she could not tell. But as she approached, the totally unexpected happened. Quite suddenly, quite soundlessly, the light vanished. She stopped short in almost complete darkness. And as she stood in bewilderment, something thin and cold and snakelike brushed her cheek and neck.

She started back with an involuntary cry. And then panic—blind, irresistible panic—seized her. Either a door or a shutter had been closed in front of her, and she was alone with something that stirred and writhed and menaced her in the gloom.

What it was she could not see. The little light that was left came from the stairs behind her. She descried only some dark and shapeless object such as she had glimpsed before, and with a choking gasp she turned and fled from it, racing back by the way she had come, somehow reaching the stairs and leaping

down them like one distraught, finding herself in the pillared hall again and rushing through it without sense of direction, only making headlong for the open, and eventually emerging—by what means she never afterwards remembered—upon the crumbling flight of steps that led down to the moss-grown terrace that overlooked the lake.

There, panting, quivering, terrified, she paused at last. There was no one within sight. What had she seen? Why had she been so madly afraid? With her hands pressed tightly over her galloping heart she sought to reason with herself, to compose herself. But the wild panic would not be stilled. The old grey château seemed to frown upon her. She could not remain within its shadow.

Desperately commanding herself, she went down to the edge of the lake, and there in a nest of tall reeds she sank down for a brief space to recover her strength.

## CHAPTER XIII

### *The Return*

GRADUALLY her agitation subsided; the horror died down. She began to wonder if in those grim surroundings she had somehow deluded herself into imagining something which had not been. The draught that had blown through the passage might easily have swung some door or shutter closed, cutting off the light. The shadowy form that had seemed to move in front of her might have been some rags of tapestry left upon the walls. The ice-cold touch—had she imagined that? Or had some tendril of ivy grown in through some crevice and softly whipped her face?

A sense of shame crept through her that did more to revive her than any other emotion. She had suffered Jacqueline to play upon her nerves, and then she had followed—and incontinently fled from—a shadow.

It took some time to arrive at this conclusion, but having formed it, she clung to it, for it seemed to be her only support. It was better to feel that she had behaved like a scared child than a normal human being who had been in touch with some horror of the unseen. It was hard to shake off the latter conviction, but her natural courage helped her. By slow degrees she brought herself back to a steadier outlook and renewed her grip upon herself. But as she gradually recovered her ordinary composure she had to face the fact that no power on earth would have induced her to go back alone to the scene of her discomfiture. She had been routed hopelessly in that respect and she was compelled to face the fact.

Eventually she collected her strength and nerved herself to rise. She could not lie there hidden any longer. She must seek the rest of the party and Pierre and she determined that she would make her return with dignity. No one—not even Pierre—should guess at the cowardly flight of which she had been guilty.

Across the water she caught sight of Prince Bruno and Cesari strolling together, and she walked quietly back towards the harbour with an eager hope quickening within her that she might find Pierre there alone. But this was not to be realized, for as she drew near she discovered Jacqueline seated on the bank, smoking a cigarette, and looking maliciously cool and unconcerned.

There was a clatter of teacups in the background which told her that Pierre had returned, and she blamed herself for having wasted so much time in

recovering her self-control.

It was complete, however, and she gave the Frenchwoman a glance as brief and disdainful as that with which her arrival was received.

No words passed between them, for the two men had turned back at the sight of her, and Jacqueline transferred her attention immediately, scorning to display any interest in anything so paltry as the English girl's doings.

It was Cesari who asked her how she had fared in her exploration of the château, and to him she merely replied that it was an interesting old ruin, but she had not had time to go all over it. At which reply Jacqueline uttered a curt, significant laugh.

Then Pierre emerged laden with utensils and eatables which he proceeded to spread on the grass around them with brisk efficiency, attending to their wants and fulfilling the few brusque orders which Prince Bruno flung at him without apparently a thought for anything else.

She was thankful to feel him near her and dreaded the moment when she and Cesari would have to take their departure. But she saw that there was no possibility of holding any sort of communication with him and she could only comfort herself with the thought that he knew exactly what plans had been made on her behalf.

No reference was made to the journey she was to undertake, but Cesari kept a close watch on the time, and there was no lingering over the meal.

As soon as it was over, Pierre was instructed to fetch the horses, which he did with the promptitude that characterized all his actions. Then, just for one moment, Gabrielle found herself close to him; for he held her animal while she mounted, and as she swung herself into the saddle their eyes met. His general air was smiling and deferential, yet his look told her something which sent a warm sense of comfort to her heart. It was as if he had bidden her once again to have no fear.

Ten seconds later the adieux were spoken, and she and Cesari were riding away along the track by which they had come.

She was determined that this time there should be no lingering by the way, and Cesari seemed to have made the same resolution. His sullenness had passed, but his manner expressed nothing but conventional politeness. He hoped that she had enjoyed her day without paying any undue attention to her reply that it had been a very beautiful one. And as they rode back over the Colline des Chênes he commented upon the exquisite effects of the lengthening shadows and seemed mildly gratified when she expressed her

warm appreciation. But no intimate talk of any kind passed between them, save that as they passed over the shoulder of the hill he glanced back momentarily and observed with a slight shudder that he would not care to be a prisoner in the Château Perdu.

Her interest was aroused though she did not allow it to be too apparent. “Has it ever been used as a prison?” she asked.

He gave her a very curious look from his unfathomable dark eyes as he replied, “Not only a prison, signorina; a place of execution as well!”

She shivered also in spite of herself, but swiftly called herself to order. “I suppose most of these ancient châteaux have gruesome histories in one way or another,” she remarked.

“You are right,” he rejoined sombrely. “But the Château Perdu with all its beauty has a record so fearful that only the very brave—or the very ignorant—will enter it by night.”

“In that case I am rather surprised that you brought me here,” said Gabrielle with rather chilly common sense.

“It is quite safe for those who love,” he said surprisingly. “But hatred within those walls is magnified a hundred times.”

She gave him a sharp glance and realized that he was in earnest. Her chilliness seemed to rebound upon herself. She gave the mare a sharp flick and rode forward at a brisker pace. There was that in the atmosphere that would not let her dismiss her companion’s words as merely morbid.

“Well,” she said finally, when they had covered some distance and the trees that concealed the château were well out of sight, “I never want to see the place again.”

“I hope for your sake, signorina,” he answered with peculiar emphasis, “that you never will.”

She did not ask him to explain his words, nor did he offer to do so. Instead he changed the subject and for the first time spoke of her coming journey, remarking that there was no time for lingering if she had any final preparations to make.

That diverted her attention to the immediate future, and she decided to risk a rebuff by putting a direct question.

“Why am I being sent to Paris?”

He gave her an odd, sidelong glance. “Are you being sent to Paris,



signorina?" he questioned.

She made an impatient gesture. "You know—you must know. If that Jacqueline woman knows, I am sure you do."

"Ah! She told you that it was Paris?" he said. "Then doubtless she was right. But that is not my department, signorina. I cannot tell you what I do not know. And you would be wise not to speak of it yourself."

It was uttered with a sort of automatic courtesy that told her in a moment that he was under orders to divulge nothing. She curbed her impatience and asked no more, reflecting that the advice was sound though it was humiliating to receive it from his lips.

They rode on in a silence which Cesari made no attempt to break, and so at length they came within sight of Ste Margu rite nestled like a pearl against the deep blue of the bay, and descended the steep track to the villa.

To Gabrielle it seemed almost as if weeks had passed since she had left it that morning. Her first eager thought was for her mother, but this was swiftly forced into the background by the appearance of Gaspare.

He met her upon her entrance, peered past her at Cesari, made an imperious sign to him and then turned upon her with a thunderous expression.

"You are late," he said. "The train leaves Pontauver within an hour. Go at once and make ready for the journey!"

And with the peremptory words he almost pushed her in the direction of the stairs and turned back himself to speak to Cesari.

She went to her room with a startled sense of expediency. So she was to catch the Paris express from Pontauver! Would Pierre realize that? She had no means of letting him know, no time to attempt to communicate with Peter even had it seemed advisable.

She changed hastily into her travelling clothes, and again her thoughts went to her mother. Should she attempt to bid her farewell? Or was it inadvisable? After all, she would be back within forty-eight hours. Perhaps it would be better to scribble her a note.

But before she could put this project into execution she heard Gaspare's step outside, and he opened the door which she had forgotten to lock without any preliminary.

The scowl was still on his face as he entered, but it turned to a faint smile as she stood up very straight and faced him.

“I fear that there is no time for ceremony,” he said, “and I desire to see you alone.”

He threw a piercing glance down the passage and shut the door.

Gabrielle remained, stiffly waiting.

He turned round to her. “I am pleased to see that you are ready. Time is short. I understand that you have decided to travel alone.”

“What do you mean?” she said.

He waived the question aside. “It is as well. The young English girl without a companion is perhaps less conspicuous, though Cesari would have been a protection.”

Light dawned upon her. “I don’t want Cesari,” she said bluntly.

His look flickered over her. “So I understand. Bueno! I must trust you to take care of yourself. Now listen! You will leave at once for the terminus at Pontaumer. A sleeping berth has been reserved for you in your own name. Antonio will attend you and see that you have all that you need. If anyone should question you, you will say that you are en route for England. That is quite clear?”

“Quite,” said Gabrielle.

He delved into an inner pocket of his coat and produced a thin sealed packet. “And here,” he said, “is the reason for the journey. You will guard it closely. It is a document of the greatest importance. Carry it on your person and show it to no one! The train will reach Paris at seven in the morning, and you will be met by one of my friends—a Frenchman, tall, thin, elderly, with a white moustache, of very military appearance. He walks with a limp and he will carry an ebony stick. He is called Colonel Duquesne. He will be watching for you, and he will address you by name when he sees that you are alone and carrying your suitcase. He will offer to escort you, and you will accept his offer. He will then take you to a hotel, and when you are alone with him you will give him the packet. You will rest during the day and then you will take the night train and return to me with his reply. That is all, signorina, and I do not think that you will find it a very difficult task to accomplish. But remember—it must be accomplished with absolute secrecy and accuracy. You may be watched, and I warn you to be very careful. If you should be questioned on your return journey, you will say that you were on your way to England but that you have been recalled on account of your mother’s health. But I do not think that you will excite suspicion of any kind unless you yourself should invite it, and you will not do that for your own sake.”

Gabrielle stood with the packet in her hand. She was trembling a little, but it was with excitement rather than fear. To question him would, she knew, be futile. He had given her the task to perform and he took it for granted that she would fulfil it—that she would not dare to do otherwise. Even as she faced him she realized that his power over her was already at work, compelling her, bending her will to the execution of his behest.

“Well?” he said, his grim eyes dominating her. “You understand what you are going to do? There is no difficulty anywhere?”

“None,” she said, “except—leaving my mother.”

He swept the objection aside. “Your mother is in my charge. You cannot see her now. There is no time. The car is waiting. When you return she will be better.”

It was exactly what she had expected, and she knew no entreaty would move him. It was true also that the time was slipping by and she must not linger. She slipped the packet inside her dress without a word and turned to fasten her suitcase.

He stood impatiently watching her. “Remember,” he said, “I am entrusting a great deal to you. But even in Paris you will not be beyond my reach. If you fail—or if you betray your secret to anyone—you will be punished heavily, and you will never see your mother again. Do you understand that, signorina?”

He spoke between his teeth. Her unmoved demeanour seemed to exasperate him.

Gabrielle locked her case and faced him again. “You have made everything so clear,” she said steadily, “that I could not possibly make a mistake. I mean to see my mother again and so I shall come back. Nothing will keep me from her.”

He smiled at that. “Buono! It rests with you,” he said. “When you have fulfilled your mission, you shall see her again.”

It seemed to her that there was a certain malice in his smile, but she would not be disconcerted by it. She met his look unflinching. There was nothing more to be said. She was in his power, but she had shown him that his power was limited. Her dumb obedience he might secure, but by no artifice could he possess himself of her allegiance.

She turned quietly from him and picked up her suitcase. “I am ready to go,” she said.

He held out his hand to her unexpectedly, and in that close, narrow grip

there was something menacing—something that was more ominous than any words.

She endured it for a second or two, and then: “I am ready,” she said again.

He let her go and opened the door. “Remember, signorina! Remember!” he said in an undertone.

She made no reply. Her whole being was filled with a nameless repulsion and in that moment her one desire was to escape from his presence and breathe the open air.

Dumbly she went from him, feeling as if she were leaving some inexpressibly evil thing behind her. She descended the stairs without a backward glance. She did not know whether he followed her or not. The door was open, the car waiting, and Antonio the chauffeur took her case from her and, directly she was seated, shut her in and went to his own place at the wheel. He asked for no instructions. Everything went with machinelike smoothness, and the car glided away without an instant’s delay.

Down the drive, out into the narrow pine-shaded road they went, and so with scarcely a sound the journey to Pontaumer was begun.

She leaned back with an overwhelming feeling of weakness that was almost a physical faintness. The strain of that last brief interview seemed to have left her powerless. She closed her eyes while the evening air blew in upon her face. But it was many minutes before that sense of trapped helplessness began to subside, and when she looked up at length they were out on the open coast road speeding swiftly round the bay.

She gazed out over the enchanted sea, and once she glanced back and saw the tree-covered Point des Sirènes stretching out into the unfathomable blue—the place where her mother lay.

A sharp sob rose in her throat, but she choked it back. Whatever happened, she must keep her strength. She knew that she would need it. She knew, as though an inner voice had warned her, that she was setting forth upon a venture that was to prove in some strange, incalculable fashion a turning point in her life. And though she told herself that as she was leaving so she would return, her heart misgave her and no conviction came. The unknown lay before her, and the change in her had already begun.

# PART IV

# CHAPTER I

## *The Journey*

IT WAS GROWING DARK when the car reached Pontaumer. There was a good deal of traffic in the narrow streets and Gabrielle began to wonder if they would catch the train. But Antonio was a sure and skilful driver and he brought her ultimately to the station with a few minutes to spare.

He produced her ticket, accompanied her on to the platform, and found the sleeping berth on the waiting train that had been reserved for her. There was a second berth in the compartment which apparently was destined to be unoccupied. Gabrielle hoped earnestly that this was the case, but there were a good many travellers hurrying to and fro and she hardly dared to expect that she would be left in solitude.

Antonio dumped down her suitcase on the vacant berth and departed, leaving her rather forlornly watching the crowd. But almost immediately the excited yellings of officials warned her that the train was about to start. There was renewed confusion in all directions, a din of escaping steam from the engine, and then the pulsing movement that meant the beginning of the journey. The platform seemed to glide away backwards, and they went throbbing into the night. Pontaumer was left behind.

Gabrielle turned and sat down. She was alone. But at the very moment that she was congratulating herself upon this fact a figure appeared in the doorway of the corridor, and looking up she saw a nun filling the space with her voluminous black robe. The coif and wimple that framed her face seemed to deprive it of both age and sex, but the eyes that glimmered at Gabrielle through large spectacles gave a kindly impression. She did not speak, merely stood looking downwards as if waiting for an invitation to enter. She was cumbered with a black leather bag that bulged in an ungainly fashion as if stuffed with promiscuous articles in great haste.

Gabrielle regarded her with hesitation. She was by no means anxious for her company, but she reflected that there might well be someone less desirable in that crowded train who might presently desire to share the sleeping accommodation of her compartment. If by any possibility either Pierre or Peter should be among the travellers it would make communication easier if she were accompanied only by this very harmless and unobtrusive person who, a

single glance convinced her, would certainly understand no other language but her own.

Her presence might be a safeguard; it could scarcely be a hindrance. And her attitude had in it a hint of pathos that appealed to Gabrielle and made her hesitation seem ungracious.

She made a quiet gesture of welcome. "Entrez!" she said.

The nun bent her head in silent acknowledgment of the courtesy shown her and entered, floundering a little with the motion of the train. Gabrielle got up and removed her suitcase from the opposite berth. If her companion were under a vow of silence it would make matters all the easier. She was in no mood for any effort at conversation in a foreign tongue. The events of the day were beginning to take effect upon her, and she was very weary. She had every intention of going to bed as soon as she had dined and she hoped that she would sleep notwithstanding the racket and turmoil of that hurtling journey through the night.

Her fellow traveller, having accepted her hospitality, paid her no further attention. She deposited her unwieldy burden upon the floor of the carriage and sat down, turning her face to the window though the dim flying landscape beyond it was scarcely visible.

Gabrielle opened her own case and took out one or two things for the night. The weariness was growing upon her and she had an urgent desire to rest. But the call of a steward along the corridor announcing dinner made her rouse herself to go and obtain the refreshment she needed.

Fortunately for her, she was not very far from the dining car and she made the difficult journey without mishap, leaving her companion in the same motionless attitude, gazing at the window which had begun to reflect the light in the carriage.

The saloon seemed to be full of French people, and the hubbub of talk was incessant. So far as she could ascertain, there was no one she knew in the place and she felt too tired to search very far. A white-coated steward brought her food and wine, and she merely paused to satisfy herself that he was not Pierre before she sank into a sort of reverie of drowsiness, eating and drinking almost mechanically.

She roused herself again when he brought her the bill and paid it with one of the notes left in her purse after the shopping of the previous day. Then she got up and fumbled her way back to her own compartment.

She was somewhat relieved to see that her travelling companion had taken

advantage of her absence to put herself to bed. She lay in a black heap on her berth, the white wimple and coif carefully laid aside, and the hood of her habit pulled over her head. Her face was sunk in the pillow and turned to the wall, and a very brief inspection convinced Gabrielle that she was asleep.

To all intents and purposes she was alone, and she divested herself of her outer garments and prepared for the rest she so greatly needed. The clattering of the train was scarcely the lullaby she would have chosen, but her fatigue was such that she knew it would not keep her awake. As she undressed, the thin brown packet which Gaspare had given her fell to the floor. She picked it up with a feeling of intense distaste and pushed it under her pillow. It would certainly be safe there. No one had come near to spy upon her, and the presence of the sleeping nun was enough to divert any suspicion that might have fallen upon her had she been unaccompanied.

As to the contents of that sealed packet she had no curiosity. It did not concern her in any way. She had been forced into conveying it, and she supposed that there was no harm in doing so. Her main idea was to fulfil her mission and return, and the very simple instructions that she had received encouraged her to hope that she would meet with no difficulties. After all, Pierre knew what was happening and he had not deemed it necessary to intercept her. He had merely told her to take her passport, and this was safe in her case.

Where was Pierre, she wondered, as she lay down? Doubtless he was pursuing his own aim with energy, whatever that aim might be. She whispered a prayer for him and for Peter and for her dying mother before she closed her eyes. But she was too tired to pray for herself.

Sleep came to her as it were upon wings, steeping her senses in a sort of hush through which for a long time she was dimly conscious of the rattling and banging of the train. As she drifted farther and farther away from reality it seemed to her that she was embarked upon an endless voyage that gradually detached her from the earth until she was floating upon billows and billows of soft clouds somewhere near the stars. It gave her an ecstatic feeling that was more exquisite even than repose; for presently it came to her that she was not alone. The pilot of her craft, whatever it might be, was close to her—a very able and safe pilot in whose guidance she had the most complete confidence.

She knew who he was, though for some reason his face was concealed from her. She was absolutely happy in the consciousness of his presence. There was no need for speech between them. She understood his gay, *débonnaire* way so well. He was so gallant and cheery a comrade, and if danger approached he was so swift to the rescue. She recalled the clatter of



knives and forks with which he had interrupted Jacqueline's stream of venom only that afternoon and she smiled at the thought of his abject apologies and then his quick words of reassurance to herself. How fully he trusted her! She liked to dwell upon the thought. And how convincing were his disguises! Even now as he drove her upwards through those muffling clouds she realized that his shrewd and merry personality was in some fashion not discoverable to any but herself. He was hidden from all others, but nothing could hide him from her. He had never seriously tried to baffle her. He treated her as a partner.

The feeling of his presence now gave her a sense of absolute security. She trusted him just as he trusted her, for she knew him to be trustworthy.

The dream deepened. They seemed to be leaving the clouds behind, to be rising into a clearer and brighter atmosphere. Her eyes were sealed, yet she was conscious of the fact that he was drawing nearer. Through all the sense of rapid travel she waited for him to speak to her and to feel the touch of his hand. But still he did not speak, though she knew that he was watching her, felt his close presence through the numbing influence of sleep, was aware of him stooping over her, protective and reverent, like a knight of ancient times.

Again her dream varied. She felt as if they were descending from the heights that they had climbed, descending very swiftly, yet she knew no fear, only a kind of dawning bewilderment, a desire to reach out and grasp his sustaining hand. But she was still fast in the bonds of slumber and she could not free herself. She was too tired for any exertion of her faculties. She hovered on the edge of oblivion.

And then strangely and suddenly she was aware of a movement, of something infinitely gentle yet not to be ignored that stirred beneath her pillow. She broke from the bands of sleep with a gasp. It was inevitable. All her senses were jerked into full consciousness. She heard the roar of the train as it tore through the night, and the beams of the lamp danced in her dazzled eyes. Someone was standing beside her—someone garbed in the black drapery of a nun. But the hood had fallen back, and the spectacles were gone. She saw a black shining head bent over something, and in a flash she saw what that something was. It was the thin brown sealed packet that had lain beneath her pillow.

She gasped again and started to a sitting posture, and in an instant with a lightning movement the black figure turned.

There was the briefest pause that seemed to indicate consternation, and then a quick, reassuring hand came out to her.

"All is well," a quiet voice said.

Her feeling was one of shock that was almost too intense for words. Her brain was reeling. "Pierre!" came from her in a half-choked whisper.

He thrust the packet away inside his clothes and bent over her. "Ah, what a pity that you have awakened!" he said softly. "You are so tired, yes?"

"Pierre!" she said again still incredulously but with less effort.

"C'est bien," he said gently. "N'ayez pas peur! I am here."

His hand touched her shoulder with a light, soothing movement. His eyes smiled into hers.

But she was trembling as if she had looked upon something terrible.

"You are not afraid?" he questioned.

She could not answer him. The climax had been too overwhelming, too shattering. She scarcely knew what she was doing.

He waited for her, stroking her shoulder with a fatherly, caressing touch, as though she had been a startled child.

"It is all right," he said at last. "You know that you are safe with Pierre, hein? You trust your friend Pierre?"

She spoke at last with a queer jerkiness. "My packet! You—you took it!"

He replied with absolute composure. "I have taken it, yes. It is not a safe document for a young girl like you. It is better that I should have it."

She looked at him doubtfully, uncomprehendingly. "You—took it—while I was asleep," she said.

He nodded cheerily. "Oui, mademoiselle. I robbed you. And for that you will not pardon me, no?"

His hand pressed her shoulder a little, the hand of a comrade, persuasive, infinitely gentle.

"I am a thief," he said. "I creep in the night and steal. And you—pauvre petite—you cannot understand."

"I can't—quite," she said. "So much has happened—and no one tells me why. That—that is what frightens me."

"Ah!" he said. "We want the good Peter here to tell you that it is all right. But see! I will do my possible. You have been placed in a position very difficult and very dangerous. You have been charged with a mission which must not be fulfilled. That packet, ma chère, it is what I have been needing for

a long time. It was given to you because none would suspect a young English girl of carrying it. The scoundrel Voltano has spared no effort to make you his property—his slave and his tool. He has tried to corrupt your innocence and he has failed because you are as brave as you are good. Now he has loaded the dice in another manner. He has bought your submission with threats and promises with regard to your poor mother, who has been for long in his power. But he has not yet reckoned with me—Pierre Ronceau. It is Peter whom he watches and fears. He does not know that Peter is but the decoy bird, and that I—Pierre—have watched and waited until at last I hold him in my hand. And for the present we must not let him know. I stole your packet because I would not that even you—petite Gabrielle—so brave and so loyal—should know. But I was not clever enough. You detected the detective. And so I cannot keep you entirely out of the game. But I can and I will protect you from the danger. My shield will be between you and all evil. Now tell me—you are satisfied—you trust me!”

She looked him straight in the face. To meet those dark, alert eyes was to meet truth and chivalry and courage. It suddenly seemed to her that to doubt him was as though she should doubt her own soul. She knew that he was sincere and honourable—a very knightly gentleman. He was Pierre.

She gave him her hand with a little quivering smile. “I am sure that whatever you do is right,” she said.

He grasped her fingers closely for a moment but he shook his head at her with his own quizzing smile. “Ah, now you are too generous,” he protested. “I try to act to the best advantage, that is all. But I am not like Peter, who keeps his hands so clean that there is never need to wash them. Believe me, there are many things in my life of which you would disapprove.”

Gabrielle also shook her head. “No, I don’t believe you,” she said. “But I still can’t see why you stole my packet when you might just as easily have asked me for it.”

“But would you have given it to me?” he countered. “Would you not perhaps have had some honourable scruples of which I am fortunately free? Now that it is beyond your reach—safely stolen—is it not better for you?”

“But that is sophistry,” she pointed out. “I am accessory after the fact now.”

“That is true,” he admitted regretfully. “And if I could but have had a little more *léger de main* you would have been spared that.”

“And what would have happened then?” she questioned. “I should have

waked and found it gone, and you——”

“I should have been gone also,” he said lightly. “But I should have come to you again before we reached Paris and I should have given you my sympathy—as I give it now. You would never have suspected me of being the thief.”

She considered the matter with a puzzled brow. “I don’t see how it would have helped,” she said.

“It would have been easier for you than being an accessory,” he said. “I think you were not made for dark deeds. You are of a nature so pure—so unsullied. There are things that it is better that you should not know.”

She still looked puzzled. “There are many things that I want to know,” she said. “You can’t go on putting me off forever. I have got to know about Gaspare. What is he? Why is he so dangerous?”

“He is a revolutionist,” said Pierre. “I cannot tell you all or even half. I have been on his track for long, but he has the craft—the guile—of a serpent. Now at last I hope to catch him. But to do it, I also must twist and crawl. Such men do not fight in the open. One has need to follow them to their lairs, and it is often a muddy journey. I would not like you to know how muddy.”

“Perhaps I can guess,” Gabrielle said. “But why is it your particular job? Are you really a detective?”

There was a queer little stab of pain as she uttered the question. So his efforts had not been made solely on her behalf after all! She felt as if she did not want to hear the answer and yet she must know the truth.

He answered her with a certain grave pride. “I am in my country’s secret service—but certainly. I fight her enemies with their own weapons. That is my business. I am very pleased that my position renders it possible for me to help you. It makes my duty doubly precious.”

She scarcely heard the somewhat formal compliment. So he was a detective, and all his assiduity had arisen from the performance of his duty! It had not been merely in her interest that he had relieved her of her mission. She marvelled at her own simplicity and she was aware of a faint misgiving stirring within her though she could not assign a cause to it.

His bright, intelligent eyes watched her and she felt that they read her mind with absolute ease.

“Do not be angry with poor Pierre!” he said with a whimsicality that was more than half serious. “He may not always do the right thing but he is always on the right side.”

She smiled rather wistfully. "I couldn't be quite so presumptuous as that," she said. "Thank you for telling me. It is nice of you to trust me."

"Mais, ma chère!" he said in expostulation. "I trust you as I would trust Peter. I look on you and him—as one. Some day"—his eyes flashed sudden friendship—"I hope to give you both my blessing."

She drew back a little. "I think yours would be the easiest part," she said with a touch of sadness. "For you don't know me. You only know Peter."

He made a gesture of apology. "But we are friends, yes?" he said persuasively.

She answered him gravely. "Yes, we are friends. But I don't like your profession, Pierre. I wish it were something different."

He smiled at that. "Oh, là là! You and the good Peter are just the same. You will pardon me for saying it. But I see it more and more."

Gabrielle turned from the subject. One could not argue with Pierre, any more than one could despise him. His standards were different. Perhaps they were higher—who could say?

"Was Peter at the pool last night?" she asked.

Pierre nodded. "I gave him your message, but he would not listen. He said that you should not be left alone all night."

"Oh, how mad he is!" she said. "I was quite safe. I heard shots in the night. What happened?"

"Nothing—nothing!" Pierre was laughing. "Monsieur le Comte—he sees a shadow and he fires. I think Monsieur le Comte is a little nervous. But he does not know what is waiting for him."

"And what is going to happen?" Gabrielle questioned.

He shrugged his shoulders. "How should I tell you? There will be consultations—arrangements—plans. Even a trapped serpent can be dangerous. But you are safe now. There will be no more danger for you."

"No more danger!" She looked at him with her serious eyes. "But—you don't imagine I am not going back?"

Pierre's face sobered almost to sternness, and again she noticed that, however grotesque the garb he wore, the virile personality of the man shone through like an inextinguishable light. "I hope," he said, "that you will permit me to guide and advise you. I would not have you return while the danger remains. You have your passport. I want you to go to your friends in England."

Gabrielle clasped her hands very tightly together. “Oh no!” she said. “No! I must go back. Whatever happens, I must go straight back. Pierre, you have had a mother. Surely you understand!”

His expression softened. “Oh, pauvre petite!” he said gently. “Do I not understand? But—for your mother’s sake—would she not wish you to return to your friends?”

“But you don’t understand,” she said. “You don’t know—don’t realize—how ill she is.”

“And she would wish you to go back to her—if there were danger?” he questioned. “Will you not think of her wishes, *ma chère*? Would she not be more thankful to know that you were safe?”

“I must go back to her,” Gabrielle said again. And then suddenly her clasped hands began to twist together; she sat for a few seconds in painful silence, then pulled them sharply apart and covered her face. “Oh, don’t try to keep me away from her!” she sobbed. “You can’t—you can’t!”

Why that flood of tears overcame her at that moment she could not have told, but the long-pent misery would not be denied and she was powerless to check it.

She turned instinctively to her pillow, but she did not reach it. She was caught instead into arms that were strong and tender, full of sustaining comfort. Her bowed head found a resting place against the folds of the nun’s black habit, and there came Pierre’s voice very hushed, infinitely soothing, murmuring words which she scarcely heard while his hand stroked and fondled her tumbled head.

She could not quit his support and she had no desire to do so. She turned and clung to him like a lost child. It was inevitable; it seemed entirely natural. And even when presently he found her handkerchief and wiped away her tears, that seemed natural too. It was as if she had known him all her life, and his touch was as caressing, as full of loving sympathy, as a woman’s.

“Ah, do not cry—do not cry!” he besought her. “I know—I understand. I will do all of which I am capable. You shall go back, I promise. But trust me, *chérie*! Let me do what is best for you! You cannot go back yet, or alone. I will take you back myself when my preparations are complete.”

“Oh, will you?” she said. “Will you? You promise? And it won’t be long? You won’t let it be long?”

“It shall not be long,” he said. “And when you go back, you shall stay with

your mother in safety as long as you will. There! You are better. You will give me your confidence and let me protect you? You will try to think that Pierre knows best?"

"Yes, I'll try," she said shakily. And then with a very childish movement she lifted her face to him. "I'm so sorry, Pierre. I think I'm tired. Shall I lie down and go to sleep again for a little while?"

He made a soft sound of pity, and then, as if he could not help it, he stooped and touched her forehead with his lips.

"Yes, sleep, my little one! It is what you need. You have had so much to bear. But remember now—Pierre is here, and you are safe."

He pressed her gently back upon the pillow and drew the covering over her as if she had been indeed a child.

The last thing that she knew before utter weariness drifted her into slumber was the close, shielding clasp of his hand.

The last thing she remembered was his kiss.

## CHAPTER II

### *The Arrival*

THAT SLEEP was to Gabrielle a period of peace which brought such refreshment to soul and body that when at last a gentle touch awoke her she opened her eyes as it were upon a new world. With a sense of happiness that was too deep for words she saw Pierre bending over her with a kindness in his look that seemed to warm the very heart of her.

With the exception of the spectacles he was fully dressed once more in his strange disguise, but though she smiled at him it held nothing ludicrous for her.

“I should know you anywhere,” she said.

He smiled back at her with protesting brows. “You are too clever for me,” he said. “But see! I have brought you coffee and a roll. I want you to have it before you get up.”

“How very good of you!” she said.

She sat up and looked around her. The light of a grey dawn was beginning to gleam at the windows. The train was still rushing on as it had rushed all through the night.

He placed a tray before her, and she ate and drank with that blessed feeling of complete security still dominating all her being.

“Are we nearly there?” she asked presently.

“There is yet half an hour,” he answered. “When you have finished I want to talk to you about our plans for the future.”

She gave a little sigh. It was in her heart to wish that the present could have lasted longer.

“Have you had any breakfast yourself?” she asked.

“Do not trouble yourself about me!” he rejoined cheerily. “I am like the cat that falls always on his feet. I wish that you could have slept longer but I hope that you are rested.”

“Oh yes,” she said, “I feel quite fresh again. I must get dressed. And, Pierre, how are we going to escape that dreadful Colonel Duquesne who will



be watching for me?"

Pierre smiled. "That is just what I am going to arrange. I have in my bag here a disguise which no one who has not seen you will penetrate."

"For me?" she said, surprised. "How amazing you are! You think of everything."

He laughed somewhat ruefully. "Not everything, I fear. I had hoped to have taken you to Calais and have seen you start for England."

"Oh, please!" she said quickly. "Don't let us go through all that again! I do try to do what you wish, and if my mother had been well—but as it is—oh, Pierre, you do understand!"

He nodded. "I understand," he said. "It is not difficult to understand you, Gabrielle. But you will try to be patient. I must keep you out of danger."

"I will be patient," she promised. "And I won't be a burden to you. I won't give any trouble."

"Ah, chérie," he said, "there is no fear of that."

"And I'm really not easily frightened," she added. "I can keep my head in emergencies. I only ran away once."

"And when was that?" he asked.

She felt a tinge of shame as she answered. "That was yesterday, in the Château Perdu. You know I went in with that horrible Jacqueline woman. And then she rather got on my nerves showing me dungeons and things. After that, I went on alone and I saw something moving—a queer figure—I don't know what it was. But she was sneering in the background, and so I followed it up the stairs and along a passage. And then somehow the light was blocked out, and something touched me. And I behaved like a coward, Pierre. I ran."

She expected to see him smile at the narration, but his face remained grave and attentive.

"You were followed?" he asked.

"No. I think perhaps it was all imagination. I don't know. Mercifully, Jacqueline had gone back another way and didn't see me. I was very glad to get back to you," Gabrielle ended, "though I felt very childish and absurd."

"En effet, you were neither," said Pierre with decision. "If you had remained, some harm might have come to you. Le Château Perdu is not a place for young girls to wander in alone."

“But what was it?” she asked in astonishment. “What could it have been? Not a ghost, Pierre! You don’t mean that.”

“No,” said Pierre. “A ghost could not hurt you, *ma chère*. You are too good.”

“But—tell me!” she insisted, puzzled by his manner. “What could it have been? Do tell me, Pierre! You seem to know everything. Why was I taken to that eerie place?”

“There were two reasons,” he said. “The first was to frighten you—to make you feel that you were a conspirator like themselves. The second was in order that Cesari might receive from the man Bruno Saffari the packet which I stole from beneath your pillow in the night.”

“But please go on!” she said. “Why did they meet at the *Château Perdu*? And what was that thing I saw?”

He hesitated momentarily; and then, “I am telling you state secrets,” he said. “But I know that I can trust you, Gabrielle. *Le Château Perdu* is one of their meeting places. It is a haunted place that the peasants avoid. They have made of it a headquarters—a cache of firearms and such things. It will be seized within the next few days. And the figure that you saw—of that I cannot speak certainly. It may have been one of the guards. It may have been one of their prisoners—some tortured and disfigured person who can make a living only by serving them. It is known that there are such. It is a nest of evil and wickedness which I hope that you may never know more intimately than at present.”

“Pierre!” she said in horror. “What are they? Anarchists?”

“That,” he said, “is a term which describes them as well as any other. They have been responsible for many crimes. It is for me—Pierre—to trap them and destroy them. And for that you blame me—yes?”

He turned to her with indomitable resolution shining in his eyes. She could not speak in answer. The horror seemed to wind itself about her, checking all utterance.

Pierre’s look changed, became gentle again with a sort of caressing compassion. “Ah, *pauvre petite!*” he said. “Why do I tell you these things? There is no need for you to know them. For you all danger is past, and you will never again see *Le Château Perdu*. I have distressed you. Pardon me, I beg! And now let me give you the disguise I have brought, and I will leave you to dress.”

He bent over the opposite berth and began to rummage in the black bag which lay open upon it.

Gabrielle found her voice. "It's no use hiding things from me," she said. "What will happen? Are you going to arrest them all?"

"If they do not escape," said Pierre. "I have work to do in Paris first. One cannot make un grand coup without preparation. I shall act as quickly as possible. But now," there was a hint of repression in his manner, "we will attend to business with your permission. See! This is for you." He shook out a floppy white garment. "It is the habit of a novice. You will conceal your hair entirely beneath this hood. We shall leave the train together, and you will keep your eyes cast down and remain close to me. If any person address you, you will not answer. That will be for me. You understand? You will not speak one single word. Now I will go into the corridor while you dress."

He flashed round upon her a look which held authority as well as kindness, and the next moment he was gone, drawing the door closed behind him, leaving her to carry out his instructions.

Gabrielle got up with a bewildered feeling that her destiny was no longer in any way under her own control. She had the sensation of being driven too fast. Life was like the roar and rush of the train. She could not stay it. There was no time for thought. And Pierre—though he had yielded the one point to her—had taken command in a fashion that made resistance impossible. Her future lay in his hands. He had not demanded her implicit obedience, but she knew that she would yield it. Peter was in the same position, even Peter the headstrong and independent. There must be some dynamic force in Pierre, she reflected oddly, as she arranged herself in the strange garment that he had provided. He always seemed to know exactly what must be done and how to achieve it. A man of incalculable strength and astounding versatility! A man to whom no position was too menial, no effort too contemptible, to attain the fulfilment of his purpose!

She bound the white band firmly across her forehead, hiding every vestige of hair, and then drew the blue hood well forward and nervously surveyed herself in the glass. The change in her appearance was certainly considerable, but did she really look like a novice, she wondered? Would Pierre be satisfied with her?

Time was passing, and she hastily packed her discarded clothes into her case. Where would he take her? What was to be the next move in this swift drama that swept her so irresistibly forward? It was impossible to think clearly. Pierre was always unexpected. To anticipate his actions would have been as

easy as to foresee the geometrical designs of a kaleidoscope. He was baffling; he moved with stunning suddenness. But there was steady purpose behind his every action. She could only submit herself to his ruling and await his decisions.

Ready at length, she turned to the door and pulled at it tentatively. It opened immediately, and the old nun of the previous evening with her spectacles and her rather bovine expression confronted her.

It was almost a shock to Gabrielle. She felt for a second as if Pierre had gone. Then, recovering herself, "Am I all right?" she asked meekly.

A finger on the lips silenced her. How did Pierre contrive to make his mouth look old, she wondered?

A husky, feminine voice admonished her. "Pas un mot, mon enfant! Pas un mot! Nous sommes au point d'arriver."

Gabrielle attempted nothing further. Apparently her disguise was satisfactory, and she regarded the rusty black habit that covered the rounded shoulders of her companion almost with reverence.

They were actually nearing their destination. The train was slackening speed, and people were moving about in the corridor. Pierre picked up the bulging black bag, and Gabrielle stood with her hand upon her suitcase. She felt no fear, but she was stirred to a deep excitement. Those last few minutes of the journey seemed almost interminable.

And then at length, just as the strung-up sense of expectancy was becoming unendurable, they ran into the long grey station and the wild turmoil of arrival began.

Pierre just glanced at Gabrielle without speaking and led the way out into the scrambling, jostling throng. She kept close to him, marvelling at the extraordinary fashion in which he managed to adapt himself to the part he had assumed. His back was the back of aging nun, and his manner of progress was the same. He did not push his way along, but moved heavily and rather apologetically, and his descent to the platform was clumsy as if his joints were less lissom than of yore. She had no difficulty in keeping her place beside him, for his gait was slow—a sort of easy ambling, as though the racing crowds about him were of no account, almost nonexistent.

Mindful of his instructions, she kept her eyes lowered, but she managed to glance about her furtively in quest of the man who presumably was searching for her. In the general stampede about her, however, she saw no one who appeared to answer to the description Gaspare had given her, and as they

plodded on towards the exit she began to think that if he had come at all he must be swallowed up in the swarm of people behind them.

And then suddenly they were confronted by a stern official demanding their tickets, and in the brief pause that ensued while they produced them she became swiftly and acutely aware of a thin, elderly man of military bearing with aquiline features and a fierce white moustache standing slightly to one side and peering curiously under her hood.

She had a moment of actual panic but she had the presence of mind to lower her eyes with the modesty becoming to a novice, and an instant later Pierre herded her onwards with the cumbersome gesture of a protective hen marshalling an only chick.

They passed out into the great open space of the station entrance, and within a few seconds a buzzing car was at their disposal.

Again, with no waste of words, Pierre urged his charge into the vehicle, gave some tremulous directions to the driver, and then lumbered in after her. They clattered off into the grey of the early morning.

And Pierre leaned back and blew out his lips with a very comic sound of relief. “Ma chère Gabrielle,” he said, “that was what the good Peter would call very nearly a squeak.”

She laughed in spite of her apprehension. “Oh, Pierre, he couldn’t have known it was me!”

“That is true,” said Pierre. “And I hope he looked only at you. For me he knows very well.”

“He knows you?” she questioned, startled.

Pierre chuckled. “Too well, ma chère,” he said. “I have sent him to prison twice, and so—he loves me not.”

## CHAPTER III

### *Chez Pierre*

“AND where are you taking me now?” Gabrielle asked when the journey had lasted several minutes.

He smiled and raised his humped shoulders. “There is only one place where I can take you—to my own appartement dans la Rue Hainault. You do not object to that?”

“I shall love it,” she said frankly.

“There will be none to misunderstand,” said Pierre. “We will change our clothes and I will make you an omelette and some coffee. Then you shall rest while I attend to my affairs.”

“Do you live quite alone?” she asked in surprise.

His eyes twinkled at her through their glasses. “Yes, quite alone. I find myself very good company. It is a very small appartement and it is not far from the Bois de Boulogne, where one can wander and think.”

“But does no one look after you at all?” she asked.

He continued to smile. “Oui, oui, there is a porter downstairs from whom I buy my stores. I allow him—sometimes—to clean a little. I go out for my meals, and the rest, I do it myself. It is quite easy—when one is alone. It is only my pied-à-terre, you know. Often I am not there for several weeks.”

“It must be rather fun,” Gabrielle said, “but lonely too.”

“In the kind of life that I lead,” Pierre rejoined, “there is need of solitude.”

She was still pondering over the strangeness of his existence when the car swerved suddenly through an iron gateway and bumped over cobblestones to some tall grey buildings that had something of the aspect of a museum.

“Nous sommes arrivés—chez moi,” observed Pierre in the tone of one who displays an historical place of interest.

“Will they know you? Will they let you in?” asked Gabrielle.

“The door is open, ma chère, and I have the key to my own appartement,” he explained. “We are all eccentrics who live here—actors, writers, artists. We

come and go, and none questions.”

They had stopped. Gabrielle opened the door and got out. She stood on the damp stones and held her companion’s baggage as well as her own while he laboriously descended and paid the driver. The place had a dismal aspect. A few straggling plane trees shivered in the morning mist. There was no one about; only a very skinny grey cat wove itself in and out of some railings like a wan acrobat who might have been performing all night and forgotten to stop.

“Entrez, mon enfant!” murmured Pierre under his breath, and they mounted a flight of steps to a large door which opened at his touch.

In a moment they were in a dark hall which to Gabrielle’s mind had a peculiar smell of garlic and cabbage stalks. But they did not linger here. Pierre’s hand guided her to some stairs, and they went up and up and up interminably until she wondered if the journey would ever come to an end. They passed three landings on the way, and several times as they mounted she heard the sound of snoring behind closed doors.

Then at length the stairs came to an end and they were faced with a single door. Pierre unlocked it and gently pushed her before him.

She entered a large room with slanting ceilings, furnished with a writing table, several wicker easy chairs and a cushioned settee. There were books on shelves against the low walls, but no pictures or ornaments of any kind. A deep dormer window with dark red curtains half-drawn was at one end. Pierre went across to this and pulled the curtains back.

“Le voilà!” he said in a tone of triumph. “This is my bureau. And that,” indicating a very narrow, brown door in the wall facing the entrance, “is my bedroom and bathroom. This,” with a gesture towards a shabby oilstove in a corner, “is where I make my omelettes and cook my coffee.”

Gabrielle looked around her. She had scarcely expected quite so humble an abode as this.

She went towards the window, and Pierre dropped his bag and accompanied her.

“See!” he said. “This is one of my reasons for making my nest at the top of the tree. You look out and you see the sky and in the distance the Bois. One can forget the lesser things—the little, ugly houses down below, and see only that which le bon Dieu has made.”

He pushed the hood off his face and tossed the coif aside. In the grey light in his strange robe he had the eager look of a mystic to whom earthly things

were of no account.

Gabrielle gazed out into the morning mist and saw that the view was indeed one which would bring comfort to the soul of any town dweller. Immediately beneath them there were houses, but beyond the gracious outlines of trees were visible, and the height from which they surveyed the dim distances gave a sense of freedom which she was quick to grasp. They seemed to be above the world.

“Yes, I understand,” she said.

He gave her a quick glance. “Bien, petite camarade!” he said. “You always understand.”

The words sent a swift thrill through her. She wanted to thank him but refrained.

“And now,” he said briskly, “you will go and change while I prepare le déjeuner. After that, you will rest.”

“Oh, let me help!” she said.

He smiled. “No, no! It is my privilege to wait upon you. It is what you call my picnic. Remember, mademoiselle, you are under my orders now. I am a very strict superior officer.”

She turned obediently. “You can order me about as much as you like,” she said.

He pointed to the further door. “You will find all that you want in there. Everything is at your service chez Pierre. And there is no need for haste.”

She picked up her case and went across the room. Again she was struck and somehow moved by the extreme simplicity of all that it contained.

Opening the narrow door she found a small bedroom with another dormer window facing in the same direction as that of the sitting room. The walls were whitewashed. It had almost the appearance of a monastic cell. As she shut herself in she marvelled afresh at her surroundings. That Pierre, the gay, the versatile, the warmhearted, should be satisfied with so severe an abode! She found it difficult to associate his personality with the almost grim barrenness of the place. But, looking out once more from the window, she felt in sympathy with him again. “Only that which le bon Dieu has made,” was a satisfying and very enlightening phrase.

She discovered a tiny bathroom leading out of the bedroom, and here she washed and changed. There was something in the adventure which gave her a



sort of awe. It was rather like being cast up on a desert island with Pierre, but she knew that the moment she was in his presence again everything would seem supremely natural. He was the one man in the world with whom she could never feel ill at ease.

When she was dressed she knelt on the broad sill of the dormer window and whispered her morning prayers. It was strangely peaceful with that quietness of spirit which sometimes comes in a lull of life's tumultuous striving. She felt as if everything had now been taken out of her hands. It was her part to trust and to obey. And in those sacred moments there came to her a great thankfulness that made her heart swell. It seemed that Pierre had been sent to lead her into a new world.

A smart rap on the door aroused her from deep reverie. She turned from the open window with a tingling in her veins as though she had inhaled some potent magic with the morning air. The sparkle of the sun which was just piercing the mist was like a stimulant.

She sprang to the door and opened it to find Pierre, businesslike in shirt sleeves, standing before her with a tray.

"Ah! I thought you would be resting," he said, smiling at her reproachfully.

"But I'm really not tired," she assured him. "And oh, Pierre, have you really made an omelette without breaking any eggs?"

"Come and see!" he said proudly, turning back into the sitting room.

She followed him, and he set the tray on a table and pulled up a chair for her.

The omelette was there beyond all question, and fresh rolls, butter, milk and coffee. "You must have just waved your wand," Gabrielle said.

He laughed and shrugged. "I have a friend downstairs as I told you. But the omelette—yes. I waved my wand many times for that."

"It looks lovely," she said. "I'm beginning to wonder if there is anything you can't do."

"Many things," said Pierre, "that are more difficult than making omelettes. Now, chérie, eat—eat and refresh yourself! But you are looking better already."

"I am quite well," she said. "And you must eat too, Pierre. You have been doing all the work."

They partook of the meal together with mutual relish and a complete

absence of ceremony.

“Ah, if your Colonel Duquesne could see us now!” chuckled Pierre as he set down his cup.

“He did stare rather. You don’t think he suspected?” asked Gabrielle.

“He is probably still staring at every woman who comes and goes,” said Pierre, callously buttering a roll. “But he will not find the one he seeks.”

“No,” she agreed with a contented sigh. “Do you know this is the most peaceful place I have been in since I left England?”

He threw her a pleased glance. “You like it? I am glad. Now you will feel that you can rest.”

“I had a sleep on the train,” she pointed out.

He shook his head. “It is not the same. You are weary with long anxiety. I want you to recover from it all while you are here. Then—when we return—you will be ready for anything further that you may have to bear.”

She knew that he was alluding to her mother, and a sadness came over her again. She wondered if she had been heartless.

“I do want to get back, Pierre,” she said, “though I could be very happy here. But you will be coming too?”

“Oh, oui, oui!” he said. “You shall not be alone. I shall not lose sight of you until I can place you in the care of the good Peter—who is very troubled about you.”

Again she felt a sharp pang that was like a stab. “I would rather be in your care,” she said in a low voice.

He looked at her with sudden attention. “Mais pourquoi?” he said. “He is English and he is very honourable.”

The colour rose in her face. She bent over her coffee cup, avoiding his eyes. “I can’t tell you exactly why,” she said. “I only know it is so. I have always felt—safe—with you.”

Pierre’s hand came quickly across the table to her as if to comfort her distress. “Safe—assuredly,” he said. “But not romantic, ma chère.”

She put her hand in his but for the moment she could not speak. She was quivering with an emotion she could neither hide nor explain.

He pressed her fingers gently. “Do not turn away from poor Peter!” he said almost in a whisper. “No one will ever love you more. He is so honest—so

true. And—*chérie*—you are the first.”

She gulped back a heavy lump in her throat but she could not look up. Was it the touch of his hand or the tenderness of his voice that so affected her? She sat very still, for in those trembling seconds it was as if something were being unveiled before her—something upon which she scarcely dared to look.

He spoke again, still softly but very earnestly. “When I see a love like that, which I know to be *la grande passion*, I say to myself, ‘This is a gift from *le bon Dieu*, and it must not be thrown away.’ Believe me, *chérie*, you may wait and wait, but nothing so pure, so noble, will come to you again. I—Pierre—I know the world so well. There is very little gold. There is very much dross. Let us cherish the gold when we find it! It does not come to us all.”

She bent her head a little lower. Her trembling had passed. She spoke at last rather faintly, but resolutely. “Pierre, would you say that if it came to you?”

He gave a slight start and she thought his hand closed for an instant; but the next he laughed and released his hold. “Ah!” he said, “but I am no longer young like you. I have given my life to the service of my country, and love has no place. I am become what the Americans call hard-boiled. I have no time for love.”

“No time!” she echoed.

“*C’est vrai*,” he declared. “As I have said, it does not come to all. And me—I am too busy. But you—*petite Gabrielle*—you are different. You were made for love, and it should fill your life.”

She heaved a sudden hard sigh. “Perhaps it isn’t always possible to love the right person,” she said.

“Ah, now you are perverse,” said Pierre quizzically. “In France our young girls are not so difficult to please. We do not waste our good things here. We value them and store them.”

Gabrielle leaned back in her chair with a dejected movement. “Yes,” she said musingly, “I suppose that is it. I am perverse. I am offered a star, and it isn’t big enough. I want the moon.”

“There are many stars that are greater than the moon,” said Pierre. “Do not deceive yourself, *ma chère*! The moon is a frozen world. You would not be happy if you had it.”

She looked up at length and met his eyes watching her with a half-smiling concern. “And you wouldn’t give it to me even if you could,” she said.

He clapped his hand to his head with a semicomical gesture. "I would give you heaven itself—if I could," he said. "Mais que voulez-vous? I have it not in my power. I only beg you not to cast away the substance for the shadow. Be young in your happiness—be happy in your youth!"

He got up with the words and moved away to the window, leaving her seated alone at the little table. She heard him unfasten the catch, and the freshness of the morning swept into the room.

Then abruptly he wheeled and came back. "And now," he said, "you will go to bed, yes? I have much to do and I must leave you. You will stay quiet till I return. See! Here are two keys! I will take one and lock the outer door, leaving you the other. But there will be no need to use it. No one will come here, and you will shut yourself in the bedroom and sleep. You are more tired than you know."

"Am I?" she said. "Perhaps I am—though I don't know why. But I'll wash up first. You must let me do that."

He began to protest, but pulled up unexpectedly. "If you will promise me that you will not do more," he said.

"I promise," she said.

He touched her shoulder lightly with a hint of coaxing. "And you will not weep?" he said in a soft voice.

"I promise that too," she said, faintly smiling at him.

"Bravo!" he said with quick approval. "Alors, ma chère, au revoir, et dormez bien!"

"Au revoir, Pierre!" she said gravely.

And so he left her.

## CHAPTER IV

### *The Flowers of Paradise*

GABRIELLE kept her promise and lying on the narrow bed in Pierre's room she shed no tears. She felt indeed as if she had received a tremendous shock that had stunned her like a blow between the eyes and she lay for long without stirring, almost as if she were afraid to move.

The revelation that had come upon her had been of so overwhelming a nature that even in solitude she was half-afraid to look upon it. She marvelled at her own helplessness, marvelled and despised herself. Yet she lacked the strength to thrust it aside. Out of the darkness of the night it had risen like a blazing dawn. Of what use to attempt to deny it? It shone mercilessly into the very depths of her being.

All that she had realized but dimly before was now dazzlingly clear. Across her heart a name was written with an impress that nothing could erase. Perhaps it had always been there and she had not known it. Pierre! Friend, protector, kindly mentor! Pierre! That most lovable personality who yet had no time in his life for love! Ah, why had the veil been lifted? Why had that blinding knowledge been thrust upon her?

She had been happy before and she had not questioned wherefore. Just to be with him, to see the cheery lines of laughter on his face, to hear the quizzical tones of his voice, to glimpse now and then the deeper things of the spirit which sometimes escaped him, as it were, by accident! All this had been a delight to her which she had accepted as natural, even inevitable. But now he had become the very centre of her thoughts—the keynote of her life. Not by his own design, but by a magnetism that was irresistible, he had enthralled her. She could not have said herself how it had come to pass. Possibly she had been influenced by Peter's attitude of almost idealistic devotion to his brother in the first place. But it had not been a conscious and voluntary surrender on her part. It had come upon her unawares. A possibility which she had never visualized had caught her with whirlwind force. It was not a matter of choice. Her foothold had been swept away and she was as powerless to battle for herself as a piece of driftwood.

She had not been on her guard, but there had been nothing to guard against. He had not sought to win her. He had been her chivalrous knight—no more

than that at any time. Gentle as a woman, brave as a lion, courteous, unflinchingly kind, he had given her free and ungrudging service. Even in the midst of his own most exacting toil, he had bestowed upon her his sympathy and fullest protection. But she had been no more to him than a child in distress—regarded already as a young sister to be handed over eventually to the keeping of Peter who loved her. Even his kiss which had so comforted her had been no more than the consoling caress of an elder brother. In all her dealings with him she had never seen aught but the light of friendship in his eyes. His loyalty to Peter had never wavered. His goodness to herself had been sheer goodness and nothing else.

It would never be anything else. That at least he had made clear to her. And a burning wave of humiliation went through her as she wondered whether he had done it of set purpose. Had he seen what was in her heart? Had that staggering revelation been visible to him also? The wave receded, and she felt very tired and old. What did it matter, after all? Even if he knew, what difference could it make? He was a man of the world and he had probably been loved many times before. He would not despise her—because he was Pierre. He would be sorry for her perhaps, but he would not take the matter too seriously. He was too fully occupied with affairs of far greater importance. His whole mind was concentrated upon his work, and he was too great a gentleman to desire to probe another's secret. Since there was no place in his life for love he certainly would not wish to waste any thought upon it. If he knew, she was sure that he would do his utmost to forget. There would be no difficulties, no embarrassments, because he was Pierre.

But for herself there was no joy, no zest left; only a great emptiness that stretched out before her like an unending desert. The sweetness and the bitterness of love had come to her at a draught, and the wonder and the rapture were not for her. The great dawn had come, and already it was fading into the grey of a day that would give no warmth of sunshine. She wanted to hide her eyes and forget, but the ache at her heart would not suffer it. Why—ah, why—had he ever come into her life? And yet she knew that she would not have had it otherwise. Never to have met him would have left her infinitely the poorer. Even in utter loneliness she would never regret having come into contact with that gay and *débonnaire* personality.

He had shown her how to laugh in the face of adversity. He had in some fashion presented her with a new creed—courage with cheerfulness. And even in the midst of her pain she struggled to grasp and hold it. Dismay and despair were unknown quantities to Pierre; therefore she too must learn to cast them out, to go straight forward fearlessly as he went, to meet all that came to her

with an unshaken spirit. She must cover up all suffering, hide the wound however deep, marshal all her forces in battle array, override and conquer her grief. It must not, however poignant, be allowed to conquer her. The blow had fallen and she was bruised and weary, but she must look up, she must press on. She must not lie and moan. Pierre did not love her. What right had she to expect it? But he had called her “petite camarade.” She must not disappoint him. She must be ready to rise and fight by his side.

And so, lying in that cell-like room of his, she kept her word to him and shed no tears. Only after long and earnest thinking, she turned her head at last into the pillow with a tremulous, long-drawn sigh.

“O God,” she said, “give me strength and give me courage to smile as I go on!”

And then in a little while she slept a quiet, untroubled sleep.

It was a deep and lasting slumber that carried her through many hours of that day. She had been in greater need of rest than she had realized and when at last she awoke it was to a sense of peace which she had scarcely expected. The turmoil had all died down within her, and the pain was stilled. She felt as if the strength for which she had prayed had come and she could be brave again.

She thought at first that she was still alone, but presently a soft sound of whistling accompanying hushed movements reached her, and she knew that Pierre was in the outer room. Those low strains of the “Marseillaise” had become familiar to her ears. She lay and listened to them with a curious sense of reassurance and thankfulness. Perhaps it would not be so very difficult after all to smile as she went along. Could anything really be difficult when Pierre was there?

A discreet knock came presently at the door, and as she started up a piercing whisper was directed through the keyhole.

“I have brought you some supper, Gabrielle. Are you awake?”

“Supper!” she echoed, and was startled to see that the day was already dying.

He opened the door an inch. “You need not get up. I will bring it to you.”

But Gabrielle was already on her feet. She met him on the threshold.

“I didn’t undress,” she said. “Oh, Pierre, I’m ashamed to have slept so long.”

Pierre was in his shirt sleeves again, very alert and businesslike. “I think

you were very wise,” he said, surveying her critically. “And you are all the better for it. You were too tired before. See! We have here a hot meal from a hotel buffet procured by my friend the porter. We will eat and drink together. And after that, I will take you to the Bois.”

“What a magician you are!” she said. “I should love to see the Bois before it gets dark.”

“After you have eaten!” said Pierre firmly. “I have had your pale face on my mind the whole day. And I have said to myself, ‘Pierre—fool—your omelette was too meagre. It would not have sufficed a fly.’ So the moment I am free, I hurry back and I order for you a proper meal—to make you forget the omelette. I am sure that you are famished.”

“Indeed I am not!” she protested.

“Alors,” he responded with a stern smile, “I shall give you wine to make you hungry. I will not have those hollow eyes regarding me. They are a reproach which I cannot endure.”

Gabrielle returned his smile without effort; in fact, she could not have denied it to him. “Let me just get tidy,” she said, “while you pour out the wine! I have been asleep nearly all day, so that shows how well you have treated me.”

He made a grimace at his own ineptitude. “Non—non! Chez moi you will eat and drink—until there are no hollows left. Dépêchez-vous alors, car je suis désolé.”

When she returned, he had put on his coat and was standing by the table on which a very tempting meal was spread. There were other dishes arrayed on the floor within easy reach, and he had filled two glasses with red wine.

“Now,” he said, “we will drink first—me to you—and you to me. Et après cela, we will eat and eat until we can eat no more.”

She laughed. Who could help laughing with Pierre? Everything was easy in his presence. It was impossible not to share in his spontaneous gaiety.

“I think you must have been born happy,” she said to him later.

At which remark he spread out his hands with an eloquent gesture. “That I cannot remember. Probably I cried, but I think I must have laughed very soon. Life is so droll.”

It was certainly the cheeriest meal that Gabrielle had ever eaten. While it was in progress he asked her questions regarding her past life, and as she told



him of the humdrum existence she had led in the village rectory and of the doings of village life he laughed again though never without sympathy.

“La pauvre petite!” he said. “A novice indeed! With no knowledge of the big world, and yet—how brave! But you loved your friends, yes? You would like to go back to them?”

“No,” Gabrielle said deliberately. “I liked them—just as they liked me. It wasn’t love. I only loved my mother.”

“Ah!” he said gently.

“You see,” she explained, “there are some people in the world—quite nice people and very good—but so dull, so like bits of furniture—that no one could possibly love them. The Lingardes are like that. I took them for granted when I was small. Afterwards, I think I must have outgrown them.”

He looked quizzical. “The little round peg in the hole so square! Yes, yes, I understand. I know those people. They are excellent for a background—like the buff stitches on a tapestry—so necessary, *mais si ennuyants*. You are right. One cannot love such. It would be a waste of time. They would not understand. If you tried it, they would give you a powder and put you to bed.”

“I believe they would,” Gabrielle agreed. “It’s funny, isn’t it? But I never did try very hard. I lived my own life, and they never knew.”

“Ah! Ça va!” he said. “How should they know? They have no imagination. And you had no companions? You were lonely?”

“I was sometimes,” she admitted. “But I was not unhappy. There were always the woods to wander in. And then there was the farm close by and the animals. And I had my lessons to do. But I liked the woods the best, because there were wild things there—birds and squirrels and rabbits, and now and then a fox. And they lived their own lives—not like the farm things. They were much more interesting.”

“Ah! The woods!” he said. “And we are going to the Bois. We must hurry or it will be dark. If I show you the way tonight, you will be able to walk there tomorrow when I am away.”

“Oh yes,” she said. “I shall love that. And when will your business be over? When can we start back?”

“Perhaps I will tell you tomorrow,” he said. “But you will be patient, *ma chère*. You will remember that I have a difficult task to do and you will not make it more difficult.”

“I would never do that,” she answered instantly. “And I will be patient, Pierre. But you won’t forget, will you, how much it means to me?”

“I do not forget,” he said. “I think of it very often. But caution is as necessary as haste, and I dare not risk your safety. Perhaps—tomorrow——”

“I won’t worry you,” she said as he paused. “I know you will do all that can be done. And I haven’t even thanked you yet for taking me in like this. But I shall never forget it.”

His ready smile flashed out upon her. “Ah, if you but knew how great an honour I regard it! And do not I owe it to you after robbing you last night, and for your so generous pardon? If you had withheld it, I do not know what I should have done.”

“You would have been—*désolé*?” she suggested.

He shook his head at her. “You are very naughty. I think I will not take you to the Bois after that.”

“Oh yes!” she insisted. “Let me get my hat and I will come! We will put everything away afterwards. It will be so lovely to get out into the fresh air, and I need a walk after being so lazy.”

Pierre’s look was indulgent. “Eh bien, we will go,” he said. “But only for a short time. Afterwards I return to my work.”

“Your work!” she said, pausing. “I thought you had finished for today.”

He laughed a little. “I shall work—possibly—all the night,” he said. “I will take the key as before and if I return before the dawn I will sleep on the couch here. But I shall be with you in any case for *le petit déjeuner*. You will not be afraid?”

“Afraid? No!” she said. “But, Pierre, you ought to rest. You’ll be terribly tired. Don’t give me your bedroom tonight! I can curl up anywhere.”

It was then that for a moment she caught a glimpse of the inner force that dwelt behind this man’s smiling exterior. “I tell you, Gabrielle,” he said, “I do not rest when I have work to do. There will be time for that afterwards, when my coup is accomplished. But for you—you will do as I have said. When another night is past, I hope you will be quite yourself again.”

She felt that she had received a definite command and she made no further attempt to reason with him. There was something indomitable about Pierre at the moment that made him almost formidable.

But when she rejoined him a few seconds later prepared for their walk, she

found the amiable, courteous Frenchman with whom she was familiar awaiting her, and there was no sign of peremptoriness left in his manner as they fared forth together.

“The beautiful Bois is better than all the sights of Paris,” he said. “And I am pleased to be the one to show it to you. *La première fois est toujours la meilleure.*”

“Oh, I hope not,” she said, but she knew in her heart that what he said was true.

The rose light of a lingering sunset still coloured the trees which were beginning to be tinged with autumn shades as they passed down one of the woodland glades. The stillness of the place diffused a peace that was almost unearthly, and Gabrielle’s spirit hung between sadness and an inexplicable joy.

They did not talk much. Pierre finished his cigarette and did not light another. He too seemed to feel a strange enchantment and he walked as if wrapt in thought. They seemed to wander in a sacred place, and the silence between them was a mute testimony to an intimacy which had no need of words.

There were one or two couples loitering about the walks, and from the distance there came the occasional sound of vehicles on the roads, but it was not the hour for much coming and going, and all the world lay hushed in the quiet of twilight.

To Gabrielle it was as if for a space time stood still, and something that was infinitely holy hovered with outspread wings in the rose-shot atmosphere. The trees were motionless, all burnished in the dying afterglow, copper-green against a sky of vivid opalescent cloud that drifted in small, flowing ripples through heights of purest blue.

The beauty of it almost made her senses swim. Looking upwards, she felt as if she were gazing straight into heaven, and the far-off glory stretching earthwards was like a widespread benediction.

A voice spoke softly at her shoulder. “I brought you to see the Bois, but—the flowers of paradise are more beautiful tonight.”

She made a faint sound in answer. They had ceased to walk and were standing in the sweep of an avenue facing that flaming west. At its end was a group of fir trees, and immediately above these, gleaming with the clearness of a crystal, there shone the evening star.

Their eyes saw it in the same moment. “And that,” said Pierre still more

softly, “is the loveliest of all.”

Gabrielle gazed and gazed, held in a spell which she could have wished might never be broken. She knew what he meant. It was the separate loveliness of that single star that exceeded all the rest. Its mystery and its splendour were all its own. It hung—a silver token that should endure when the wider glory had faded.

A great sigh welled up from within her. She knew that this hour of “sunset and evening star” would dwell apart in her memory as long as she lived.

“I fear we must go,” whispered Pierre after an interval.

She turned without a word. The wondrous colours of the sky were slowly merging from fuchsia into palest rose. The tender dusk was spreading over the quiet earth. Only that one star remained, serene, changeless—immortally, permanently alight.

“The white star of Destiny,” said Pierre, “that we must follow to the end.”

She quivered a little but she did not ask him what he meant.

They returned as they had come, oblivious of any passers-by, still bound by that deep intimacy of the spirit which needed no outward expression.

It was not until they were back in Pierre’s appartement that the ordinary things of life recalled them, and then they looked at each other with a sort of wonder. But Gabrielle’s eyes were heavy and her smile was faint.

“That was a marvellous adventure,” said Pierre, and he had the expression of one awaking from a dream. Then, looking at her more closely: “Mon enfant, comme vous êtes fatiguée! You will go to bed, hein? And sleep—sleep!”

“Good night, Pierre!” she said wistfully.

He regarded her for a second longer, then—but not as though he acted on impulse—he took her face between his hands and kissed her lightly on both cheeks.

“Oh, Pierre!” she said. “Oh, Pierre!”

Her control broke. She leaned her head against his breast, clinging to him voicelessly.

“Mais, ma chère!” he said. “Ma très chère!”

His arms enfolded her. He held her closely, sustainingly, just as he had held her on the previous night.

Then, even more tenderly than he had taken her, he let her go.

“All is well,” he whispered, and looked once more into her face with anxious searching. “Tell me all is well!”

She tried to tell him, but she could not. She was silent.

He also was silent for a moment or two. Then he led her gently to a chair.

“A glass of wine!” he said briskly. “Et après cela, you will go to bed. I fear we have been too far. You have had much to bear lately.”

She submitted dumbly to his ministrations, afraid to speak lest tears should overwhelm her.

But when she had drunk the wine he brought to her she regained her self-command and smiled up at his troubled face.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “What must you think of me?”

His own magnetic smile gleamed back instantly. “I will not tell you what I think,” he declared whimsically. “It would be very bad for you to know.”

She got up with resolution. “And we didn’t go too far,” she said. “I loved—every minute. Now please let me help you put things straight!”

“I will not let you do anything,” he said. “You will leave me now, please. Everything will be finished in ten minutes. And then I return to my work.”

He spoke with the finality which she had come to know. She turned to the inner door. But as she reached it she looked back at him. He was standing watching her, and there was something in his eyes that she had not seen before—something that vanished even as she looked.

“Thank you for everything, Pierre,” she said.

He shrugged his shoulders with a characteristic, half-rueful gesture. “You may thank me when you find your happiness,” he said. “But till then—non, non!”

She passed through into the little bedroom and softly closed the door.

## CHAPTER V

### *Capture*

SHE HAD NOT THOUGHT that sleep could come to her, but—perhaps the wine that Pierre had given her had made her drowsy—as soon as she lay down she drifted away upon soft billows of restfulness. That last look of his had strangely eased the pain at her heart, though wherefore she could not have said. And all through the night it was as though a soothing hand had been laid upon her. She woke but to sleep again.

In the morning she rose and dressed quietly, hearing no sound in the sitting room and wondering if Pierre had returned. But when presently she cautiously opened the door she saw him lying under his cloak on the settee.

He leapt up fully dressed and greeted her with an alertness that did not give the impression of repose. Yet there was no hint of weariness on his face. He looked spruce and ready, and there was about him a keenness that swept everything before it.

“Ah, good morning!” he said. “I see you have slept. I also have taken a short rest. With your permission we will go to the café at the end of the street for le déjeuner. And then I must leave you again. But I shall return in the afternoon when we will make our final preparations for departure.”

His manner was concise and businesslike, but he smiled his cheery smile at her as he spoke.

“We are going today!” Gabrielle said.

He lifted one finger. “I do not say when. I only say we will be ready. Put on your hat, *ma chère*, and let us go!”

She obeyed him. There was a briskly impersonal air about him that was like a smoothly running dynamo. It seemed that only her appearance had been needed to set it in motion, and she determined that he should not find her a hindrance.

He looked pleased at her promptitude when she returned. “Très bien!” he said. “You can walk in the Bois this morning but do not go far and be here again at noon! I will leave the key here.”

He showed her a cranny in the wainscot that might have been a rathole in a

dark corner of the little landing and pushed the key into it out of sight.

“Now,” he said, “you can come and go as you like till noon. You will be quite happy, yes?”

“Oh, quite,” she assured him. “Don’t, please, think about me! I promise I will be here.”

“But naturally I think about you,” he said. “I could not do otherwise while you are in my charge. You will not feel deserted?”

“Of course not!” she said. “I shall enjoy it.”

He gave her a half-doubtful glance. “You look so young,” he said as if to himself. “But no! The air will be good for you. You will not stray far in the Bois?”

“Oh, I’ll be a model of discretion,” she said.

He shook off his momentary misgiving. “But you are always that,” he declared. “I have never seen you anything else. I have the greatest respect for you.”

Respect! But for the raillery in his voice she might have winced at that word. As it was, she laughed.

“You will say that you stand in awe of me next! I may look young but I’m beginning to think I must be at least fifty.”

He waved her to the stairs. “I do not think age will ever have any effect upon you,” he said. “You have so brave a spirit.”

“I wonder,” said Gabrielle. “Or is it that you see your own courage reflected in other people?”

“Oh, là là!” laughed Pierre. “I am no hero, me.”

“I wonder,” she said again.

But it was no moment for discussion. The morning air felt crude and unsympathetic, and time was evidently precious.

They hurried up the grey street to the café where they found themselves the only customers at that early hour. The place was in process of being cleaned, but Pierre secured a corner beyond the zone of mops and brooms, and they had a hasty breakfast together in comparative comfort.

“You know the way,” he said. “Promise me that you will not be lost!”

“I promise,” she assured him. The hint of anxiety in his look gave her a

throb of pleasure. "I shan't go off the beaten track and I shall come back very early."

"Yes, I am sure you will be safe," he said as if reassuring himself. "No one would seek you in the Bois. Au revoir, alors! We shall meet again very soon."

He saluted her and hurried away.

The sun was just breaking through the morning mist. Gabrielle reflected that she had not been aware of the chill in the air until she was alone. She pulled up the collar of her coat and turned in the direction of the Bois.

The world seemed to be coming to life. Cars and vans were whizzing along the roads and the business of existence was being resumed in earnest. Women wearing bedroom slippers rode by on bicycles on their way to carry out their early marketing. Bedding was being shaken and draped outside upper windows. It was as if at a given signal the work of the day had begun.

Gabrielle looked about her with interest. It was strange to be alone in this backwater of Paris, knowing nothing of the wonderful city itself. She wished that she might have explored the streets further, but she understood Pierre's uneasiness in that respect. It was extremely unlikely that any time would be wasted over her by the man with whom she had failed to keep her appointment, but the bare possibility existed and it was better to avoid all chance of an encounter. Besides, the Bois with its verdure and its winding paths was infinitely pleasanter. She had a feeling that it was more friendly to her. That walk with Pierre the evening before had been her initiation. She was no longer a stranger.

The sun triumphed as she entered it, and the scents of autumn rose like incense as the mist evaporated. She wandered in by a path that wound amongst the trees but she did not turn in the direction in which she and Pierre had walked together. She would keep the memory of that undisturbed and sacred forever.

Yes, it was a kindly place. She heard the voices of children playing in the distance, and the chequered shadows seemed to beckon her. It was less beautiful than the garden of the Villa des Sirènes but infinitely more hospitable.

The sun was growing warmer every instant. She was lucky, she told herself, lucky to be in so sweet a spot. A perfect morning lay before her, and she would enjoy it, putting all forebodings aside. The cooing of pigeons overhead seemed to prove all restlessness. She wished vaguely that the world were a more peaceful place.



She found a seat in a sort of bow cut in the bushes that bounded the path and sat down. It was secluded yet close to a road on which at frequent intervals cars passed, interrupting the calm with a brief flurry of sound that rendered it all the deeper when they were gone. The aromatic fragrance of the sun-smitten trees surrounded her, and she breathed it in as though it had been nectar. Yes, Pierre had been right when he had sent her out into the air. It was refreshment to soul and body.

She leaned back with closed eyes, drawing in the sweetness. It was the turn of the year when the essences of spring and autumn seem strangely to mingle—when the summer newborn and the summer dying are almost as one. She thought to herself that a blind person would scarcely have been able to distinguish between the two.

Suddenly she heard a footfall and realized that someone was invading her solitude. She started upright with open eyes. The curve of the path hid the intruder for a few seconds, and then as the quiet tread drew nearer a shadow fell, and the next instant a spare, martial figure appeared close to her.

Gabrielle's heart gave a wild beat of dismay and stood still. It was Colonel Duquesne.

He was walking very slowly forward, looking straight before him. He did not appear to look at her, or if he did so it was the barest glance, and she sat absolutely motionless as if frozen into immobility. Without a pause he went stiffly by, and as he went she saw that he was making a peculiar movement with one grey-gloved hand as though he were tapping the ash from an invisible cigarette.

The action was somehow familiar to her though for the moment she could not recall where she had seen it before. Then suddenly she remembered the evening at the gaming tables, and Gaspare and Prince Bruno coming towards her with Cesari. And as the blood raced back to her heart she remembered another scene on the following morning, and felt again the sharp sting of sparks upon her wrist.

She got up swiftly. His back was towards her, but something about his sauntering gait warned her that he would probably return. He had not seemed to perceive her, yet she was convinced that he knew she was there. It was no accident that had led him past her retreat. He had followed her through the Bois.

She stepped out of the leafy recess, and turned sharply in the opposite direction. Without a glance over her shoulder she began to hasten along the path that led apparently into the heart of the wood. But before she had gone ten

paces she was aware of a sudden movement in the bushes on each side of her.

Two figures sprang out like leopards upon a fleeing doe, and as she caught her breath to cry out she was seized and held. The cry never escaped her, for a heavy cloak was flung over her head, and she felt herself borne backwards in a suffocating darkness.

Then, while she struggled against overwhelming odds, there came a sharp stab in her arm like the sting of a monstrous insect. She realized that in spite of her utmost straining it was being held rigidly outstretched, and a wild horror rushed over her as she grasped the reason.

It was all over in a few agonizing seconds of frantic striving. Her resistance died like the flame of an extinguished match. She was dimly aware of the cloak being lifted from her face, and she took one gulping breath of air before a great blackness came down upon her, engulfing her whole being, deadening every faculty. She felt herself collapse and sink beneath it into a deep sea of forgetfulness.

## CHAPTER VI

### *The Wheels of Fate*

OUT of that unfathomable sea there arose a whirlpool like the whizzing of a thousand wheels. The rush and roar filled Gabrielle's consciousness, and her brain spun round and round, refusing to focus. Wild fancies darted in and out like imps of fever, and she was aware of a cruel, darting pain that pierced her head with every turn of those racing, jigsaw wheels.

Her mouth was dry with a dryness that went deep down into her helpless body. Her throat was harsh and burning. Her eyes seemed to be two balls of fire. When she tried to open them, even a glimmer of light was agony.

She moaned, and the whirlpool caught her; the wheels tore madly round. She tried to lift her hands, but they felt like lead. A great weight bore her down. She was powerless. Even that moan seemed to tear through parched tissues. She yearned for water as she had never yearned for anything in her life before. It came to her that without it she would die very soon in a furnace of suffering.

Again, feebly, she tried to move. But the wheels defeated her. Her head jolted back, and her brain was shot with anguished pain. She lay for a space in a misery so intense that all rational thought was blotted out.

Then again she was conscious of the wheels—The Wheels! Was she trapped in some vast machinery, being flung from one revolving piece of mechanism to another, being battered and ground to atoms, being annihilated through aeons of agony? Was she already dead, passing through some frightful experience that was so acute as to feel physical though it was not? Or had she had an appalling accident that had already rent her to fragments, and were they bearing her mangled frame to some place where death would mercifully bring her peace?

She made no further attempt to move. The torture of the wheels was too great. She remembered in a confused sort of dreaming that people had been broken upon wheels. Surely that was what had happened to her! Some relentless force had seized her and hurled her into this place of torment. In the whole of her life she had never suffered as she was suffering now. Through all the confusion of her bemused senses this ceaseless drumming of wheels—the wheels of Fate—ran like a red streak of madness. She wanted to scream but

could not.

A long time passed—a span immeasurable by any human standards. It might have been many hours; she had no means of knowing. Her consciousness came and went like a flickering flame that never penetrated beyond the bounds of pain. But at the end of that interminable interval she was dimly aware of a lessening of noise and motion, and finally of the wheels suddenly ceasing to revolve. It was as if she had been tossed through deafening tumult into a great emptiness.

She lay passive, too ill to stir or to take note of her surroundings, until unexpectedly she found herself grasped and lifted up. Then automatically her eyes opened. She saw the lean grey face of Colonel Duquesne.

It dawned upon her that she was lying in the back seat of a large car and that he was in the open doorway trying to pull her out. Mechanically she attempted to descend, but in a moment her head swam with a sickening giddiness, and she scarcely knew what was happening until she was sunk in a heap by the roadside overcome by so violent an attack of nausea that it seemed as if her heart itself must burst.

He supported her with a few ejaculatory remarks which completely passed her by, and when the worst was over he seated her on the step of the car to recover and went away. She crouched with her face in her hands, too shaken by the horrible convulsion that had overwhelmed her to have thought for anything else, though gradually, notwithstanding her weakness, she began to feel a slow-growing sense of relief. She was still desperately weak and her head ached violently, but the dizziness was past. She was capable of attaining some sort of coherent idea as to what was happening to her.

The memory of her capture in the Bois came back to her, the awful smothering struggle, and the pitiless stab of an injection needle. She shifted her position and looked at her arm. The place where it had entered showed an inflamed circle. How long ago could it have been? How far had she been brought during her unconsciousness? She nerved herself to look a little further, and found that the car had stopped on the outskirts of a narrow town, close to a shabby *estaminet*. The sun was slanting downwards to the west. It must be late in the afternoon. Then they had probably travelled for hours, travelled for many miles.

A nervous shudder went through her. She still felt very ill and cold. Someone came abruptly out of the inn to her, and she shrank. It was Colonel Duquesne again.

He stooped and placing a hand under her arm impelled her to her feet. Her

knees bent under her weight. She was too weak to stand alone, but he held her up, and by the exercise of great firmness he led her into the inn.

The atmosphere nearly made her faint. It was hot and reeked of garlic, but she was too dazed for anything but the most abject submission. A hubbub of French voices came to her, though there were not many people present.

They were met by a black-haired woman in a sand-coloured overall and the inevitable bedroom slippers who took her away from Colonel Duquesne very much as if she had been an inanimate object of no particular interest, and guided her stumbling feet up some narrow stairs to a small, stuffy bedroom where she brought her a jug of cold water and left her to bathe her throbbing head at a tiny cracked basin.

It was a task which Gabrielle found almost beyond her strength, but she made the effort and the deadly faintness began to subside. Catching sight of her own face in a looking glass on the wall, she was very shocked by its ghastliness. She smoothed her hair with trembling hands and sank down upon a rickety chair to wait. The horror of this thing that was happening to her seemed to clog her brain. No thought of escape occurred to her. She was too hopelessly entrapped for that.

After a few minutes the woman returned, bumping her way in with a tray. On it was a cup of hot coffee, black and steaming, and some pieces of buttered roll. Gabrielle turned from the latter with sick disgust but she took the coffee thankfully. It was very hot and it had a queer smell, but she drank it slowly even though it scalded her throat and made her cough.

The moment it was gone she felt revived. A warm deep glow spread through her as though she had swallowed liquid fire. She looked at the woman, who stood waiting, but she could think of no French beyond a low-spoken "Merci!"

The woman smiled and made a few remarks in her own language which were quite unintelligible to Gabrielle, and then she came to her and with a powerful hand hoisted her to her feet.

It was then that it dawned upon Gabrielle that she had taken a stronger stimulant than coffee. The ground swayed under her feet and the walls of the room seemed to be leaning inwards. Her head felt strangely light and all pain had gone, but she knew that she was reeling with intoxication.

She clutched her guide's shoulder, but without any sense of dismay. The glow that tingled through her had taken away the horror also. She was no longer afraid, no longer ill, no longer anything that she could realize. Her

whole being might have been transformed into a single brilliant flame.

She never remembered descending the stairs but she had a flashing glimpse of Colonel Duquesne waiting at the bottom and she supposed he ultimately caught her; for quite suddenly she saw the car again and somehow she found herself inside. Her brain was a sparkle of dazzling lights, without any sort of sequence. It was sheer heaven to sink back and feel that all effort was over. A vague impression came upon her that they were now going back again, and that at the end of the extraordinary journey she would find Pierre, would sleep once more on his narrow bed, and hear him softly whistling the “Marseillaise” when she awoke in the morning.

The sparkle died away into a softly-tinted dream of happiness, but the exquisite, throbbing glow remained. She remembered the glade they had trodden together—the flowers of paradise—the white star of Destiny.

And then she drifted into the fuchsia clouds of sunset, floating like gossamer through endless space—conscious no longer of the rushing wheels of Fate that bore her on and on southwards, ever southwards, all through the night, but peaceful in the midst of it all, wrapped in a slumber so deep and dreamless that it might have been an enchanted sleep.

## CHAPTER VII

### *The Welcome*

THAT DEEP SLEEP lasted for many hours, but into it at length there filtered a strange and haunting dream. As one who gazes into a crystal, Gabrielle saw again the Château Perdu. It was not a continuous vision. Sometimes the crystal was clouded, but always it came again. She saw the castellated front and its still reflection in the lake. She saw the crumbling steps and the reeds that grew around the margin of the water. She saw every detail of grassy sward and encircling woods with their invading undergrowth.

She recognized it as a dream, and yet, curiously, it was more. It was a premonition. By some hidden means the conviction was projected into her slowly waking brain that the Château Perdu was her destination. It was inexplicable, wholly irrational, yet with the certainty that sometimes asserts itself in partial consciousness she knew that thus it would be.

As the deep tide of sleep gradually receded from her, as her reluctant eyes perceived the pale light of morning through their heavy lids, the knowledge lay cold at her heart. They were taking her—a helpless prisoner—to their stronghold.

Again the wheels of Fate for a while obsessed her. They were travelling at a high speed as they must have travelled all through the night. The rushing and the drumming confused her brain. She felt battered, oppressed, unspeakably weary. But sleep had gone from her beyond recall. The exigencies of a new day must be faced. She could no longer hide her face from the stark reality of her capture. The inevitable awakening had come.

Slowly her eyes opened. She was lying on the back seat of a large limousine with a coat rolled up under her head and a rug flung over her. On a seat in front of her with his back to her was a man—Colonel Duquesne. Another man sat beside the driver. She was well guarded.

She made no attempt to raise herself. Her head felt too unsteady for effort, and she dreaded moving. But she stirred her cramped limbs a little and obtained a measure of relief. As she lay she could see the grey morning light spreading over the sky and she had an impression of fleeting poplars at the roadside.

Perhaps for an hour she lay so, then suddenly the car slowed down and ran into a town. Colonel Duquesne turned and looked at her, his face impassive and as lacking in interest as though she had been a doll. She gathered that he spoke no English, and as her French was of the most elementary description it appeared that any communication between them must necessarily be of a very limited character.

After a long and completely impersonal stare he turned back and spoke to the driver, giving some instructions in a sharp staccato. They stopped again in front of an *estaminet*, and Gabrielle sat up, shuddering a little.

Colonel Duquesne got out and paused to help her, but when once outside in the chill morning air she found her feet. Her head felt better, and she was thankful to find that she could walk alone.

They all entered the *estaminet*, and when coffee and rolls were brought to her she discovered to her surprise that she was very hungry, too hungry to pay any attention to her companions, who talked rapidly among themselves while they ate and drank.

It was only a brief halt. Very soon they were on their way again, running hourly into a warmer atmosphere while the grey clouds slid away leaving a blue sky of flawless sunshine. No one spoke to her. The two men in front chattered together, and Colonel Duquesne sat in silence, his back rigidly turned to her. She was extremely grateful for this fact, for his appearance did not encourage confidence. She presumed that he was merely carrying out precise orders concerning her which he had received, and by a sheer effort of will she kept herself from looking forward too far.

Her chief trouble was the thought of Pierre—Pierre waiting for her in growing anxiety, deeming her lost through her own foolishness, chafing at the delay she was causing. But even here she found some sort of comfort, for from what she knew of Pierre, he would not wait for long. He would act swiftly and decisively, in what direction she had no idea, but she was certain that he would act.

And he knew of the Château Perdu. That also comforted her, for still the conviction persisted that she was being taken thither. He knew, and his enemies were unaware that he knew. Through the long travel to the south that lasted throughout that autumn day she kept that thought close in her heart. He also might jump to conclusions when she failed to return. Her continued absence must make him realize that she was no longer a free agent.

She was very weary again before the day was done. Their brief halts for refreshment were too hurried to ease the fatigue of rapid travel, and rest in the



car was no longer possible. She ached in every limb, and her head was a throbbing maze of doubt and conjecture. She was in Gaspare's power. Of that there could be no question. And if he thought that she had betrayed him he would not spare her.

As the sun went down again a heavy sense of foreboding which she could not conquer crept over her spirit. It was terrible to be so alone, so completely at the mercy of the unscrupulous. But still somehow she was not defeated. She kept despair at bay.

With the sunset there came to her the first glimpse of mountains stretching out ahead of them, blue and purple and smoke-coloured in the evening light. The road began to wind upwards, became in places precipitous. The great crests stood up like the majestic ramparts of an immense fortress, grandly aloof. She watched them as long as the light lasted with the growing realization that they were drawing towards the end of the journey.

When darkness fell she huddled a little deeper into her corner. She thought of her mother and she thought of Peter. How little either of them guessed of this strange return! She had spoken no farewell to either and now she was on her way back to the neighbourhood of those two who loved her more tenderly than anyone on earth. But their love was powerless to reach her, impotent to pierce the wall of secrecy that surrounded her. For her mother's sake she was glad. But if by longing she could have conveyed a message to Peter—that stalwart champion of hers—it must have gone forth on the chill night air as the car climbed the long road through the mountains.

She had a pang of self-reproach when she remembered how little thought she had spared for Peter since she had seen him last in the square at Pontaumer. The joy of Pierre's presence had blotted out all lesser things. But she felt that she had been ungrateful. For Peter had given her all his love, and Pierre, it seemed, had none to give. Ah, why was life so complex? She believed that she had been almost on the verge of loving Peter once, but it had all been swept away by Pierre's magnetism. And it was Peter who had waited vainly for her by the pool even at peril of his life, Peter who had kept watch outside the villa lest any evil should approach her, Peter who had been ready to take any risk, however deadly, solely on her behalf. But because he lacked the genius that sparkled so brightly in his brother she had scarcely noticed his devotion.

She saw it now with a clearness that made her feel ashamed. He had given his love to her just as she had given hers to Pierre. Not until now had she understood what that meant and she shrank from the thought that she should ever inflict upon Peter the suffering that she herself had undergone. To love in

vain was such a cruel waste, and Peter was of the type in which such suffering bit deeply. Had she been heartless, she asked herself rather piteously? Was there anything that she had done or left undone to have brought about this tragedy? She could not find a satisfactory answer to the question though she puzzled round and round it until her brain was mazed and aching. Fate had played them a cynical trick. They had been flung together and tossed apart again. It was not Pierre who was at fault, neither could she honestly fix the blame upon either herself or Peter. It had just happened, one of those curious, unhappy tangles in human existence that nothing can avert.

It was strange that on that night when her own future was so menacing she could not tear her mind away from these thoughts. They went with her through the gathering darkness, pressing her down. What troubled her chiefly was the reflection that somehow Peter had not been given a fair deal. Measuring his feelings by her own, she saw him in a new light, and it was a sight that grieved her. She could not bear that he should be hurt. He had been so utterly generous to her. And she knew he would continue to be generous. He would fight to deliver her if he had the chance, fight to the death if need be. But what would he ever gain in return? She wondered sadly if it would not be better for him at least if she were never heard of again.

The night wore on. It was cold up on the heights, and the sky was a spangle of stars. But when after weary hours they began at length to descend, a warmer air greeted them. The soft fragrances of the south floated in—the scent of dew-drenched lilies and a myriad other flowers, the intoxicating odours of an earthly paradise. She knew by these alone that the end of the journey was in sight.

There was no slackening of speed. They raced on over deserted roads. Darkness met them and streamed behind. The moon was not yet risen. The starlight only remotely challenged the gloom. A drowsiness that was akin to stupor crept over Gabrielle. She was too tired to think any more, but real sleep was denied her. She ached from head to foot, and the motion of the car had become an active torment. Her whole being yearned for quiet and stillness, but instead of these she was obliged to endure the grinding of gears and a jolting progress which at times amounted to actual agony.

They had turned off the main road, but she was too spent to realize it. The car bumped in and out of holes and ruts, and every shock sent darts of pain all through her. She had reached a state in which physical misery had blotted out everything else.

When they stopped at last and Colonel Duquesne turned round to her, she was huddled in her corner and incapable of moving. He muttered to himself

and spoke to one of the men in front. They lifted her out between them and laid her upon a bank of grass. Her face gleamed white and void in the starlight.

They stood over her and talked for a space; but though she could hear them talking, the inertia of exhaustion held her as if she had been bound. Eventually they raised her, and Duquesne forced some brandy out of a flask between her lips. She choked over it and came to life. She had swallowed but a very little, but the choking brought the blood to her head, and she found strength to struggle to her feet.

But she was too weak and stiff to walk alone. They supported her on each side through an arched doorway and into a dim courtyard. A lamp shone out in front of them and towards this they led her.

She moved with dragging, tottering feet, asking no question, gazing straight at the light with eyes that scarcely saw.

A figure came suddenly and almost soundlessly to meet them. She heard a soft, suave voice address her.

“Welcome!” it said. “Welcome to the Château Perdu!”

And she turned her eyes with a painful effort to see Gaspare standing before her and smiling at her—smiling at her—with the face of a devil.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *The Spectre of the Château Perdu*

AFTER THAT MEETING with Gaspare there followed a blank space which left no impression whatever upon Gabrielle's mind. It was as if the powers of evil had swooped upon her and dragged her down into an outer darkness where she neither saw nor heard. She had no consciousness of anything that followed the moment of the encounter until she awoke from a deep sleep of utter exhaustion to find herself in a strange place.

It was a curious awakening, for it brought her straight to the surface of things so that she knew immediately what had happened to her and where she was. Her brain felt strangely light, but it was as clear as glass, and her first feeling was one of intense thankfulness that the rush and whirl of wheels had ceased.

She sat up and found that she had been lying upon a rough bed composed of a large sack filled with straw. She was in a cell-like apartment with a stone floor. There was a grating thickly covered with ivy close to the roof in the wall facing her, and it was through this alone that any light reached her. She could just make out the outline of a massive door about six feet away from her. It seemed to her that she was imprisoned in what must once have been a loose box.

By the dim light that filtered in, she judged that it must be early morning, but no sound reached her beyond a vague rustling of the ivy that curtained the grating. The awful weariness and sense of shock had gone from her, but she found it difficult to concentrate her attention upon any one thing. Though her memory was perfectly clear, the curious lightness in her brain persisted. She could not think with any depth of purpose.

She supposed she must have fainted and been left here to recover and so she must have drifted into sleep. Suddenly a shiver ran through her, and she realized that she was cold. Looking about her, she discovered a rug lying in a heap by her side and she pulled it over her. Then, looking a little further, she saw something white on the floor against the wall with a dark object upon it. It was within reach, and she felt out towards it and found a wooden case standing on a newspaper. It had a lid which yielded under her searching fingers and, opening it, she found that it contained a hunk of bread, very dry and crusty,

and a corked bottle.

A queer little thrill went through her. So she had not been left to starve! She realized abruptly that she was in need of food though she was not aware of hunger. She took the bread and began to eat. It was like sawdust, and she opened the bottle and drank from it. She expected water, but it contained a light wine which refreshed and steadied her in a fashion which she could scarcely have believed possible.

She did not finish either the bread or the wine, deeming it advisable to save enough for another meal later. She put the remainder carefully back into the box, and settled down again into her straw bed with the rug around her, feeling warmer and more capable of thought.

The light had increased a little, though it could never be anything but gloomy within those dark walls. She was thankful that the day lay before her, not realizing then that it was to be the longest she had ever known. The memory of Gaspare had begun to haunt her, though she tried to thrust it away. There had been such diabolical intention in his look. It had told her so clearly that there was some awful punishment in store. And it was like him to hold his hand until she should be in a fit state to suffer to the full. If he had acted last night she would scarcely have known what was happening. Her faint had postponed it, and she tried to encourage herself with the thought that the longer the postponement the greater was her chance of escape.

For had not Pierre told her that in a few days he would seize the château? And Pierre was a man of his word. He would come. She was certain that he would come. She prayed desperately that he might not come too late.

It was evident that Gaspare did not anticipate his coming. He did not know obviously that Pierre had discovered the whereabouts of their headquarters. The message she had been given to deliver could have contained no information in that respect, and she herself had never connected the Château Perdu with any of Gaspare's activities until Pierre himself had told her.

No, they must consider themselves safe for the moment, or they would not be lingering here. Pierre's coup would be sudden and unexpected. She alone knew of it, and from her lips no word should ever escape. She remembered how he had trusted her and she would be worthy of his trust, whatever happened. A vague fear crossed her mind that they might attempt to extract information from her, but she put it away into the farthest background. They would not—surely—credit her with knowing anything. It was only the failure to execute her mission for which she would be held responsible. For that some penalty would be exacted, perhaps only captivity. They would not dare to

injure her, so she sought to reassure her doubting heart. She was English. They would never venture to wreck vengeance upon an English victim. There was too much at stake. The publicity would be too great. And yet, though she tried to reassure herself thus, and though again and again through the dragging hours she prayed with an almost frantic intensity for deliverance, the torture of the long waiting told upon her, and still she doubted and feared.

The day spread itself into an eternity of suspense. The cold grew less as the sun rose to its height, but no sleep came to her, and no answer came to her prayers. The blank walls closed her in, and the silence was almost intolerable. There were times when she thought it would drive her mad. Her eyes ached for the daylight instead of that intolerable gloom. Her ears were perpetually strained for some sound, but she heard nothing but the whispering of the ivy at the high grating, and even that ceased in the noonday quiet. She had never before felt so cut off, so overwhelmingly alone. It was like being buried alive, and she would not finish her ration of bread and wine until sheer necessity should drive her to it. Perhaps they had all gone and left her to die in isolation! Perhaps no one would ever come near her again until she was dead!

There came at last a moment when inaction was no longer endurable. She had sat or lain huddled in her corner for a period that seemed like many days though no night had fallen. But she suddenly found that she could remain passive no longer. It was afternoon already, soon it would be night indeed, and utter darkness would descend upon her. She got up, trembling. Though reason told her that she would not be left to die in her prison, she felt beyond the power of reason. The solitude and the silence weighed so heavily upon her spirit that she felt as if something within her, something of vitality itself, was beginning to crumble under the strain. Nothing that she had borne so far was to be compared with this. Even the presence of an enemy would be preferable to this appalling loneliness—this terrifying quiet.

She crept to the door and felt it. There was no handle, no keyhole. She pressed against it. It yielded not the smallest fraction of an inch. Evidently it was bolted on the other side.

She had known that it would be so, and yet the discovery shook her. She was frightened in that instant as she had never been frightened before. Till then a certain calmness of self-possession had been hers. Now, quite suddenly, it forsook her.

A wild panic seized her—the panic of a child in a nightmare. She hammered wildly with her fists upon the massive wood.

“Let me out—let me out!” she cried, and again, as a fearful storm of

emotion swept through her, “Let me out! Oh, let me out! Do anything to me, but don’t—don’t keep me here!”

Her voice went into agonized sobbing, broken words of entreaty, piteous in their incoherence. She was certain that there was no one to hear her and yet she could not restrain herself. Her cruelly prolonged misery was bound to find a vent.

She expected no answer. She scarcely listened for one. And when abruptly there came the sound of a heavy bolt being withdrawn she drew back petrified with amazement, torn between fear and relief.

Slowly the door swung open. There was gloom beyond. But in the aperture she saw a figure, shapeless, somehow monstrous—a black, veiled thing, squat, ungainly, like a bear upraised on its hind legs.

She drew back from it in terror, while the memory surged through her of that dimly discerned object she had followed on that afternoon with Jacqueline that seemed so long ago—the spectre of the Château Perdu.

It stood motionless for a space, and Gabrielle was motionless too, caught in a kind of spell of horror. What was this thing—human—animal—devil? Whatever it was, she could not have passed it. It stood like an incarnation of evil, blocking the doorway.

And then suddenly a sound came from it, a sort of questioning grunt, and into Gabrielle’s half-paralysed mind there rushed another memory—Pierre’s explanation. The thing was human, and it had suffered torture. Whatever it once had been—man or woman, it was impossible to guess, nor was she ever to know—it had been rendered misshapen and monstrous by the wickedness of men.

Her horror gave way. She forced her fear into the background. The thing was human. It might have some understanding left. She conquered the instinctive abhorrence that gripped her, and she stretched out her clasped hands to the object in front of her.

“Oh, help me!” she said. “Help me! I’m sure you can.”

It moved in answer, and she saw that the head and shoulders were covered with a sack drawn firmly over. It bent itself, and she almost expected to see it go down on all fours and turn into an animal. Then it was upright again. It seemed to be looking at her.

Again she heard that peculiar, interrogating grunt.

“Can’t you help me?” she whispered.

It turned to the box which contained her provisions, stooped over it, grunted again; and she saw a hand, shrivelled, grey as a bird's claw, with only three fingers on it, open the lid and feel inside. The next moment it was holding out the half-empty bottle of wine to her, and it came to Gabrielle with such a throb of gratitude as she had never known before that the action was a kindly one.

She took the bottle while she continued to plead in broken, difficult French. "Sauvez-moi, je vous prie! Vous êtes mon ami. Sauvez-moi!"

The gaunt hand pointed at the bottle. No word was spoken, but there was insistence in the gesture. Gabrielle took out the cork and drank.

The wine restored her. Her courage returned, and something that was greater even than courage awoke within her. She did not finish the wine but held out the remainder to the silent creature before her.

"Vous aussi!" she said, and, though she stood in such sore need of a friend, it was not for her own sake that she did it. Her fear was merged into a deep compassion. The comradeship of suffering had somehow linked her to this unknown being.

Her offer was not accepted. There was a long pause during which eyes that she could not see looked deeply at her through the ragged sacking, but she was certain that there was no malevolence in the look. Finally there came another grunt, another clumsy obeisance, and then a shuffling, backward movement and the closing and bolting of the door.

She was alone again, but her anguish of solitude was past. She no longer felt forsaken. Whatever ordeal might lie before her, there was someone in that terrible place who did not regard her with hostility; there was someone at hand who would not let her cry for help pass unheeded.

And it came to her with an odd sense of conviction that this strange gaoler was to prove the answer to her prayer.



## CHAPTER IX

### *The Sentence*

SLOWLY THE DAY WANED. It had seemed unending, but now as it slid into evening Gabrielle began to dread its going. Though she struggled to fight down her fear, she was certain that something would happen to her that night. She had dreaded the darkness, but just as it was about to fall, the door was opened again and a dimly burning lantern was thrust inside. She called her thanks softly but she was not sure that she was heard.

The last of the daylight faded, and she was left to watch the faint ring of light that was cast upon the floor by the illumination and to listen with shrinking nerves to a new sound—the occasional scuffling of rats about the walls.

There was an iron drain in the middle of the stone floor, and she watched this also in a quiver of apprehension, but though many times she almost deceived herself into seeing a stealthy grey form squeezing upwards through it, nothing actually materialized. With a great effort at common sense she ate what was left of the bread and finished the bottle of wine, after which she felt a little braver. She even, as time passed, began to doze, and finally sank into a light slumber, propped against the wall with the rug wrapped around her.

It was thus that presently a dream came to her. She thought that she was wandering in the garden of the Villa des Sirènes among its myriads of flowers. She was quite alone, and the loneliness pressed upon her. She tried to find her way round to the tool shed where it seemed possible that Pierre might be awaiting her. But at every turn the path wound in another direction and for some reason she was forced to follow it. Downwards it led her and ever downwards until she came to the steps that led to the jutting corner of cliff above the whirlpool—the cut-off, sheltered spot where first Peter had kissed her. And then, as she stood hesitating at the top, she heard a whistling, faint and distant, and she started forward listening. Was it the “Marseillaise”? Was it Pierre who awaited her down in that rocky corner above the sapphire sea? And then, while her whole heart strained with eagerness, she caught the tune, clear as a pipe though very far away: “D’Ye Ken John Peel with His Coat So Gay?” And with a sob she awoke.

But the impression made upon her was so strong that she sat up motionless,

listening intently, convinced that it had not been wholly a dream.

An instant later she heard sounds outside the door, the tread of feet, the withdrawing of the bolt, and in that instant she knew that the dreaded hour had come.

She started to her feet as the door opened and an electric torch shone in upon her, dazzling her. She put her hand instinctively over her eyes for a second, then she heard a soft, derisive laugh and looked up.

Gaspare was standing there, surveying her mockingly while he flashed the torch over her to and fro, taking in every detail of her dishevelled appearance.

“Still alive!” he commented. “But a little the worse for wear! Bueno, signorina, you will now come with me and tell us all your secrets. You have had a pleasant day, I hope?”

She did not answer him. Her look had gone beyond him to where in the background stood the sackcloth-covered figure of her gaoler.

Gaspare swung on his heel, following her look. “Ah yes,” he said. “Your smart attendant shall come with us. I like my prisoners under guard.”

He flung a brief order in French to the silent creature, who moved forthwith to Gabrielle’s side, and, as Gaspare strode out, poked her with a finger to indicate that they were to follow.

They passed into the stone passage lit by a flickering lamp on a bracket, and as she moved forward through the vaultlike corridor Gabrielle realized that she had been there before. It was here that Jacqueline had brought her to show her the closed door behind which were the instruments of torture. Glancing behind her she saw that door and suppressed a shiver.

Gaspare marched on, and she and her companion followed, the latter moving with a shuffling gait as if rapid progress were difficult to achieve. They passed the door that led into the old courtyard. It was closed. Their feet sent strange echoes along the grim stone walls. Gaspare’s torch was now the only light.

They came to a sudden flight of steps leading upwards into a hole in the roof that looked like a loft, but when they reached the top there was another door which Gaspare pulled open, and they came suddenly into a large, raftered room without windows which might once have been a granary.

There were lamps as well as candles burning here, and the place was comparatively well lighted. A buzz of talk reached Gabrielle, and she realized that several people were assembled around a rough table. They were seated on

benches, and as she entered a silence fell, broken almost immediately by a cackle of laughter.

“Ha ha ha!” cried Jacqueline. “La petite Anglaise, si belle, si gentille! Maintenant nous verrons!”

And she got up from the end of a bench, tossed back her green cloak and struck Gabrielle a stinging slap on the cheek as she paused.

“Little traitress!” she said between her smiling teeth. “You shall suffer—how you shall suffer—for what you have done!”

Gaspare turned with humorous reproof. “Jacqueline, patience—patience! Your turn will come.”

She flung round to him. “Ah, you promise me!” she said.

He laughed. “It is always my method. When a woman deserves punishment, I give her to another woman. Men are too tender.”

Gabrielle stood by the closed door with her guard. She was white save for the blazing streak across her cheek. The blow had taken her completely unawares, but she was determined that she would not endure a second.

But Jacqueline sat down again with no further show of violence, and, looking beyond her, Gabrielle saw Prince Bruno, Colonel Duquesne and Cesari, with five or six other men whom she did not know. Duquesne’s two companions who had helped in her capture sat apart on the other side of the table, with an air of awaiting instructions.

It was to be a trial then, and Gaspare was the judge. He seated himself at the end of the table facing her, the evil smile still on his face, and almost immediately he began to speak.

“And now, signorina,” he said, “we will have an exact account, if you please, of your meeting with Pierre Ronceau, and all that happened afterwards.”

Pierre Ronceau! The name sent a throb of emotion through her. Her eyes went to Duquesne, but his face remained perfectly impassive. But Cesari, beyond her, was gazing at her fierily, and she swiftly avoided his look. She had never until that moment thought of him as formidable, but now he seemed to her more menacing than even Gaspare himself.

She collected herself before she spoke, for though she was quivering inwardly with an almost overwhelming agitation she felt that, whatever happened, they must not know it.

At length, with a desperate quietness, she made reply. "There is really nothing to tell you. Colonel Duquesne brought me here, and I presume he knows everything."

Gaspare made a sweeping movement with his hand as though her words were wholly inadequate. "Shall we suppose for a moment that Colonel Duquesne knows nothing?" he suggested smoothly. "For how long have you known Pierre Ronceau?"

She hesitated. To her own soul it was as if she had known him for a lifetime, yet she saw clearly that to acknowledge any previous acquaintance with Pierre would not be in his interest.

She answered after a moment. "I met him on the train."

"For the first time?" asked Gaspare.

She was silent.

He leaned slightly forward. "Signorina," he said, "I gave into your keeping a document to be delivered to Colonel Duquesne. You did not deliver it. Is it still in your keeping?"

"No," she said.

He continued to smile at her. "You gave it to Pierre Ronceau?"

"No," she said again.

"Can you tell me where it is?" he asked.

"No." She spoke the monosyllable almost in a whisper. That terrible smile and Cesari's devouring eyes in the background were sapping her courage.

"Ah!" said Gaspare. "You had it. You did not give it to Pierre Ronceau. You cannot tell me where it is. I think, signorina, you will either tell me at once what has become of it, or—you will be stripped and searched."

She gripped her hands together. The brutal words uttered so suavely made her think of the coiling of a serpent gradually winding itself about her.

"I have not got it," she said. "And—it is true that I do not know where it is."

"Yet—you know what became of it," said Gaspare.

He made a sign to the two men on his left, and they got up and came towards her. In their faces she saw a sickening relish, and she heard Jacqueline utter a raucous laugh that was like the cry of a questing animal.

Gaspare remained immovable, his smile fixed. "You are not wise to defy me, signorina," he remarked. "This is not a school for morals, and you are placing yourself in great danger."

Gabrielle leaned against the door sick with horror. The two men were close to her. They were like beasts of prey, and their ravening eyes burned into her brain. Suddenly they seized her, dragged her forward. Their hands began to tear at her. She struggled wildly and fruitlessly while they flung her this way and that, dragging from her first her coat, then her dress, which rent into rags in the violence of their onslaught. Finally, agonized and powerless, she shrieked and shrieked again for mercy.

Through the turmoil she heard Gaspare's voice, sharp and authoritative, and immediately there came a lull. She found herself held up on each side by her tormentors, clad only in the torn remnants of her underclothing and facing the gloating eyes of all the men seated at the table. She was gasping, nearly fainting, wholly exhausted.

"And now, signorina," said Gaspare, "you would like to tell me how you parted with that packet with which I entrusted you."

Words babbled to her lips, but she could not utter them, so terrible was her distress. She would have fallen to her knees but for the fierce grip in which she was held. She could only sob with broken sounds that had no meaning.

"You would like to tell me," Gaspare said again very deliberately. "I am sure you would like to tell me. I will give you a few seconds in which to be wise."

The seconds passed. He raised his hand; and breathlessly, in quivering response, she managed to speak.

"It—was taken from me—while I—was asleep."

"You were sleeping with Pierre Ronceau?" questioned Gaspare.

She was aware of Cesari's glowering face thrust forward with a menace that was like a stab. "No," she whispered. "No."

"I think—yes," said Gaspare. "Not that night only, but the night after, and the night after that. Ah, signorina, we are all human, after all. And he took it from you while you slept and gave you his protection—in exchange. Bueno!" He threw a sideways glance around. "We will find another companion for you tonight. You shall not sleep alone again. No, Jacqueline," he smiled towards her, "I have not forgotten you. You shall have your turn first. But I have not quite finished with the signorina. He took the packet, you say. And what was

the result? Was he able to decipher it?"

"I never knew——" moaned Gabrielle. "I never heard—what was in it."

"Ah! Perhaps he did not trust you," commented Gaspare. "A man of sagacity would not discuss official secrets with a girl who had already shown herself to be untrustworthy. It may interest you to know that that packet was chiefly a test of your integrity—a test which you failed to pass. It contained nothing in itself of vital importance—nothing which could bring him to this place. You are beyond all deliverance, signorina, and you will not leave it as you entered it. You have shown yourself to be untrustworthy, and as such you will be treated. I have no mercy upon those who are false to me. I respected you once, but your pride will no longer serve you. By this time tomorrow it will be trampled out of existence, and you will never want to see your Pierre Ronceau again—neither will he want to see you. Jacqueline, you may take her now. You know how to punish."

Jacqueline sprang to her feet with glittering eyes. "Ah, oui! I punish well—but very well!" she said. "Venez avec moi, petit agneau! Et vous aussi, Bossu!"

She addressed the humped, sack-clad figure by the door in a burst of rapid French while Gaspare gave an order to the two men who still held Gabrielle.

They released her and drew sullenly away. She staggered a little as the bruising fingers relaxed their hold, but in an instant Jacqueline had pounced upon her. She clutched her by the shoulder.

"Pick up your clothes, shameless," she commanded, "and come with me!"

Gabrielle groped and found her coat. She tried to put it on, but Jacqueline prevented her.

"Non, non! You may bring it with you, but you will not need it again tonight. In the morning, perhaps—to cover your shame!"

She propelled the shrinking girl to the door with the words, and from behind them came Gaspare's soft, secret laugh.

"Sapristi! Jacqueline—the avenger!" he said. "I commend you to her care—carissima. The sentence is well deserved."

## CHAPTER X

### *The Escape*

JACQUELINE'S grip was merciless. Her long nails bit into Gabrielle's flesh. She drew her breath ghoulishly between her teeth as one in pleasurable anticipation of a banquet.

She talked to herself in a lurid, incomprehensible flow as they went back through the dim passages to the vaultlike chamber in which Gabrielle had been imprisoned; and here she suddenly flung the girl down upon the straw mattress with the violence of a madwoman.

"Ah, canaille!" she cried, and kicked her before she could rise. "At last—I punish you!"

Gabrielle was almost stunned by the brutal attack but she struggled up in desperate self-defence.

She was small but she was very lissom. As Jacqueline tried to seize her, she sprang aside and eluded her.

Jacqueline swung round to the door with an infuriated gesture and went outside; but only for a few moments. Very soon she reappeared, looking somehow gigantic in the vague light of the lantern, and in her right hand she carried an old carriage whip.

"Now," she said, "I will cut the rest of your clothes away from you."

The lash curled out like a snake. Gabrielle leapt away, but it caught her. In that confined space there was no escape. It stung her unprotected shoulders, and her involuntary cry mingled with Jacqueline's laugh of triumph.

"This is the game of a child," she gibed. "I will show you something more funny very soon."

She struck again with shrewd dexterity, and Gabrielle smothered another cry.

"That stings, yes?" said Jacqueline. "Wait! It will burn soon."

Her wolf-eyes shone red in the dimness as she stood, crouching forward a little, the whip poised to strike. But it did not fall a third time, for a sudden awful convulsion went through Gabrielle. Her two hands clutched wildly

backwards at her bare shoulders as she staggered against the wall.

“I’m on fire!” she cried. “I’m on fire!”

Jacqueline slowly straightened herself. “Yes. You are on fire,” she said. “It is acid, mon enfant. Be thankful that I am content only to lash you with it tonight! You have had enough—already? Then I will send for Cesari. Where is that bossu?”

Gabrielle, writhing in an agony that was like a fierce flame licking her flesh, heard nothing but the last word and seized upon it frantically. She was almost beside herself with pain.

“Bossu—Bossu——” she wailed, “sauvez-moi! Bossu, sauvez-moi!”

She did not expect deliverance. She did not look for it, but at her cry the door opened behind Jacqueline and the sack-covered creature stood in an arc of lamplight.

Jacqueline turned to it with a burst of rapid instructions, but it did not stir. Gabrielle had dropped moaning on to the straw mattress and was rocking herself to and fro while those terrible stripes seemed to burn deeper and deeper into her flesh.

Jacqueline flung back upon her in a fury of contempt. “Two little lashes and you are beaten! If it were not that Cesari desires you, I would have poured it over you. But that would be too quick. And Gaspere wills that you shall be punished slowly—slowly. Enfin, Cesari shall have you—until tomorrow. Why do you stand there, bête? Have I not told you to——”

Gabrielle raised her head. She saw the waiting figure. “Sauvez-moi!” she said again entreatingly.

It made a movement towards her, but like a leaping wolf Jacqueline intervened. “Ah!” she cried. “So you think your spectre will help you! I will show you then what manner of beast it is of whom you ask help. You have felt the acid on a whiplash only. Now you shall see for yourself what the acid can really do!”

And swiftly she seized the sack that covered the shapeless head and shoulders and tugged at it ruthlessly. There was a struggle, a deep-throated sound that was like the snarl of an enraged animal, and then she rent the sack away.

Gabrielle saw a skull—grey, featureless, fleshless, sunken, as it were, into a cleft between two shoulder blades. Only, out of that appalling mask two eyes looked forth, like bits of quartz glinting in rock. She was shocked beyond



measure, so shocked that in the awful revelation her own pain faded into the background.

Jacqueline uttered a hideous laugh. “You see?” she said. “This is the face of a traitor. And yours will be like this one day—one day—when your punishment is complete. But tonight——”

She got no further, for in that instant the skull was turned towards her. There was a rapid movement, so swift that Gabrielle scarcely comprehended it, a shriek that was immediately smothered in folds of sacking, a headlong fall.

Jacqueline’s body fell across the lantern with a sickening thud, and then, before thought could reassert itself, Gabrielle herself was snatched up, muffled in her own coat, and dragged out of the darkness.

They were in the lamp-lit corridor, she and the awful thing with the naked skull that only released her in order to bang and bolt the door through which they had just passed, then snatched her again and pulled her unresisting along the winding passage until at length they reached the flight of stone steps leading downwards to another door which she remembered vaguely to have seen once before.

She was too bewildered for speech or thought. One thing only, besides physical pain, stood out in her consciousness, and that was that the creature at her side was helping her. She had no doubt of that.

At the bottom of the steps they paused, and then there came the grating of a key in a lock and the door swung inwards. They entered under the low archway and the door was instantly closed again.

But they were not in darkness, for her guide switched an electric torch into the shadows. And she saw an amazing thing. The place was full of shelves and wooden cases, and everywhere were firearms—rifles, machine guns, and smooth, sinister objects stacked in order on the shelves—bombs.

Not a word was spoken. It seemed that the creature beside her was incapable of speech. But it rushed her forward down a long lane between the stacked shelves at breathless speed. She stumbled in a mass of straw but found herself held up and supported. She recovered, and they tore on.

The place was a labyrinth of passages, but there was not an instant’s hesitation. It was evident that her guide knew it all by heart. It seemed an endless journey through those packed cellars of the Château Perdu—a nightmare journey, astounding, horrible.

Straw seemed to catch at her feet in all directions, but it was not allowed to

impede her progress. She felt almost demented with the struggle and rapidity of her flight.

Then suddenly a blank wall rose up before them. They stopped. She found her coat flung over her burning shoulders, and she grabbed and held it. For a few seconds she stood gasping. Then, recovering, as it were, a portion of her conscious self, she looked round. The thing that had brought her hither was dragging at something. She saw the torch moving to and fro. And then, as she leaned against that blank wall for support, she realized that one of those ghastly grey claws was pulling a petrol can from some hiding place almost at her feet.

Horror seized her—a wild pulsing terror. Some telepathy flashed to her brain. Petrol—straw—bombs!

“Let me out—let me out!” she cried.

It turned towards her—that awful, unveiled death mask. It stooped, pushing her aside. And there before her the unbelievable happened. The wall moved. She beheld a slit of darkness that widened to a gap.

For the first time the nameless thing spoke—one single word repeated over and over—urgent, metallic, like the clanking of a chain.

“Allez—allez—allez—allez!”

Instinct caught her, galvanized her as with an electric current. She leapt for that widening gap and in a second she was in the open air.

For a moment she was stunned. Her instinct was to flee, but the sudden liberty paralysed her. She stood, looking back. And she saw the gap narrow again, become a slit, a crack, finally close. Her last glimpse was of that demonlike figure stooped over the petrol can, working with its shrivelled fingers at the stopper.

Then all was gone from her sight. Panic snatched at her again. She knew that destruction was close at hand, and with a sob she fled—stumbled against a flight of steps—scrambled up them like one possessed—felt grass under her feet—saw a glimmer of starlight, a darkness of trees—and rushed for cover like a small, stampeding animal.

There was no stealth in her flight. Blind expediency drove her. She plunged into woods, running madly, with neither thought nor pause, just fleeing—fleeing—fleeing through the night, unaware of direction, unaware of anything beyond the one gigantic need of escape.

And so the woods received her, and she ran on and on with that

superstrength which comes only in the hour of frightful stress, till even that began at last to fail her, and she was forced by her choking breath to slacken and pause.

Then it was that the most amazing thing of all happened. Weak with that agonized exertion, broken, with despair sweeping upon her, she fell against a tree trunk. But as she collapsed in the gloom she heard a sound as of someone running close to her, a figure started out from the undergrowth, two hands clasped her. There came a voice she knew, and she thought it must be a dream.

“Tenez! Tenez!” it said. “C’est Gabrielle!”

She was almost speechless but she turned and weakly clung. Her shaking lips articulated a name: “Pierre!”

He held her to him. She felt the warmth of his body, and it went straight to her heart. She awoke from her dream.

“I have you—I have you, chérie,” he whispered. “You are safe.”

She began to sob, but stopped herself and forced out gasping words. “Go back—go back! The château’s on fire! It’s going to blow up. They’ll all be killed. It’s coming now—now—now!”

Her voice rose to a scream that was lost in a sudden mighty thunder that shook the very ground under their feet. There came a frightful glare piercing the wood so that every leaf was visible. The whole world seemed riven with that awful pandemonium of sound, and for one terrific second she saw Pierre’s face as if it had been carved against a background of flame.

Then darkness fell upon her. She knew that she was forced downwards into the soft earth, and she knew that Pierre was still holding her, heard him whisper, “Mignonne!” before all knowledge slipped away from her and she lay as one dead.

## CHAPTER XI

### *Only Peter*

WHEN GABRIELLE opened her eyes again she was in a car, and for a time it seemed to her that the long, long journey of a previous existence had been resumed in another world.

But when she tried to move, she was aware of pain, and memory came crowding back upon her—memory that called to her like a wandering voice.

She drew a quivering breath and spoke. “Where is Pierre?”

Instantly a hand clasped hers—a big, protecting hand; but it was not the hand of Pierre.

“It’s all right, darling,” a voice said. “You know me, don’t you? It’s only Peter. I’m taking you to your mother.”

“Oh, Peter!” she said, and lay still for a space, wondering.

The car was running smoothly through stretches of moonlight. She saw glimpses through the window of a clear, unruffled sea.

Presently, “Where is Pierre?” she said again.

He answered her, she thought, with a touch of restraint. “Pierre is quite safe. No one was hurt outside the château.”

“You are sure?” she said.

“I am quite sure,” said Peter briefly.

She shifted her position with a sigh that turned into a low moan of pain.

Instantly he was bending over her. “You are hurt, darling. What have the devils done to you? Tell me!”

She put up a weak hand as if to keep him from her. “Only—my shoulders,” she said. “It was some—acid. They’re blistered.”

She heard him swear a deep inarticulate oath. “Well, they’re all dead, anyway,” he said a moment later. “The whole place went up in smoke. And a damn’ good job too!”

“All—dead!” she echoed. “But—you’re sure—Pierre—is safe?”

“Of course he’s safe!” Peter said. “He put you in my charge. Don’t worry, little sweetheart! I’ll see to everything. We shall soon be there, and I’ll get a nurse down from the convent. You’ll feel better very soon.”

Her hand fell. She closed her eyes and tears she could not check welled through them. “I want—Pierre,” she whispered to herself.

They swept on through the moonlit night. The sudden cessation of all strain was having its inevitable effect upon her. She wept silently.

Peter still held her hand but he did not talk to her. He sat square and motionless with eyes sternly fixed upon the back of the gendarme who was driving them. If he were aware of her tears he made no sign.

They came at last upon the silent front of Ste Marguérite where the sea softly lapped the shore. The Point des Sirènes rose ahead of them—a black mass against the western sky.

Another short interval and they were mounting the narrow, tree-shadowed road behind the villa. They reached the gate. It was guarded by gendarmes. Peter leaned from the car and showed a paper. The gate swung open. They drove up to the dark portico.

Two men in uniform were here also. Peter opened the door of the car and got out. Gabrielle sat without moving.

He came round to her side, opened the door, took her with the utmost gentleness into his arms.

“Oh, Peter!” she said, half-startled.

“It’s all right,” he answered, and his voice was deep and very steady—a voice she did not know. “I’m doing everything. Just—lean on me!”

He carried her into the villa and up the stairs.

“I won’t take you to your mother yet,” he said. “Which is your room?”

“The end of the passage,” she whispered faintly.

He bore her thither with his quiet, unfaltering stride. He pushed open the door and switched on the light. She saw his face set in stern lines as she had never before seen it.

“Peter,” she murmured, “you’re not—angry?”

His look softened on the instant. “With you, my precious? Never!” he said.

He carried her to the bed and laid her tenderly down, drawing a covering over her.

A twinge of pain drew her face and he stayed his hand. "Let me see your shoulders, darling!" he said.

She looked up at him. There was something about him—a sort of hush—that was completely at variance with the impetuous Peter she had known of old.

"Never mind!" she said. "Peter—my mother—is she—is she——?"

"I think she is in much the same state," he said. "I will find out for you in a moment. But let me see first how badly you are hurt—please, dear!"

He helped her with that new infinite gentleness of his to raise herself, and she heard the quick intake of his breath at what he saw. "How was this done?" he said.

"It was a whiplash dipped in some acid," she told him. "It only caught me twice. It'll be better soon."

"Lie down again!" he said. "And don't worry about your mother! I will see to everything and I won't keep anything from you. Was this all that was done to you? Or was there—anything worse?"

"No," she said, shuddering a little. "They hadn't time for more."

She heard him breathe again—a deep, hard sigh of relief. "Lie quite still!" he said. "I'll come back in a few minutes. But this must be attended to properly. I must get hold of someone. You'll be all right?"

"Oh yes, thank you, Peter," she said. "I shall be all right."

He went away so quietly that she scarcely heard his footfall. She was worn out mentally and physically, and it was only the throbbing pain of her shoulders that kept her from sinking back into a stupor of exhaustion.

She pondered fitfully upon Peter. She had never thought of him as a responsible, authoritative person before. Had her faculties been more alert she would have contemplated him with amazement.

He came back to her presently with a cup of milk and some cushions to ease her position.

"I think your mother is asleep," he said. "She has probably heard nothing. The old woman is in the room with her. Can you manage to drink this? And then I won't worry you any more till the doctor comes."

He stooped again to help her, and she saw a deep compassion in his eyes.

"You're—very good to me, Peter," she said.

“Good!” said Peter, but he stopped on that one word abruptly; it was like the shutting of a lid. A moment later: “Don’t move more than you need!” he said. “I’ll do it all. I know it hurts infernally.”

She gave herself into his hands with a confidence which awoke a vague wonder in her own mind. His unswerving solidity was a wonderful support.

She drank the milk slowly while he held her. “It’s doing me good,” she said, with a pathetic attempt to smile. “Thank you for being so understanding. It’s—a big help.”

“You poor little soul!” he said, and gave her a rather crumpled smile in answer. “Now let me settle you as best I can! And shall I stay—or wait outside?”

“I’d like you to stay,” she said.

And so when he had eased her into as comfortable a position as he could achieve—and there was no clumsiness in his ministrations—he sat down beside the bed and held her hand quietly and comfortingly in silence.

To Gabrielle, in spite of her suffering, that interval of waiting gradually imparted a certain sense of comfort and peace. The large stolidness of Peter had an element about it that was rather sublime. There was no longer anything embarrassing in his devotion. It surrounded her like a great rampart but it constricted her not at all.

She did not know how the time passed. It seemed neither long nor short. Peter’s presence held her in a sort of vacuum that nothing could disturb. Even thought itself was suspended, until presently there came a slight stir in the villa, the sound of voices and approaching feet.

Peter looked at her, softly relinquished her hand and got up. “That’ll be the doctor,” he said, and went to the door.

There followed a brief colloquy, and then he brought a stranger to her bedside—a white-bearded man with rough white brows and kindly eyes.

“Dr Lefèvre!” said Peter.

She tried to raise herself, but was instantly checked. The doctor spoke no English, but he made her understand that exertion was needless. He carried out his own arrangements without any help from her, examined her burns, dressed them rapidly with a feathery lightness that gave her most blessed relief, bathed her face and hands, and finally presented her with a draught which she accepted gratefully though she felt that the easing of the pain would have brought her sleep of itself without it.

She sank down on the pillows when it was over. She had never needed rest so much before. But before she floated away into the welcome oblivion that awaited her, she was aware of Peter once more bending over her, and in his eyes she saw the reflection of the pain that she had endured.

She smiled at him lazily. “Much better now,” she murmured. “Good night, Peter!”

He did not kiss her, and she wondered a little at the omission. “Good night, Gabrielle!” he said in his steadfast voice. “Sleep well, and—I’m here if you want me. Don’t forget!”

She was too tired to say anything further, but she understood his words. She was still smiling at him as her eyelids closed.



## CHAPTER XII

### *The Awakening*

WHEN GABRIELLE'S EYES opened again it was late afternoon. She came to herself slowly as one returning from a long journey. But when at length she would have raised herself someone stopped her.

"Lie still, my darling!" a low voice said, and turning her head languidly she saw her mother.

She was seated in a low chair by the bedside, and it was to Gabrielle as though a spirit had come to her from a world beyond.

"Is it—really you?" she said.

"Yes, really me, my Gabrielle." There was such a wealth of love in the answer that it seemed to flow over her in a warm flood. "Keep quite still! There is a nurse here to do everything for you. And I am here too. They couldn't keep me away."

Someone—a white-robed nun—held a feeding cup to Gabrielle's lips. She drank obediently, and the realities of life came back to her.

She looked at her mother's fine-drawn face in which the eyes shone like mystic fires. "Ought you to be here?" she asked doubtfully. "Isn't it bad for you?"

"It is the only place in the world for me," her mother answered tenderly.

"Then you know—everything?" Gabrielle said.

"Everything, darling. It was kept from me until today—perhaps mercifully." The beautiful voice quivered a little. "I hoped with all my soul you had gone back to England—you and Peter. I had no idea of all you were going through. But now I have you safe, and in a little while you will be well. That is all that matters—all that is left to matter."

"All that matters!" Gabrielle echoed the words with a slight contraction of the brows. "Where is Peter?" she asked.

"He is close by. You shall see him very soon," her mother said. "Let the nurse attend to you first, darling, and we want you to keep very quiet."

Gabrielle submitted, but the faint cloud remained. It was only her mother's presence that kept her docile. The nun's quiet movements failed to soothe her.

"I could get up and dress," she said restlessly.

Her mother shook her head. "You would be in great pain if you did. No, darling, be patient for a little while! Peter shall come to you the moment you are ready."

"It is nice to wash again," Gabrielle said. "Oh, that filthy, dreadful place! Mother, did you know of the Château Perdu?"

Her mother sighed. "I knew a great many things that I can't talk to you about, my child. Try to forget it! It is better to forget."

There was a note of pain in her words, quiet as they were, and Gabrielle was silent. It was as if she had come suddenly upon a closed door. She watched her mother uneasily. She still had the feeling that it was a spirit and no being of flesh and blood that was sitting by her side. When she had seen her last she had looked desperately ill, but that had passed. She now looked in some strange fashion etherealized. Her face held not death, but the clear flame of an unearthly life.

"Mother," she said at last, "what has happened to you since I went away?"

Her mother smiled, but it was the smile of an angel. "I have been dead and am alive again," she said. "God is very merciful, Gabrielle, even to those who are yet a great way off."

Gabrielle was awed. It dawned upon her then, as if a voice had spoken in her heart, that the frail mortal shell would very soon be gone from her sight, but it would not be death but life that would bring it to pass.

Her own unrest was stilled. It was as if a veil had been lifted, and her soul had caught a glimpse of an infinite Beyond. She knew that those gently uttered words would live in her memory perpetually.

She spoke after a few moments almost in a whisper. "Mother, He has been very merciful to me too."

And her mother leaned slowly forward and kissed her, murmuring a blessing. Afterwards she rose and went softly, glidingly, from the room.

Gabrielle was alone when Peter came to her. He entered with that quiet tread of his and the same air of deliberate restraint that she had observed before. But the sight of him renewed her earlier anxiety. She felt as if he were keeping something back.

“Peter, I’m really quite well,” she told him earnestly. “You can see for yourself. Please—please tell me the truth! Is Pierre safe?”

He bent and laid his hand over hers. “He is quite safe,” he said. “I’m being perfectly straight. He is frightfully busy, that’s all. He’ll come and see you by-and-by, to take your evidence before he makes his full report. Meantime—are you feeling all right, dear?”

Her face had a sort of frozen whiteness, but she smiled straight up at him. “Yes, Peter, quite. Have you seen him today?”

“No, only talked on the phone.” Peter’s voice was gruff. “He asked after you—very particularly, and was very glad to get a good report. He is down at Pontaumer, you know.”

“I see,” she said. “And—are there no prisoners at all?”

Peter hesitated a moment. “Not from the château,” he said. “Everything went up. That’s a mystery so far. How did you know about it? And how did you get away?”

She also hesitated. “Can’t I tell Pierre all that myself?” she asked in a low voice.

His hand released hers. “Of course you can, dear! I was only curious. You came right out of the thick of it, and we didn’t even know for certain that you were there.”

“Did Pierre think I ran away from him in Paris on purpose?” she asked quickly.

“No, no, of course he didn’t! He guessed someone had seized you. And he jumped to the conclusion—which is a game he’s pretty good at—that you would be brought to the south. He was mad with anxiety. So was I when I heard,” threw in Peter. “He got his men together and they came by air. I joined up with them. You didn’t hear me whistling ‘John Peel’ in the woods after dark?”

She started a little. “Yes, I did—I did! I thought at first it was——” She stopped.

“No, it was only me,” said Peter. “Pierre only knows the ‘Marseillaise.’ ”

“I see,” she said. And then, recalling herself, “Sit down, Peter! I’ll tell you everything.”

“Not if it tires you,” he said.

She smiled rather superficially. “No, I’d like to. You were so very decent

to me last night. I don't know where I'd have been without you."

Peter sat down. "You see," he said, "Pierre was obliged to leave you to me. He had his job to attend to, and it was a pretty big one. They had to throw a cordon all round the place to make sure no one got away."

"And no one did?" she said. "Gaspare—Cesari—Jacqueline——" she shuddered uncontrollably.

"Not one of them," said Peter. "The château must have been a regular arsenal. It's gone now—and all of them with it. Who fired it? Not you?"

"Oh no! Not me!" she said. "I'll tell you all about it. I only escaped just in time, and I never thought you were outside. Oh, Peter, it was pretty ghastly."

"Don't talk about it if you'd rather not!" he said.

But she smiled again. "Yes, I want to tell you, and you've a right to know. I think it'll take off some of the horror to talk about it. I'm really quite myself again, you know."

"You're the most wonderful person I ever met," said Peter with blunt sincerity. "And I'd like you to know just this. I'd do anything on earth for you, whatever it might cost."

"That's like you," she answered with some sadness. "You always were much too decent. It's no good trying to thank anyone like you. One might as well thank the sun for being warm."

"That's all rats," protested Peter, flushing deeply, but she passed the protest by.

"I can't tell you how I feel about it. It's no use saying things that only sound stupid. I'll tell you all about everything instead."

And so she told him the whole story, told him of her journey to Paris, of the coming of Pierre, of her subsequent capture and all that had followed it, while he sat and listened, gravely attentive, asking no questions, making no comments. She touched but lightly upon her sojourn in Paris. "I expect you know all about that," she said, and he did not contradict her or ask for any details.

She ended finally with the account of her wild rush for freedom. "I had no idea where I was going. It was just to get away from that awful place. And then—and then—I'd come to the end of my tether. I was finished. And I found—Pierre."

Her voice sank on the name. Peter shifted his position slightly, moving his

chair with its back to the light.

“Yes, Pierre had all the luck,” he said, and his tone had a hint of irony that was unfamiliar. “Well, he deserves all he can get and always will. I think you’d better rest now, don’t you? I can see that nun hovering about in the passage. I’m sure she’s yearning to turn me out neck and crop. It’s crossing the Rubicon to have me in your room at all.”

Gabrielle managed a faint laugh. “I know. But you’ll come again, won’t you? Perhaps tonight? Tomorrow, anyway!”

“Certainly tomorrow,” said Peter, adding rather naïvely as he rose, “I’ve nothing else to do, and if I mayn’t do that much, I might just as well go and drown myself with the sirens.”

“Oh, don’t do that!” she said. “Promise you won’t do that!”

His laugh joined hers, but it had a hollow sound. “No,” he said. “I’m standing by, darling, anyway till Pierre turns up. After that,” he got up and lightly touched her hand, “well, after that, it’ll soon be the hunting season, you know. I never miss that.”

She looked up at him wistfully. There was something about Peter that she could not understand. He seemed to have grown much older, to have left his impetuous boyhood far behind. It hurt her vaguely, even while it reassured her. The Peter of today was no longer headlong. He would never again try to take her by storm.

She watched him go in silence. She felt that she herself was changed, was a girl no longer. She had been hurled forward into a new life, and the happy in consequence of youth was gone. Nothing would ever give it back to her. Her spirit like her body was scarred. She too would never be the same again.

But the difference in Peter stirred her in a fashion more deeply. It made her want to weep. If she had only been able to love him, perhaps it would never have happened—perhaps he would never have grown up!

## CHAPTER XIII

### *The Prisoner*

GABRIELLE DID NOT SEE her mother again that day though her convent nurse assured her that all was well. She slept uneasily through the ensuing night, though it was not pain that kept her restless. She heard movements in the villa, men's voices, and footsteps that came and went. Long before the dawn she told herself that she could endure inaction no longer.

She lay watching for the sunrise, and when it came at last she got up. Her shoulders were swathed in bandages and movement was difficult, but the feeling of exhaustion had gone. She wrapped herself in a dressing gown and sat down by the window.

When the nun entered gently with an early cup of tea, she showed her a face of such smiling resolution that protest was obviously useless. She was quite willing to submit to the necessary treatment, but she was firmly determined to dress afterwards.

The nun was shocked at her waywardness but later she succumbed to the inevitable and helped her into such clothes as she could most easily wear. A blue linen coat completed her toilet and covered all deficiencies, so that there was nothing to outrage the good woman's sense of propriety, a fact which helped very materially to reconcile her to the English girl's stubbornness. And Gabrielle, shaky but triumphant, realized that she had gained her freedom.

She had her petit déjeuner sitting by the open window. It was a brilliant day, and she felt her strength returning with the scented air that wafted in upon her. She could hear the distant washing of the sea, and she wondered if Peter had gone to bathe. Already she had begun to achieve a more cheerful outlook, and she was ashamed of the depression that had so nearly overwhelmed her the night before. It was wonderful what a difference a little effort made.

When she had finished, she smiled again at her nurse and rose. "Je vais maintenant à ma mère," she said.

The nun did not oppose her. Gabrielle's determination was of too convincing a character. She merely uttered a few uneasy injunctions which Gabrielle did not understand. It was impossible to restrain such a patient, neither could she hold herself responsible for her, but she strongly

disapproved.

Gabrielle went to the door and opened it. Again she heard the sound of footsteps and of men talking. They seemed to be at the end of the corridor near the top of the stairs. She passed her mother's door and quietly turned the corner to investigate.

Two gendarmes were standing murmuring together in the passage. They did not see her, and she withdrew in some surprise. Why was the villa being guarded? A sudden thought shot through her. Had Gaspare by any possibility escaped? Did they expect him to return? For a moment horror clutched her again. The memory of the man rushed like a wave of evil through her soul. But the next she steadied herself. She was certain that Gaspare was dead.

She reached the door of her mother's room and opened it. She saw the frail, beloved figure lying back in a chair by the window and moved forward, feeling weak in spite of herself.

"Why, Gabrielle—darling!" she heard her mother say. "What are you doing here?"

She reached the chair with an effort. "Mother, tell me—what are those men—those gendarmes—doing here?" she said.

Her mother smiled at her—a far-off, very peaceful smile. "Sit down, darling! Don't look so frightened! There is no need."

Gabrielle sank down on a stool by her side, feeling rather dizzy. "But why are they here?" she persisted.

Her mother's hand caressed her hair. "They are guarding me," she said. "I am a prisoner. But—it is all right, my Gabrielle. I shall soon be free."

"You—a prisoner!" Gabrielle said, startled and shocked. "Mother—darling, you can't mean that!"

"It is true, dear." Very gently came her answer. "You see—I was in Gaspare's confidence to a certain extent. I was—his secretary. And I had to be faithful to him. I—destroyed everything—when I heard. That is why—I am a prisoner."

Her voice failed. She was breathing rather rapidly. Gabrielle looked up at her anxiously.

"Mother, they will let you go," she said. "I shall see Pierre. He will make them let you go."

"Ah!" The words came in a whisper; the delicate form was bowed forward

as if in pain. “It was Pierre—who sent them.”

“Mother!” Gabrielle said again.

But no further words escaped her, for she suddenly realized that words were futile. A spasm of anguish had caught the bent figure, and she looked round in desperation. Marta came forward from the further end of the room and motioned her imperatively away.

She got up but she knew that she was useless. The dizziness came upon her again. The old Italian woman pushed her on one side. She crept trembling from the room.

She did not know quite how she returned to her own. The nun came forward to receive her with an exclamation of anxious reproof, and helped her down upon the bed. And while she lay there exhausted, Peter entered and stood beside her, taking her hand comfortingly, with deep pity in his eyes.

“You shouldn’t have gone, dear. You’re not fit,” he said.

“I had to go,” she whispered back. “I’m sorry, Peter. But she’s so ill.”

He was silent but he continued to hold her hand, and gradually her weakness subsided.

“Can I sit up?” she asked humbly.

He raised her and propped her with cushions. She could see the morning sunlight falling across the garden, but it was like a mockery. She looked up at him in urgent appeal. “Peter, I must see Pierre. I have something—very particular—to say to him. Will you get him for me?”

He betrayed no surprise at the request. “He is coming today, dear,” he answered steadily.

“Soon?” She spoke with feverish earnestness. “Will he be here soon?”

He was watching her attentively with grave, unvarying eyes. “I will try and get him this morning,” he said.

“Oh, will you, Peter? Thank you—thank you.” Her fingers pressed his hand with a sort of convulsive gratitude. “You always help me,” she said with quivering lips.

“I want to help,” he answered quietly, and with that he turned and left her.

And Gabrielle hid her face and wept.

When she was calmer, she lay for a long time watching the sunlight on the leaves. Pierre was coming, but somehow the thought filled her with more of



fear than exultation—a strange fear which she could not define—a feeling of foreboding—a nameless dread.

Peter came back to her at length, his brown face very quiet and self-contained. “Your mother is more comfortable now,” he said. “I’ve seen the doctor, and he is coming in to see you directly. Try not to worry, won’t you?”

“Yes, I’ll try,” she said meekly. “But they’ll let me go to her, won’t they, if—if——”

“Of course you shall go to her!” he said. “Only—don’t try to go alone. Let me help!”

She thanked him tremulously, adding, “And—Pierre?”

“Pierre,” he told her very deliberately, “will be on his way now. He ought to be here in half an hour.”

She felt the colour flood her face, and she saw him look away.

“He had a tremendous amount of work to do,” he observed after a moment. “I don’t know how he gets through it all. He never seems to sleep.”

“No, I know,” she agreed.

Peter went to the window and began to pull off some pink roses that hung against the frame. “He’s a marvellous chap,” he said. “I think he goes too hard. He’ll wear himself out. It’s a pity. It’s time he stopped. He ought to think of marrying—settling down.”

Gabrielle was mute, but her colour went from her as suddenly as it had risen. She felt small and crushed, utterly impotent.

Peter continued to gather the roses. “I’ve told him so myself,” he said. “But he’s rather an obstinate devil. He won’t give up and he has an idea that no woman would take to him because of his profession. Sheer nonsense, say I. Don’t you agree?”

“Yes,” Gabrielle said faintly.

“There you are!” said Peter, in the tone of one bringing a hotly-contested argument to a triumphant finish. “If you cared for a fellow—a magnificent chap—like Pierre, you wouldn’t turn him down whatever his job was, would you?”

Gabrielle was silent.

“Would you?” said Peter again.

She started a little, as if the repeated question pierced her. “No!” she said

rather breathlessly, and then, more firmly, “No.”

He turned quietly round and brought the roses to her. There was something indomitable about him, something rather grand. He made her think of a soldier breasting a high hill in the face of overwhelming odds.

“There’s one thing I’ve got to say,” he said, “in case you’ve any doubt about it. Pierre’s one of the best and he’ll never let you down. Put your money on Pierre and you’ll always be safe!”

He laid the roses down beside her, and for a second his hand rested upon hers. His face had a conquering look as if he had already stormed the heights.

“But I don’t think he’ll understand without being told,” he said. “It needs a bit of courage, but—Pierre is Pierre, and he’s worth it.”

He turned aside with the words.

Gabrielle was beyond speech. It was a relief to them both that the doctor and nurse entered at that moment. With a half-smile over his shoulder Peter went away.

## CHAPTER XIV

### *Duty*

THE DOCTOR'S VISIT was a short one. He was pleased with his patient's progress and he told her that with care she would soon be well. But when she tried to ask about her mother, he shook his head with pursed lips.

"Je ne peux pas dire, mademoiselle. C'est tout à fait impossible."

He proceeded to explain the reason for this in his own language at some length, but as she could not understand, he presently abandoned the attempt and took his leave.

Thereafter Gabrielle lay very still for a space with Peter's roses beside her. The scent of them was all-pervading—like sacrificial incense. They seemed to have a mystic meaning for her—a message for her soul which penetrated more deeply with every breath she drew.

She had meant to be sitting up in a chair for Pierre's visit, but he came upon her unawares. The nun was actually opening the door to him before she realized his presence.

She made no attempt to rise then, but just looked at him, looked at him with eyes of grave welcome that held an inexpressible sadness.

He paused momentarily upon the threshold, and in that pause by some means he relegated the patient nun to the other side of the door.

Then he came briskly forward. "Ma chère—ma très chère!" he said. "How you have suffered! And I—Pierre—failed to protect you! But you are better, yes?"

She held out her hand to him, and he took it, stooped, and put his lips to it.

"Yes, I am much better," she said. "It wasn't your fault, Pierre, and anyway it's all over now."

He gave her one of his swift, flashing glances. "But I ought to have known—to have foreseen," he said. "My poor little one! To think I had you so safe—and then—let you go! You may forgive me, but I shall never forgive myself."

"But you must," she said, smiling a little. "Sit down, Pierre! Thank you for coming."

He drew up a chair and sat facing her. "I could not come before. But I knew you would be happy avec le bon Peter. Have I not always told you—in an emergency—il est magnifique. He will never fail you—as this miserable Pierre." He made a whimsical grimace that had in it a touch of pathos.

Gabrielle's eyes dwelt upon his a little questioningly, the sadness still in their depths. "I don't think you have ever failed anybody," she said. "But never mind me now! I shall soon be well. You would like to hear all about it, wouldn't you? You want to complete your report."

He looked as if he had received an unexpected jolt. "Ah! C'est vrai," he said. "I have heard only a little from Peter. Mais, ma chère, I have not yet heard enough about you. You have been wounded, yes?"

"Only my shoulders," Gabrielle said. "It was some acid, but they were only flicked. It burnt at the time, but they have put on a dressing that takes away the pain. I may be scarred, but after all, that won't matter, will it?"

He made a sound of dismay. "Matter! It matters very much. I am grieved—I am very grieved. You have endured so much, my poor little one. I blame myself more and more."

"Please don't!" she said. "It's over, and I don't mind. There are worse things in life."

"Not for you, I hope," he said quickly.

She made an odd little gesture of philosophy. "We can't expect to go through it without some scars, can we? I've learnt that, anyway. I am a good deal older than I was."

He leaned forward with swift vehemence. "You! You must never grow old, chérie," he said. "You have the young heart. You will find happiness—and that will keep you young."

She uttered a small sigh. "I think I've left off being young already," she said. "How many of us can hope for happiness when the world is so full of suffering?"

He looked at her with deep concern. "You are unhappy?" he asked gently. "Could you not confide in me? I might be able to help you."

She met his look without flinching. "Yes, in one way I think you can help me," she said. "But I'll tell you that later. Wouldn't you like to make your report now?"

He regarded her very earnestly for a second or two, then with a slight shrug

he took out a notebook. "If you desire it, little one—business first! It is a very painful business to me. It is a record of failure."

"It is nothing of the kind," she said. "You are not to think of it as such. I am practically none the worse and I shall never forget all your goodness to me before it happened."

"Please," he said, "we will not talk of that."

And so once more she told her story, but not this time to a silent listener. He made lively interjections, threw in abrupt questions, while he scribbled vigorously and with incredible speed. He was no longer the intimate friend but the extremely efficient official. And Gabrielle told him everything calmly, without reserve and without apparent effort. It was almost as if she were relating the experiences of someone else.

When she finished, he looked up and gave her a scrutinizing glance. "Thank you," he said. "You have made everything very clear. You have been a marvellous help to me, and your courage fills me with the deepest admiration. I shall never forget it. You have aided me to an extent which you yourself can scarcely realize."

"How you must enjoy your—cases!" she said, faintly smiling.

He smiled also, and the official mask fell from him. "I do not think life without work would be worth having," he said with simplicity. "This is my work, and it is a good work. I only regret that we did not succeed in trapping the scoundrels alive."

"That's vindictive," she pointed out.

His eyes twinkled at the accusation, but there was a fiery gleam behind their humour. "I am vindictive—yes," he said. "I am infuriated—for you. To think of you—at their mercy—it sends me—nearly demented. And I—I who always told you that Pierre would keep you safe! A grand jest, that!"

"Ah well, I am safe now," she said. "And even you couldn't do the impossible. I'm so glad you didn't think I'd failed you when I didn't come back to you in Paris."

"Could you ever fail anybody?" he said, and stooping forward, he took her hand and again with a sort of reverent ardour he kissed it. Then he looked at her with a half-quizzical tenderness. "And now you will give me your confidence," he said. "You will tell me what I so deeply desire to know. I can see that you are troubled."

Her smile had gone. Her eyes had rather a piteous expression. "Yes,

Pierre,” she said, and her voice held a quiver of nervousness. “There is one thing that troubles me—a thing I can’t understand.”

“I guessed it!” he declared in a tone that sounded almost triumphant. “It is Peter, n’est-ce pas? He is being foolish—English—chivalrous! He will not speak! Ah, I will arrange all that.”

“Oh no!” Gabrielle said on a quick note of protest. “It’s nothing of that sort. Please leave Peter alone! Why—why should anyone speak if they have nothing to say?” There was a hint of passion in her words, and as she uttered them, all-unconsciously she gathered the roses together and held them in her trembling hands. “I don’t want anything like that,” she declared almost with defiance. “For one thing, Peter has given me up because he thinks I love someone else better.”

“What?” said Pierre. “But—that is not true!” He spoke with conviction.

She looked at him above the roses. Her face was quivering. “It doesn’t really matter whether it’s true or not,” she told him. “I’m not discussing that. It’s a far, far bigger thing. Pierre, my mother is a prisoner in this house. You have influence. You have power. I want her set free.”

“Your mother! Oh, chérie!” he said, and got up with a jerk. She saw the kindly lines about his mouth and eyes grow suddenly firm. “But she is having every care—every consideration,” he said.

“She is a prisoner,” Gabrielle said again. “It is unfair—unjust. She must be set free. Surely—Pierre—surely——”

She stopped, checked by a gesture from him. He stood looking at her, and though there was pity in that look, his face was stern.

“I am very sorry,” he said. “Perhaps I ought to explain. She is a prisoner by my orders, but—I do not think she will be brought to justice.”

“By your orders!” Gabrielle went suddenly white. “By your orders! Pierre, you don’t mean that—you couldn’t—you can’t——”

He took a step towards her and then stopped himself. “I am very sorry,” he said again. “I have done my possible to spare her in every way. But—I cannot liberate her. You must understand, Gabrielle, she is a criminal—like those others. She was one of them.”

“That is not true!” Gabrielle said swiftly and breathlessly. “Gaspare had her in his power—as he nearly had me. But she has done no wrong.”

“She has destroyed every morsel of evidence within her reach,” Pierre said.

“She was an accomplice.”

There was something fateful in his words. Gabrielle caught her breath; she was staring at him with a sort of horror.

“Do you know,” she said slowly, “that she is dying?”

He made a sharp movement, and the pity of his look almost overwhelmed the sternness. “My poor little Gabrielle!” he said. “Yes, I know it. And I dared to hope that she might die before you knew the truth.”

Gabrielle’s eyes remained fixed upon his with a half-frozen incredulity. “You made her a prisoner,” she said, “and you—you can’t set her free—even to die.”

He stood up very straight before her. “I am obliged to do my duty,” he said.

“Your duty!” Gabrielle said almost mechanically. And then in a different tone: “And she is the only one you succeeded in trapping—alive!”

“I do not deserve that,” Pierre said.

She knew that she had wounded him deeply, and somehow the knowledge agonized her. She flung out her hands to him with a wild gesture, scattering the roses all about her in confusion. “Oh, Pierre—Pierre!” she cried. “I didn’t mean that! Forgive me! But oh, give up this dreadful—hideous—work! It’s horrible—it’s cruel—this hidden spying to trap people—even if they are wicked. And she isn’t—she never has been! Oh, Pierre—oh, Pierre——”

Her voice broke against him. He was stooping over her, not holding her in his arms, but with both his hands pressed strangely upon her head.

“Oh, hush—hush—hush!” he whispered. “It is all right. I understand. Someday—you will understand also—and then—perhaps—you will pardon the poor Pierre—who was obliged to do his duty.”

He stopped. He bent lower. His lips touched her hair. And then, very gently but as if in haste, he released himself from her clinging arms. He swept the roses together and laid them beside her—all save one which somehow detached itself from the rest and hung upon his sleeve. That one he caught against his heart and thrust away out of sight.

And Gabrielle did not miss it. She had sunk back exhausted and trembling on her pillows. She only vaguely heard the opening and the closing of the door.

## CHAPTER XV

### *Sacrifice*

THERE WAS SOMETHING almost headlong in Pierre's exit, but in the passage he stopped, pulled himself together, walked to an open window.

Here he came to a stand, very pale, with twitching lips, took out a handkerchief and wiped his forehead and his eyes. He was breathing hard as if after some terrific exertion.

"Mon Dieu!" he whispered. "Oh, mon Dieu!"

There came a step behind him. A voice spoke. "Pierre, old man!"

He wheeled sharply, even violently, with a clicking of heels. "Peter!" he said.

He stood with his back to the light. Peter was facing him, intensely composed, yet with an unspoken question in his eyes.

"Well?" he said quietly. "You've seen her and got your report. Let's get out into the garden!"

Pierre took a step forward, his whole figure stiff, uncompromising. "No!" he said. "No! My good Peter, I must go. I have much to do."

Peter's eyes narrowed a little, grew stern, insistent. "You can't go yet," he said. "I must have a word with you first. It's necessary—it's urgent."

He blocked the way. Pierre remained rigidly confronting him. "Mais que voulez-vous?" he said. "We can talk—another time—not now."

"No, now, please!" Peter said, and suddenly, rather awkwardly, his hand came out and touched his brother's shoulder. "Now, please!" he repeated, and though his face remained stern there was almost a beseeching note in his voice.

Pierre relaxed abruptly. He smiled. "Oh, qu'est-ce que c'est, Peter?" he said. "Can you not see—I want to go?"

"I know you do," Peter said. "I'm sorry, old chap. But—for my sake—stay a minute! Come into the garden!"

He linked his hand in Pierre's arm as if he feared he might escape him, and Pierre submitted, the smile, rather set, still on his face.



They went down the stairs together, past the gendarmes, who saluted Pierre punctiliously, and so out into the riotous sunshine where a myriad flowers were blooming.

“We’ll get down into the shade,” Peter said. “I won’t keep you very long but I must be alone with you.”

Pierre gave vent to a brief sigh, as if he stifled a vagrant sense of exasperation. “Do not be too English, my Peter!” he said. “If we must talk, let us talk sense!”

Peter piloted him across the terrace down to the path that led to the grotto without uttering a word.

Then, very suddenly, in the shadow of the pines, he stopped. “Have a smoke!” he said, and proffered his cigarette case.

Pierre gave him a lightning glance and took a cigarette. He was fully master of himself now and no trace of agitation remained.

“Well, Peter?” he questioned quizzically. “Why this ceremony? I am to be your father confessor, yes?”

Peter lit a cigarette for himself also and trod the match underfoot. “I’m sorry if you think me an ass,” he said. “But—there’s something to be said between us, and it’s no use shirking. Pierre, you understand—don’t you—that I’m right out of the running?”

Pierre’s eyes met his through a film of smoke. “Ah! C’est ça!” he said.

“Yes, just that,” said Peter. “I never had the ghost of a chance. All I’ve got to say is, I hope you realize that you hold the winning cards and I wish you the best of luck.”

“Peter!” Pierre said, and suddenly, incomprehensibly, he laughed. “Oh, my good Peter! You’re not really so blind as that!”

“What d’you mean?” Peter demanded harshly. “Oh, don’t laugh—in heaven’s name! There are some things I can’t stand—even from you.”

“My very dear Peter, I laugh at Fate—not at you,” Pierre explained with gentle irony. “It is good of you to wish me luck, but—that sort—is not for me. La petite Gabrielle and I are nothing to each other—less than nothing. To her I am the vilest thing that crawls. And to you also it is evident that I am a traitor—and not the man of honour that I prefer to regard myself.”

Peter stared for a moment, and then: “Oh, rot, Pierre!” he said bluntly. “You know very well what I think of you. She’s not my property and never has

been. If I've chosen to make a fool of myself, that's my affair. But she belongs to you now. If you don't know it, you ought to. You're the best man and you've won."

"Oh, pardon me!" Pierre said. "I have not won. And, Peter, I have never tried to win. She is not mine. She never will be. She regards me with horror, very naturally. She knows that her mother was made a prisoner by my orders, and I cannot release her."

"Oh, bunkum!" Peter said. "She's not so unreasonable as that."

"No, she is not unreasonable." Pierre's voice still had a faintly ironical sound. "I see her point of view. If I were not what I am, I might perhaps share it with her. But, mon ami, we cannot alter facts. My work is my life, and it is not such as to awaken admiration in any woman. *Le voilà!*"

"But she wouldn't turn you down on that account," maintained Peter doggedly. "She said so. Look here! You've played your cards all wrong. You've misunderstood the whole thing."

"No, I think not." Very quietly, with a hint of dignity, Pierre asserted himself. "I have played my game exactly as I meant to play it, Peter. It is you who misunderstand—you who fail to see where her happiness is to be found. I appreciate that you are seeking her happiness, mon frère, but you are not seeking it in the right quarter. When I am gone, perhaps you will see more clearly. There is no need for you to sacrifice yourself. Sacrifice is sometimes wrong. You love her. *Alors, love her more!*"

He patted Peter's shoulder kindly with the words. The ever-ready smile was once more on his lips.

"*Et maintenant je vais—je vais!*" he said. "There is much—very much—to be done. I leave her in your safe keeping, mon cher. *Et puis encore, I wish you—the best of luck!*"

He would have gone with that last quip, but Peter stayed him.

"Pierre, wait—wait! I won't have you go like this." He gripped him by the arm. A kind of desperate honesty shone in his eyes. "You shall know the truth," he said. "You're mad—quite mad—not to have seen for yourself. Man, she cares for you—just you. I'm nowhere. Can't you understand? She's breaking her heart for you. *D'you want it broken?*"

Pierre stood very still in his hold. His face wore a strange look—it was almost as if he saw a vision. "I will tell you one thing, Peter," he said after a pause. "You are the one man in the world to mend it."

Peter uttered a sound that was half-despair and half-remonstrance. “Don’t play with me!” he said.

“I am not playing.” Very steadily Pierre made answer. “I tell you the truth as I see it. She will turn to you. She will love you. And you will give her happiness. With me, that could never be. Everything that I am—everything that I do—would make it impossible. That I have always known. Also, *mon ami*, her regard for me is not what you think. Circumstances may have induced a passing fancy, nothing more. And that fancy, beautiful as it may have been, has already faded on account of my occupation. Can you not see, Peter? You with your English heart—and your so beautiful English home—have everything to offer her, while I—have nothing. It is better so, *mon frère*. You are suited to each other. You will be happy. Perhaps not all at once! The best things of life do not always come like that. But in a little while—with patience—you will win your heart’s desire. It is my desire also, Peter. Can I say more?”

“But, my dear chap,” Peter’s voice had almost an anguished ring, “we’re not playing the game by her. Surely the choice should rest with her, not with either of us! And I know—if she were given it——”

Pierre silenced him with a quick, imperious gesture. “Peter,” he said, “I am playing the game and I have chosen. *La petite Gabrielle* is not for me. I have always known it. She would not be happy. I would not take her even if—even if——” he paused. “Ah, that is enough!” he exclaimed half-angrily. “You press me too far. I will not discuss it any more. *C’est fini!*”

“Hold on!” Peter said, and there was more than British stubbornness in his tone; it held authority. “Tell me one thing and it shall be finished, so far as I’m concerned. Pierre, you care for her, don’t you? Answer me—on your honour!”

Pierre drew himself up sharply. For a moment his eyes flashed fiercely. And then very slowly he took Peter’s hand from his arm and held it.

“Yes,” he said and he spoke with dignity and absolute sincerity. “I love her—just enough to wish to see her happy—with you—in your English paradise. I wish for her that which I can never give—peace—and her husband’s unbroken companionship and love. You can—you will—give her all those. That must be enough for you, Peter. It is my last word.”

He gave Peter’s hand a sudden, hard squeeze, looked him straight in the eyes with something in his own which checked all further questioning, and then very erect, firm and with a certain fine pride, he dropped the hand he held, turned about and walked away.

Peter remained staring after him, curiously abashed and powerless. He knew that the final word had been spoken, that neither argument nor persuasion would induce Pierre to alter his decision. Nor was there in fact anything further to be said. It had not rested with Pierre alone. He had gone voluntarily, and the manner of his going was that of a great man. But the cards had turned against him. He had lost that which it had never been his intention to win. And since Pierre was Pierre, none but himself would ever know how deep his loss had been.

Peter ground his heel into the earth and swore. He loathed himself for being there, and yet he knew he could not go. Sacrifice could be wrong. Pierre had somehow made that very clear. But even so, he could not believe that the victory thus thrust upon him could ever be truly his, or the agony of longing within him ever be assuaged.

In his heart he heard again that piteous, trembling voice asking, “Where is Pierre? Where is Pierre?”

And when it turned to that broken whisper, “I want—Pierre,” he covered his face and groaned aloud.

“O my God,” he said, “give me strength to play the game!”

And it was the most earnest prayer he had ever uttered.

## CHAPTER XVI

### *The Dawn*

IT WAS THREE NIGHTS LATER, in the hush that falls before the dawn, that there came a low knock on the door of Gabrielle's room.

She had been asleep, but her slumber was easily broken in those days. She sat up instantly and spoke.

"Come in! I am awake."

It was Peter who stood at the door. She saw him against the light outside. "I've come for you," he said simply. "Your mother!"

"Oh, Peter!" she said, and that was all.

He turned on the light, came quietly to her and wrapped her dressing gown around her. "Marta called me. I fetched the nurse. She is going, darling," he said.

He stooped and put slippers on her feet, and she suffered him, scarcely noticing.

But when she stood up she laid her hand on his arm. "You'll be with me, Peter?" she said.

"My dear, of course!" he answered.

They went together to her mother's room.

The windows were wide open, and a lamp burned beside the bed. Great moths were flitting to and fro, dashing themselves against the shade or making wide circles around the ceiling.

It seemed to Gabrielle that the room was full of the rustling of wings, but from the bed on which her mother lay there came no sound save a faint uneven fluttering of breath.

As she drew near she saw the beloved face dead white against the supporting pillows. But the eyes, immense in their cavernous hollows, were open and searching for her.

They smiled as she came softly to the bedside, dwelt tenderly upon her, and then went beyond her to Peter standing behind.

Gabrielle took the wasted hand into both her own. "Aren't you so well, dearest?" she whispered.

A few hours before she had left her in Marta's charge for the night as usual, seeing no sign of any imminent change. But now, as she looked upon her, she knew that the summons, which had been delayed so long that it had almost begun to seem, too remote for reality, was indeed very close at hand. The rustling quiet of the room made her feel as though it had become a threshold of the unseen. She felt neither fear nor distress, only an intense and yearning love. If any impulse to prayer had come to her in that moment she would have asked not for delay but for an easy and placid passing.

But no such prayer was needed. Those deep eyes held no pain, only a mystical, far-seeing peace.

The hand that Gabrielle had taken pressed hers very feebly in response, and then through the parted lips there came a whisper that was more of a spirit voice than any earthly sound.

"Gabrielle—darling, I'm leaving you—to Peter. Let him—care for you!"

A little quiver went through Gabrielle; but she turned her head immediately and spoke over her shoulder to the silent figure behind her.

"Peter, you will take care of me? Will you tell her so?"

Peter moved forward. For an instant he stood above her, then he knelt down and laid his lips against their clasped hands.

"I will always take care of her," he said, "so help me, God!"

"Thank you," murmured Gabrielle.

He lifted his head and looked straight up at her. Her eyes left her mother and came to him. It was as if some message passed between them though no word was spoken. For a long second she met his look, then quietly she stooped and kissed his forehead.

In that moment there came a soft, slow sigh from the bed, followed by—a silence that was like the dropping of a veil. . . .

Old Marta, crouching at the foot, stood up and crossed herself. The nun crept forward from beyond the lamp.

Gabrielle looked up, laid down the lifeless hand, bent to touch the lifeless face with her lips.

"All over now, my darling," she whispered. "You are safe—and free."

And then, even while she smiled in utter thankfulness, a weakness came upon her—a dizziness in which she seemed to hear only the rustling of many wings. She felt Peter’s arms uplifting her and she yielded herself to them like a tired child. She was glad when he carried her from the room; for she knew that her mother was no longer there.

He laid her down upon her own bed again. The scent of dew-laden flowers came in upon them. The dawn was close at hand.

Peter lingered. “Can I get you anything, darling?” he said.

She lay looking up at him. “Oh, Peter,” she said, “I’m not unhappy. I can’t be. I feel as if God is so very near.”

“Yes. So do I,” said Peter.

He went to the window and saw the first faint light of a new day rising in the east.

“You’d like to be alone for a while,” he said. “I think I shall dress and go out.”

She lay on her bed watching him with mysterious, shadowed eyes. “Why do you think I want to be alone?” she said.

He came back and stood beside her. “I am trying to think of anything that you could possibly want,” he said. “Is there anything at all you would like?”

She put out one finger and touched his hand. “Yes. I—would like you to stay with me—for a little,” she said rather haltingly. “Would you? Do you mind?”

“Mind!” he said. “My dear, you don’t know me very well yet, do you?”

“Yes, I think I do,” she said. “It’s you—who don’t know me.”

He took her hand and held it. His face had a sombre tenderness. “Yes, I do know, Gabrielle,” he said. “I know everything. You mustn’t mind my knowing. I’ve understood, and I’ve wanted your happiness more than anything else on earth.”

“Have you, Peter?” she said. “How good of you! I haven’t deserved that—from you.”

“You’ve deserved the very best,” he said, “and—before God—I wanted you to have it. It’s been damnable just to stand by and see you suffer.”

“And what about you?” she said in a low voice.

“Me? Oh, I don’t matter,” he answered. “It would have been worth it. In any case—even as it is—I don’t want you to think I’m cad enough to ask anything of you. I’m going to take care of you, as I always said I would—as I’ve now sworn to do. But I won’t get in your way—won’t pester you to marry me—won’t behave like a damn’ fool as I used to. I promise you that.”

“No. Don’t promise!” she said, and suddenly her face quivered, and she hid it against his hand. “At least—not if you still want me, Peter!”

“Gabrielle!” he said, and stood tense.

She pressed his hand very hard against her eyes. “It’s very difficult to say,” she told him tremulously. “I’ve had a dream—and now I’m awake again. I’ve mistaken the shadow for the substance, but I never shall again. For days I’ve been thinking—thinking—wishing I was more worthy of you—wondering if I could ever dare to ask you—if you still cared. And if—if you would have the decency to tell me if you didn’t!”

“Gabrielle!” he said again, and in a moment he was kneeling by her, his arms stretched out. “You know I care—you know—you know!” His voice sank huskily.

She crept close to him like a bird into its nest, and laid her head against his neck. “It’s like offering you the second best,” she said shakily. “Oh, my dear—my dear—I made such a muddle of things—and it hurt so horribly. And now I know how you’ve been hurt too—through me. Will you forgive me, Peter? Will you treat it as a dream that is quite—quite ended? It was all such an unnatural atmosphere. I’ve only just got to know you—and to see things as they really are. Peter”—she spoke through sobs—“if—if you really care—so much about my happiness—you’ve got it now—for what it’s worth—between your hands.”

“And I will never, never let it go,” he said, as he clasped her closer to him.

She lifted her face to him, all wet with tears. “Do you think—I—am to be trusted with yours?”

He did not speak in answer. He only took the kiss she mutely offered.

And in the sacred silence that fell upon them, the night passed into the dawn.

THE END



## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been silently corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Serpent In The Garden* by Ethel M. Dell]