

A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, rendered in a dark brown color, framing the central text.

Nude in Mink

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by

Sax Rohmer

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Chapter One

1

“DON’T turn. Don’t stop. This is Maitland behind you. Just go right ahead. Tell me where you live and stand by to let me in the moment I get there.”

Mark Donovan didn’t turn, and he didn’t stop; he went straight on through the darkness of a foggy night. He had recognised that tense voice. The speaker was Dr. Steel Maitland right enough—whom he had last seen in Cairo! But his heart began to beat a shade faster when he spoke: Maitland was no more than a pace to the rear.

“One-twenty-three Bruton Street. First floor. Walk straight up.”

“Expect me any time, Donovan. Don’t fail.”

He had an impression that Maitland had fallen back but Donovan pressed on. His brain became a whirligig. The vapoury masses about him which were Bond Street whispered menaces. What, in reason’s name, had happened to Maitland? Why must he not stop, but go right ahead?

There was little traffic when, crossing, he continued on his way. The blanket-like hush of foggy London had become in a moment a mysterious hush, an ominous hush: it bore down upon him. That *rara avis* (in fog) a taxi, passed every now and again; pedestrians materialised out of yellow shadow, phantoms preceded by the glow of a cigarette, and merged into shadow again.

He grew conscious of distrust. Amongst these ships that passed in the night some might be enemies.

Bruton Street, former abode of fashion, sounded empty right to Berkeley Square. Donovan’s footsteps hollowly disturbed a ghostly silence where, once, dance bands had played, sleekly gowned women come and gone under striped awnings; where, in times yet earlier, bucks of the Regency had supped, and gambled, and fought.

From here the present Queen had been borne away in a Cinderella coach to her

wedding in Westminster Abbey: here, streams of traffic had congested the fairway when society entertained; here, long ago, linkboys had steered the drunken reveller home.

Where were the fairy coach, the cars, the linkboys?

Lost, to live again only in the pages of history. This was the London which the Nazis had made; and Steel Maitland had said, "Go right ahead. Stand by to let me in the moment I get there."

As Donovan pushed the door open he stood for a moment listening, before allowing it to swing to again. The hush of Bruton Street was broken by a solitary tread. He waited. The measured steps drew nearer. A light was flashed upon him.

"Good night, sir."

"Good night, Constable."

He closed the door and went upstairs. On the landing he paused, listening again.

There was no sound.

Once inside his own apartment, the lobby lights up, he heaved a sigh of relief. A moment later he was laughing at himself. Undoubtedly, he needed a rest. Not since he had landed with an American task force at a selected point, to find enemy guns raining bullets on the spot, had he been so frightened: his heart was still beating ridiculously!

Those modest belongings which Donovan had distributed around the apartment struck a note of reassuring familiarity. For the rest, its appointments were strictly utilitarian. The owner, from whom he leased it, had removed all but essentials. A whisky and soda restored him, and he sat down to consider the question: What was it all about?

Lighting a cigarette, Donovan turned this problem over in his mind, and realising the urgency in Maitland's voice, came to the conclusion that some mysterious but potent danger must threaten him. He went out and opened the door, leaving it ajar. No sound reached him from the stairs.

He sat down again in a deep, red leathern armchair and waited.

How long he waited he could not, afterwards, say (probably less than five minutes) before anything occurred. He listened to the silence of Mayfair around him, and throughout that time nothing disturbed it but a rare footstep, and once the passing of a taxi.

Then, he heard something else.

Someone was coming upstairs—softly, hesitantly.

Donovan's first impulse was to hurry out to greet the new arrival. His second, oddly enough, was to close the door.

He could never account, then or later, for that nervous premonition which claimed him. Of his neighbours he knew nothing. The person coming upstairs might be a fellow resident. But of one thing he felt assured: It was not Steel Maitland.

And so what he did was this:

He remained seated in the red armchair, staring across the lobby at the partly open door. Those soft, almost furtive footsteps, drew nearer.

On the landing they ceased. Whoever stood there had been arrested by the light shining out.

He sat quite still. And as he sat there he saw the door slowly open wider. A panel of blackness which represented the unlighted landing increased in width. There was no sound, now.

Putting his cigarette in a tray. Donovan was leaning forward, gripping the chair arms, and prepared to spring to his feet, when the door opened fully... and a girl took one faltering step into the lobby!

2

Donovan did not spring up; he rose slowly, watching her where she stood. Her face was in partial shadow, so that he could not determine the colour of a mass of distractingly curly hair; but of the fact that his visitor was of quite unusual beauty there could be no doubt whatever. Her eyes were magnificent, fixed wildly in a stare of dreadful perplexity; her lips were slightly parted. With one

hand she held about her a wrap or cloak which Donovan recognised as that lure of souls, mink, and which therefore must have been worth several thousand pounds. Slim legs (revealed, as he thought at the time, in gossamer stockings of a quality no longer purchasable in London) were of equally patrician elegance, but he was puzzled to note that she wore blue slippers trimmed around the ankles with white fur.

These impressions he derived in one swift glance as he stood up. Then, trying to speak gently:

“I hope I have not alarmed you,” he said.

Her expression changed scarcely at all. She shrank back to the door, upon which one hand still rested; and as the upraised arm was bare, Donovan assumed that his mysterious caller wore evening dress. She moistened her lips, and drew the fur wrap more closely around her.

“No,” she whispered; “it is ... my fault.”

And as she stood there, watching him in that distraught way, Donovan saw that she trembled violently. He realised that this beautiful mystery was in a state of acute terror, of exhaustion, was, in fact, on the verge of collapse. He took a step forward.

“Please sit down and rest. You are quite safe here. What has frightened you?”

She shrank away yet further. Indeed, perhaps she would have tried to escape, if, as she retreated, the door had not been closed by her own movement, so that she was left standing with her back to it.

“Thank you—no. I... quite understand.” Her words were barely audible; her expression was that of a trapped animal. Not unnaturally, perhaps, Donovan misconstrued her terror, and, frankly, resented it; but when he spoke again he still spoke gently.

“I shouldn’t have left the door ajar. And when I heard you outside I shouldn’t have remained silent. I was just expecting someone else—that’s all. Surely you can see it’s simply a mistake?”

But she repelled him, pressing back against the panels wildly.

“I can see,” she whispered, “that you were expecting me... Waiting for me. I might have known *she* would guess. Very well. Take me back.”

Donovan’s original resentment left him. This girl’s terror—anguish—lay deeper than he had suspected. She had grown alarmingly pale. He determined to make a final effort. “Please try to be calm. How could I be expecting you when I have never seen you in my life before?” She sought to control her trembling lips. “This is my aunt’s flat,” she panted—“although all her things are not here now. If *She* had not sent you, how could *you* be here?”

“*She?*” (Donovan began, now, to doubt the girl’s sanity. To whom did her words refer? The appalling idea occurred to him that she had escaped from a mental clinic} “I can’t even imagine what you mean. This is certainly Lady Orpsley’s flat...”

“Lady Orpsley is my aunt.”

“Good heavens!” he exclaimed, and experienced a welcome wave of relief. “Now I see it all! You didn’t know? Well, sit down No, please don’t look so frightened. This flat was leased for me by a mutual friend. I have occupied it just three days. I am Mark Donovan, of the Alliance Press Association, and I only returned to England last Thursday. Surely you understand?”

And as he talked, striving desperately to put his visitor at her ease, those great haunted eyes studied him, and he thought that she was beginning to lose some of her terror; but she held her place by the door, clasping the fur wrap about her with white fingers which trembled.

“Oh,” she murmured, “can it be true.” There was that in her glance, now, which he could only have described as beseeching.

“It *is* true. Try to understand that you have nothing to be afraid of. Try to tell me what has happened. Let me help you.”

A moment longer she watched him. All colour had fled from her cheeks, and she swayed as she stood there.

“Oh, my God!” she whispered, “what shall I do...”

Then, almost before he could grasp and support her, she swayed right forward

and collapsed in a swoon!

Donovan's frame of mind became indescribable; his brain was in a tumult. First, he thought that he would carry her to the couch in the living room; then, he decided that he would put a cushion under her head where she lay on the rug, and bring brandy, of which he had a small stock.

Stooping over her (the beauty of her pale face was exquisite, black lashes drooping motionless on white cheeks) he became aware of a faint but pleasant perfume exhaled by the fur; and as he moved her in order to put the cushion in place, her wrap fell away from her shoulders.

Swiftly, Donovan rearranged it. Then he came upright at a bound.

He had made a staggering discovery!

Accounting himself, as he did, a fairly complete cosmopolitan, for he had lived in many of the world's capitals, the fact remained that up to fourteen he had never moved more than ten miles from a New England farm—and this tells. To that very moment he remained subject to attacks of harrowing embarrassment; and he had one now.

He hurried into his bedroom where he had concealed his two remaining bottles of French brandy (distrusting the daily help who looked after the apartment). Beyond question, he was overwrought, and he couldn't find the key of the case in which the cognac was locked. A swooning woman always got him jumpy, in any event, and he cursed his shaky nerves when he discovered the missing key in his pocket.

Then he ran into the bathroom, and back again for a corkscrew; so that perhaps three minutes had elapsed before he returned to the lobby carrying a glass of brandy and water.

The lobby was empty!

Noting the door ajar, he set the glass down and raced out on to the landing. He could hear and see nothing.

"Hullo! Where are you?... Don't run out... like that... Come back!"

He ran downstairs, calling, and out into Bruton Street. There he stood, looking right and left, and listening.

But there was not a sound.

Out of the mystery of foggy Mayfair she had come; the mystery of foggy Mayfair had swallowed her up again.

... And under her mink wrap she was perfectly nude!

Chapter Two

1

SOME uneasy idea that he had failed in a plain duty, that he had bungled, and bungled badly, a job which Fate had tossed into his hands, held him there in the darkness...

Someone bumped into him.

“Hi! look out!”

“In you go, Donovan. No need to wait out here. Quick as you like. Dodged ‘em this time!”

A tall, hatless figure, arrayed in a blue waterproof, materialised at Donovan’s elbow. Unceremoniously, his arm was grasped and he was swept in.

“Maitland!”

“What’s left of him. First try to our side. Lead the way.”

Followed so swiftly that he felt himself pursued, Donovan hurried upstairs. As he entered the lobby, Steel Maitland kicked aside the cushion which lay there.

“What’s the idea? Put there for visitors to fall over?”

“As a matter of fact—”

But before Donovan had time to say more, Maitland was in the living room, his glance resting on a tray which stood beside the red armchair.

“Whisky and soda? Good idea, Donovan. Gad! What a night I’ve had!”

Dropping the raincoat on the carpet, he revealed himself in a notably shabby suit, and wearing a muffler in lieu of a tie. His appearance had undergone another startling change; for the incipient whiskers which Donovan remembered in Cairo had developed into a formidable black beard. When Maitland smiled, and he had a gay, quick smile, his teeth gleamed brilliantly in that hirsute frame.

“You look that way,” Donovan commented, pouring out a drink as he dropped into the armchair. “When I last saw you in Cairo—was it really three years ago?—you were Lieutenant Commander Steel Maitland, a respected medical officer. What are you supposed to be now?”

Maitland’s clear blue eyes were raised as he took the tumbler from Donovan’s hand.

“Hunted man!” he replied. “It has taken me more than an hour since I left my hotel to get as far as this.”

“As far as this? Then where are you going?”

“Charles Street.”

“But Charles Street is only just across the Square.”

Having taken a long drink, Maitland set his glass down.

“Very likely. But, many places that are just across the Square may be damned hard to get to all the same.”

“Suppose,” Donovan suggested, carrying his own glass over to the couch, “you lift the veil slightly. Are you fired? Wanted for debt? Spy hunting? Are the police after you?”

Maitland shook his head rather grimly, extracting from a case one of those abominable cheroots resembling dried twigs which come from Burma. This thing alight, he spoke again.

“No. I am trying to save a man’s life. But as a matter of fact I was nearly arrested half an hour ago. It might have taken me some time to establish my identity at a local police station. I’m no longer in the Navy. I was seconded more or less indefinitely just after you left Egypt, and what used to be a hobby is now a full-time job ...”

“Amateur theatricals?”

“Something rather like it.” He removed his cheroot and stared meditatively at its narrow, smouldering cone. “We fondly imagined, once, that when we had

stamped out Hitler & Co., we should be in clover. Now, what about Stalin & Co.? And has it ever occurred to you that the beastly cauldron of war may have brewed even fouler things—as corruption breeds fungus? We have seen some of the horrors that lay hidden behind the mists of the East, for instance, but we haven't seen all—yet.”

Donovan stared at him intently. So deeply had his strange manner, and the stranger manner of his arrival, impressed him, that even his own remarkable experience was set aside as of small consequence.

“Perhaps I don't quite follow.”

“No.” Suddenly Maitland stood up. “Nor have we a moment to waste. My chance sight of you in misty Bond Street (by the light of a passing flashlamp) may have saved the situation. I have been trying, as I said just now, to beat into Charles Street for more than an hour—and I have had some narrow shaves.”

“Narrow shaves?”

“Very. In fact the conclusion was forced upon me that if I persisted, alone, I should in all probability be liquidated. Quite a number of people get run over in the fog, you know. Therefore, Donovan, I am going to ask you to come along. It's harder to garrote two than one. In return I will give you a story (but not for release until I say 'shoot') which will make your reputation with the Alliance for good and all.”

At that, Donovan, also, stood up.

“Are you serious?”

Maitland nodded shortly. “Tell me, Donovan, in your many wanderings have you ever heard of a woman known to some by the title of My Lady, and to others as Sumuru?”

“Sumuru?”

2

At about the time that Mark Donovan echoed that peculiar name, a strange scene was taking place in a room even more strange. On entering it one might have

supposed that he had journeyed by time-machine from democratic London back to Imperial Rome. There were pillars of varied characters, pillars from Egypt, Syria and Greece, supporting a painted ceiling. Oriental rugs and skins of animals were strewn about the marble floor. Beside a square pool guarded by a figure of Pan, banks of mimosa flowered and filled the air with their heavy swooning perfume.

There was a semi-circular recess, like a shrine, approached by three marble steps and veiled by silk curtains of rosy pink.

The existence of this singular apartment was destined to arouse keen curiosity in certain quarters (and before long) and to provoke equally keen incredulity in others.

A high, sweet note, that of a bell or of a silver gong, split the hushed silence, hitherto unbroken except for faint stirrings of lily leaves in the pool when one of several large golden orfe swimming there disturbed them.

Almost noiselessly, a bronze door was opened at the head of a short flight of marble steps. The handrail also was bronze, terminating in a newel post representing a sphinx. A man came down, slowly. He was a man of slight and graceful build. His leisurely movements were those of an Arab, and he wore a sort of Arab dress, a black robe, resembling a djibbeh, a skull cap, and red slippers. But his face, a smiling mask of old ivory, was not the face of an Arab.

His red slippers made a faint shuffling sound on the pavement as he crossed to the recess and mounted the three steps. He drew the pink curtain aside, and the rings on which it hung emitted a musical tinkling like that of tiny bells. He saluted with both hands, and stood there, head lowered.

“Madonna?”

The woman addressed lay curled up comfortably on a low divan, propped amongst many cushions. She wore a sort of Eastern indoor dress, and sandals. Her hair was entirely concealed by a close fitting turban. On a table beside her were books, writing materials and an ivory box half full of cigarettes. But no normal man would have noticed any of these things which surrounded the woman on the divan, or, noting them, must have noted them subconsciously. His attention would have been arrested, and held, by her eyes. Her eyes were superb, except that they seemed to be too large for that small, delicate, vital face; but

when she spoke, the magic of her voice almost rivalled their witchery. It contained those delicate tones which the harp, alone amongst musical instruments, can breathe.

“Well, Caspar—has she been brought back?”

Caspar, of *the* set smile, answered without raising his head. “No, Madonna. The men could find no trace of her in the fog.” His unctuous, caressing voice afforded a marked contrast to the golden tones of the woman. He spoke as one who speaks in his sleep. “Abdul is searching, now.”

There was silence for a few moments. Only that faint lapping of leaves disturbed in the pool intruded upon it.

“I am informed that Dr. Steel Maitland is endeavouring to reach the house in Charles Street before our own agent. Are his movements covered?”

“Closely, My Lady.”

“You may go, Caspar. Send Sister Jean to me.”

“I hear you, my Lady.”

Caspar repeated the deep obeisance, stepped back and closed the curtain so that the rings tinkled again sweetly. He glided, smiling, to a draped archway, drew the drapery aside and called: “Sister Jean is wanted by Our Lady.”

From somewhere beyond, another voice cried, “Sister Jean...”

A third, further off, took up the call: “Sister Jean...”

And presently, heralded by hesitant footsteps, a girl came out, as Caspar, holding the curtain aside until she entered, dropped it behind her. She was an exceptionally pretty girl, her hair almost Titian red, but her grey-green eyes were frightened eyes, and her hands opened and closed nervously.

Caspar, in silence, led the way to the curtained dais, went up the steps and opened the pink curtains. His oily calm voice mingled with their musical tinkling.

“My Lady—Sister Jean is here.”

He saluted and withdrew, the sibilance of his slippers dying away as he crossed the marble floor.

Long before he had reached the bronze door, Sister Jean threw herself on her knees and buried her face in her hands. “Oh, My Lady—My Lady! What can I say? What can I do?”

Unmoved, the reclining woman watched her. “Kneel there.”

“Madonna!”

“Kneel, child—but look at me.”

One might have thought of a rabbit and a serpent as the frightened girl raised her eyes to that lovely, expressionless face. “Yes, Madonna.”

“You brought Claudette to me. It was well done. I accepted her. She has beauty and intelligence, and birth. Tonight, I left her in your charge. She has gone. Her clothes are found in your room. A further cape of mine is missing. Be good enough to explain this matter.”

In a voice stifled by sobs the girl replied.

“Madonna, forgive me! I had only just returned to England, and I wanted so desperately, so desperately, to see— someone. Claudette was asleep—I thought for hours. To make more sure, I removed her clothes from her room, and—went out.”

Sobs checked her words entirely.

“Well, continue, Jean. I have not spoken.”

“My Lady, My Lady! I was gone only ten minutes, and when I returned...”

“The length of your absence is of no consequence. You were absent without my leave. For the women of our Order there are no *someones*. They live the lives of cloistered nuns until I choose a *someone* for them. My wishes must be obeyed. I do not mar my penitents with whips. I have other methods. Claudette must be

found—and we must meet this interfering *someone*, Jean, His name, child?”

“My Lady! Dear My Lady! I swear he—”

“His name, child?”

“Please, Madonna—please, I beg of you!—don’t punish him for—”

3

And in Donovan’s apartment in Bruton Street, Steel Maitland was saying, “Yes, Donovan—Sumuru. A woman who sets no more value on human life than *that*.” He crushed a cone of ash in the tray beside him. “There’s a lot to be said for her system. After all, certain governments we know have got a long way with similar methods.”

But Donovan, his habitually good-humoured face a mask of perplexity, asked, “Then what are her methods?”

“Well”—Maitland smoked reflectively—“women are her chief victims. For instance, I am trying to find out what became of Claudette, the daughter of Marcel Duquesne, the Paris journalist, who disappeared on her way home from Algiers. And she is only one of many. But we’re wasting precious time. Do you know Sir Miles Tristram?”

Donovan considered the name for a moment, and then, “Yes,” he replied. “Used to be in your Indian Civil Service, and afterwards for a while was an Assistant Commissioner at Scotland Yard.”

“That’s my man. His unsavoury private life led to his retirement, although he was, professionally, a brilliant success. Well, he lives in Charles Street. I had hoped to save him. But the fact that all approaches to his house are efficiently patrolled leads me to fear the worst—”

“The police—”

“Police my grandmother! He has been marked down by one of the few first class brains in the world. The entire Force couldn’t save him! There’s just one chance, and its success depends upon my getting at Tristram personally.”

“This thing sounds—”

“Like lunacy? It does. But it’s real,” Maitland picked up his waterproof. ‘They don’t know where I have gone. So, with fair luck we may get across Berkeley Square, now the railings are down, without being spotted. Once in Charles Street the fun begins!—What’s that?’”

He paused abruptly, the blue coat over his arm. He listened, and Donovan, stricken motionless in turn listened also.

Footsteps in the otherwise silent street, of which vaguely both had been aware, had stopped immediately below the windows. Donovan stood there, questioning Maitland with his eyes.

The footsteps passed on.

“Only someone pausing to strike a light.”

Maitland nodded. “Maybe. Mustn’t get jumpy. Listen, Donovan. Tristram’s one resident servant—a man called Harper—is standing by to open the door the moment I get there. (Same arrangement that I made with you.) Jump into this waterproof.”

“What! Why?”

“I am prepared to learn from the enemy. Those cunning devils tried to get me arrested by a passing policeman! You might be mistaken for a plain clothes man anywhere. Haven’t got a bowler hat, I suppose?”

“I have not,” Donovan replied, as Maitland forcibly helped him into the coat.

“Soft brim one, then. If anyone tries to stop us, just say ‘Police force. Stand aside’—they won’t spot your American accent—and hang on to my arm as if you had me in custody. They will think their trick has worked after all and that you are taking me to the lock-up. If they don’t”—he thrust an automatic into Donovan’s hand—“show ‘em that! Come on. Where’s your hat?”

Of that nightmare scurry along Bruton Street and across Berkeley Square,

Donovan's impressions were hazy, except that, aided by the now friendly fog which hemmed them in like a prison wall, it represented, later, a crossing of the borderline; it had swept him from a rather weary world he knew into a world whose existence he had never even suspected, a world of horrors unimagined.

At the corner of Charles Street: "Here they are!" breathed Maitland. "Grab my arm. Play up." Then, raising his voice, "I tell you, my man," he shouted, "that you are making a damn fool of yourself. I am a British officer. My business here is urgent "

"You can either come quietly or have the bracelets on," Donovan replied in a loud gruff voice.

Two short, stocky figures had manifested from somewhere, and loomed threateningly just ahead. Donovan pushed Maitland forward.

"I warn you, constable," Maitland exclaimed. "I am known to your superiors. This will mean back to the beat for you."

"Move on there!" Donovan ordered the skulking pair, who seemed to be closing in. "I am a police officer."

Both fell back as they passed, and Donovan had never a glimpse of their faces,

"I demand to be taken to ..."

"You'll be taken where I take you!"

"Next door but one," murmured Maitland. "Pray heaven Harper is standing by!"

A moment later he plunged suddenly to the left and Donovan heard a muffled bell ringing behind same invisible door. It rang three times quickly and then twice slowly. A narrow oblong, dimly luminous in the darkness, became visible.

"All lights out, Harper! In you come, Donovan."

Donovan hurled himself at the vague doorway, fell over an unseen obstacle, and sprawled on the carpet. He heard the door bang. It silenced racing footsteps which swept up behind. Then came a crashing blow on the door. Someone shot a bolt into place, and as Donovan stood up, a voice right beside him said,

nervously:

“Dr. Steel Maitland, sir?”

“Here,” came Maitland’s voice. “You all right, Donovan?”

“I think so!”

“Is there any other way in, Harper?”

“No, sir. May I turn on the light?”

“Yes.”

A switch clicked and they found themselves in a miniature panelled entrance hall, doors right and left, and a stairway ahead. Harper, the manservant, proved to be a flabby type, pallid (but this was no cause for wonder) and having the heavy sensual jowl of a tired Silenus. He stood staring at them, his lips twitching.

“Sir Miles?” Maitland asked sharply.

“Is in his study, sir. He requested that I should not disturb him.”

“I imagine the clatter of our arrival will have done so, however. He is well?”—“He was his usual self when I was last in the study, sir.”

Maitland’s teeth glittered through his black beard as he turned to Donovan.

“Second try to our side: Lead the way, Harper.”

“Certainly, sir.”

Harper, quite obviously, had been reduced to a state of utter bewilderment: his expression was pathetic. Ascending to the first floor of this cramped little house, he rapped on a door, opened it, and announced:

“Dr. Steel Maitland, sir, and another gentleman.”

Harper stood aside as Maitland and Donovan entered—and never, to the end of their days, did Donovan or Maitland forget the study of Sir Miles Tristram.

It was a small oblong room with a low ceiling, and its atmosphere struck one as unpleasantly stuffy. This was due in part to the presence of heavy window curtains, in part to that indefinable smell which belongs to ancient volumes, old furniture, to certain kinds of relics—and in part to something else.

Several shelves bulged with books, almost exclusively of an erotic Character. There were some reproductions of Pompeian frescoes, and the available wall space was otherwise filled with figure studies of a more than startling character.

There were a number of statuettes which would have shocked the most liberal-minded observer and some framed photographs of an artistic depravity which certainly shocked Donovan.

Indian antiques, chiefly sadistic in design, crowded a glazed cabinet: and the room was strangely still.

At its further end, an old carved walnut desk was placed in a book-lined recess. Immediately above the chair behind it hung a square oil painting which the American journalist decided he could not attempt to describe in print otherwise than to say that it represented a grotesque god seated cross-legged on a golden dais, obese and leering, laved in the smoke of incense, to whom votaries male and female made obscene offerings.

Upon the desk, in addition to an untidy mass of papers, they saw an open jewel-case as large as a painter's portfolio, containing the most wonderfully graded collection of Oriental sapphires which either had ever set eyes upon. The range of colour was amazing, the manner of their disposition worthy of a great artist. Under the light of a reading lamp which burned on the desk they glowed with the magic of Arabian fable.

And in the chair, hunched forward, one podgy hand clenched on the desk, and the other resting on a Chinese snuffbox, was Sir Miles Tristram, a vast carnal figure, his face that of an aged satyr, his several chins bulging over the collar of his dinner jacket; lascivious god of the picture incarnated in gross flesh.

Something peculiar in his appearance brought Donovan up with a start as he crossed the threshold. Staring hard, he saw what it was. Tristram had a watchmaker's glass screwed into his right eye. He was uncannily still.

“Good evening, Tristram.”

Steel Maitland spoke clearly, indeed loudly. But Sir Miles Tristram did not move. Maitland stepped forward.

“You were expecting me, I believe?”

But the man hunched over the desk never stirred. Some slight draught set up in that stagnant air by their entrance crept around the recess; it fluttered a few straggling hairs upon the nearly bald massive bowed head.

“Maitland!” Donovan whispered, “he is unnaturally *still*. See! He never moves... and he is clutching something in his hand!”

“Stand back, Donovan! Don’t touch him. Stand back. Leave it to me.”

In two long strides Maitland was behind the desk, bending over the seated man. He grasped those heavy, slumped shoulders and pulled. The figure remained immovable. Donovan heard Maitland’s teeth snap together as he clenched his jaws.

He pulled again, then desisted—and slowly straightened himself. His eyes, when he stared across at Donovan, shone brightly as two of Sir Miles’s gems.

“I was wrong, Donovan,” he said quietly. “The second try was *not* to us.”

Chapter Three

1

“ENDEAVOUR to be quite exact, Harper. Omit no detail.”

In a constricted but perfectly formal dining-room, Harper faced Maitland and Donovan. Here, were no traces of that pathological eroticism which fouled Sir Miles’s sanctum. The manservant looked more flabby and fishlike than ever. He knew that his master was dead, but Maitland had not permitted him to enter the study. That ghastly spectacle, and recognition of the astounding rigidity of Tristram’s body, had induced a sudden nausea in Donovan’s case, from which he was by no means fully recovered.

Harper moistened twitching lips.

“At the time that you phoned, sir, and I answered your call, the lady I have mentioned was with Sir Miles.”

“How long had she been there?”

“Not more than five minutes.”

“Was she present when you delivered my message?”

“She was, sir.”

“What was she doing?”

“She was sitting facing Sir Miles across the desk, and a green sapphire lay between them. Her finger was touching it as I came in.”

“What exactly, did you say?”

“I said—” Harper closed his eyes in an effort of concentration—“Dr. Steel Maitland has just phoned, sir, and requests that you will remain at home until he arrives. Just what you told me—ahem—to say.”

“Exactly. What did he reply?”

“Nothing, sir. He simply nodded and handed me his snuffbox—which I took away and refilled.”

Steel Maitland, who had been swaying from foot to foot as though the floor were a moving deck, stood stock still.

“You did *what*?”

“Refilled Sir Miles’s snuffbox, sir. It was one of my duties.”

Maitland stared so hard that Harper ceased speaking as he watched him. “Had you forgotten to fill it, then?”

“Not at all, sir—at least—not to the best of my recollection. But Sir Miles used a large quantity of snuff, and when I went to give him your message, he held out his snuffbox and said (I report—ahem—his exact words): ‘Why the hell haven’t you filled my snuffbox?’ I therefore carried it down, cleaned it, as is my custom, refilled it and took it back. That was the last time—I saw him, sir.”

Something oddly like emotion moved Harper, and Steel Mainland’s manner underwent a subtle change.

“I am obliged to you, Harper. I am to understand, then, that to the best of your knowledge Sir Miles’s snuffbox had been filled as usual, but that when he handed it to you it was empty?”

“I couldn’t say exactly empty, sir. There was just a little dust at the bottom, but not sufficient for—ahem—a pinch.”

“You say you cleaned the box. In what way?”

“I washed it out thoroughly, and dried it with a clean leather before refilling it.”

Steel Maitland nodded. “Bad luck. Had you ever seen this woman before?”

“No, sir. But I believe she had phoned. I think I recognised the voice. She probably wished to remain—incognito. I imagine she came to dispose of the green sapphire.”

“Quite so! Describe her.”

“Very pretty, sir.” Harper rolled his eyes rapturously. “Smartly dressed. Uncommonly handsome—shoulders. Her frock was décolleté, sir, so I couldn’t help noticing. Ahem.”

“But what was she like? Dark or fair? Tall or short?”

“I couldn’t swear to the exact colour of her hair, sir. She wore a sort of gold net over it. She was young—”

“How young?”

“I should have said in her early twenties. Sir Miles did not escort her to the door—which surprised me. She came down alone, and informed me that he did not wish to be disturbed.”

And then Steel Maitland asked what Donovan thought, at the time, to be a singular question.

“Did you notice her ankles?”

Harper’s expression was indescribably complicated.

“Her ankles, sir?”

“Exactly: her ankles.”

“Well—ahem—they were very well turned, if I may say so.”

“Did she wear a bangle on either, for instance?”

“A bangle on her ankle, sir? Not to the best of my recollection.”

“Oh. Had she a car waiting?”

“No, sir. I offered to obtain a taxi—if possible; but she declined.”

There was a momentary silence. The house, and the street outside, seemed to be unnaturally hushed. Donovan thought of that gross, immovable body slumped in the chair upstairs. He wondered what awful thing had reduced a massive frame to dead, but gruesomely solid, flesh, in so short a time...

When Chief Inspector Ives arrived, with others, the inspector stared hard at Steel Maitland and then shot out a large, muscular hand.

“Dr. Maitland! Why—this is like old times!”

“Glad to see you, Ives.” Mainland’s teeth glittered through his black beard.

He had been a divisional police surgeon before the war and had more than once solved problems strictly outside his professional province. This was a real reunion.

“Do you know the cause of death, Doctor?—or, let me see, isn’t it Commander now?”

“Plain ‘Doctor’ once more. Yes—I know what killed Sir Miles, and I propose to be present at the autopsy. When I have gone over the ground with you, Ives, I should be obliged for the loan of your car. My friend and I are—too tired to walk back ...”

2

Caspar was crossing the marble floor, that eternal smile upon his thin lips. When he drew the tinkling curtains, the woman reclining upon the couch did not seem to have altered her position in any way. But her eyes were nearly closed, so that they glinted through heavy lashes with an effect of smouldering fire.

“Sister Dolores is here, My Lady.”

“Send her to me. What news of Claudette?”

“None, My Lady.”

“Has Sister Jean confessed the name of her friend?”

“Not yet, My Lady.”

“You know what to do. You may go.”

Caspar performed his profound obeisance, closed the curtains and glided away on whispering slippers. He drew aside the heavy drapery in an arched opening

and called.

“Sister Dolores is wanted by Our Lady.”

And those other voices, beyond, took up the call.

“Sister Dolores...”

When the girl who was summoned, appeared, she proved to be a brilliant brunette, quite evidently Spanish. She wore an evening toilette which did full justice to perfectly moulded shoulders, and her dark hair was confined in a jewelled golden net. She carried a metal despatch box, and appeared to be intensely agitated.

Caspar having conducted her to the recess and retired, pent-up emotion overwhelmed the girl.

“Madonna!” she whispered—“Madonna!”

Sister Dolores had a fascinating accent.

“Kneel there, child, where I can see your eyes. You are trembling.”

From those golden tones the girl seemed to draw strength; but: “Oh, dear My Lady, it is—dreadful!” she said brokenly.

“What is dreadful, child? Did he die horribly?”

“No, no.”

“You replaced the snuff? You are sure that you spilled none when you emptied the box into your handbag?”

“None—no. He is out of the room. He has gone to bring his case of sapphires. I replace the—other stuff—in the box, and put the box back on his desk. When he returns... he takes some. And then—it is dreadful.”

“Explain what you mean.”

“His man comes in with a message! He hands this man the box and tell him to refill it! The man goes—and I am waiting—waiting—and watching the other

one until the man returns!”

“Did this man notice anything?”

“No, Madonna, although, already—the other is quite still. When—it is finished, I have to leave the sapphire you give me to sell to him.”

“It is of no consequence. But why did you leave it?”

Dolores struggled to regain self-possession.

“His hand is clutching it—and I cannot move it! But I take his keys, as you order, and open the drawer in his desk. Here is the steel box. I carry it out under my cloak.”

She placed the metal box on an inlaid coffee-table beside the couch. She was still trembling violently—but listening for the music of that wonderful voice.

“You have done well, Dolores. But why are you trembling? It is better that one man—an ugly man, ugly in mind and body and soul—should die, than that our plans for a beautiful world should suffer. Here, in this box you bring, are details of our Order which only *he* possessed. Tonight, he meant to show them to someone else. I honoured you with the task of removing this danger. You have done well. Just think what the world might have been spared if one such as I had removed Adolf Hitler before his scheme to wreck civilization had come to pass. Look at me, Dolores. Your eyes are lovely behind their veil of tears. You have done well. Let me see you smile, child.”

“Yes ... dear My Lady—”

3

“You are naturally anxious to know,” said Steel Maitland, lolling in the red armchair and lighting a cheroot, “what killed Sir Miles Tristram. Well, the answer is: he died of *rigor Kubus*—so called because its first recorded appearance was among the Kubus, a primitive tribe in Sumatra. It was described by the Dutch physician, Van Voorden, in 1923. He traced these cases to a secondary infection following the sting of a species of scorpion sometimes found in the neighbourhood. You noted (in fact, you turned quite pale) that Tristram’s body was like granite to the touch. Whatever is clutched in his hand we shall

never be able to recover— except with a chisel. The jeweller's glass is also immovable— and indeed they will have to bury him like a sitting idol.”

Donovan emptied his tumbler, and crossing to the buffet, refilled it.

“But—Sumatra! Tristram died right here in London!”

“I know—where I feared he would die. This thing operates like black magic, Donovan... and unless I am greatly mistaken, it is operated by a woman!”

“A woman!” Donovan stared incredulously. “You must mean a she-devil!”

“She-devil if you prefer it. No doubt you will ask: What is her object? I reply: Just what I am here to find out. One thing I know already. She is that most formidable of all creatures, a fanatic of genius. Her range of knowledge is stupendous, and exact. She never hesitates to employ it.”

“And in a sweet, gentle way!”

“You have witnessed merely one trivial incident; the removal of an obstacle. Women, as I have said, are her chief victims. In addition to Claudette, the daughter of Marcel Duquesne, why did Mrs. Orlington, the young wife of the Air Vice-Marshal, notify her husband that she had obtained permission to join him in Cyprus, and then fail to meet the plane by which she was to travel from England? Where did she go? What has become of her? Where is Claudette Duquesne?”

It suddenly occurred to Donovan that he was gaping like a village idiot.

“If I were to show you the list of missing women which has now been compiled, it would appall you. I don't suggest that all have gone to her; but it is certain that a large proportion has.”

“White slave traffic on a major scale?”

“Yes—but with a different motive driving it. As for Sir Miles Tristram, although he was officially unrecognised, I may tell you in confidence that he was sometimes employed on intricate investigations. He had a uncanny flair for such work: they found that out when he was at Scotland Yard. Certain incidents in North Africa led to his being sent out there. I gave him all the information then

in my possession, and he vanished into the blue. That was more than two years ago—just after I saw you in Cairo. It was an inquiry after his own heart. He reappeared in London and I came here to meet him. He had made many discoveries, and so had I. There's a stout steel box in my baggage. Which contains all the evidence I have managed to accumulate to date. I dare not try to get it here tonight, but it's safe enough where I left it. Together with Tristram's discoveries it might have led us somewhere. Now—we shall never know what Tristram knew."

"But, Maitland!" Donovan exclaimed—"who *is* this woman?"

Maitland shook his head.

"I confess myself to be on uncertain ground. She was the subject of an unfinished sonnet left by Romain Ravillac, the young French poet who jumped overboard from a liner two years after the war. In it, among other things, he refers to her hair as 'clarte du soleil entrelacee,' which I take to mean woven sunshine. On the other hand, a stolid Russian diplomat, who met her in Paris, speaks of her as dark, sombre, and also a 'a deep, secret well.' That she is a woman of unusual personal beauty seems to be established. In all other respects, accounts differ. But if you can imagine one possessing the arts of Circe and the allurements of Calypso, the brains of Winston Churchill and the soul of a Himmler, you will have formed a rough impression of the Marquise Sumuru."

"Japanese?"

Again Steel Maitland shook his head.

"I have no idea of her nationality. But she is reputed amongst other things to be the widow of a Japanese marquis who committed *hara-kiri*, shortly after the first bombing of Tokyo. As Japanese aristocrats usually married in their own class, she may be Japanese."

A score of questions, doubts, suspicions, flocked to Donovan's mind; what he said—and he spoke in a hushed voice —was: "But *rigor Kubus*? What causes this frightful thing?"

Maitland took a sip of whisky.

"It is caused by the spores of a minute fungus. It invades the lymphatic

membranes and multiplies incredibly. As it moves on, it first produces complete paralysis and then brings about a blood change which converts living tissue to something as hard as marble. A lot depends on the point of infection, and I actually had with me a vaccine (Van Voorden's preparation) which, ordinarily, might have saved him. However—not only did I arrive too late, but nothing could have saved him.”

“Why?” Donovan stood by the buffet watching Maitland, a thin spiral of smoke coiling up from his cheroot.

“Infection can occur by swallowing the spores. In this case the onset of the awful symptoms is deferred—sometimes for hours. It can be injected. This method is swift. But Tristram had inhaled a tremendous shot of the stuff, and it went straight to the higher nerve centres. He probably lost consciousness a few minutes after Harper left him.”

“Inhaled it?”

“Of course. Surely that's plain: Tristram, when absorbed, was curiously absent-minded. Someone (unseen by him) emptied the snuff from his box and replaced it by a or so heavily impregnated with the poison spores.”

“Why not merely have added the spores to what was already there?”

“Analysis would have discovered it. We are dealing with a lady who leaves nothing to chance. When he found the box to be empty, he told Harper to take it away and refill it.”

“But what devil...”

“We haven't far to look, Donovan! A she-devil. The agent who performed the conjuring trick with the snuffbox was that glamorous damsel (‘uncommonly handsome shoulders’ you may recall) who came to sell Sir Miles the green sapphire.”

“Good God, Maitland! You mean that this girl committed a cold-blooded and loathsome murder?”

“No doubt about it. He must have known, even before my message, that he was in danger; but Tristram, even if he stood on the scaffold, would never have

denied himself the visit of a pretty woman. His second interest in life was sapphires, his collection of which is famed throughout Europe. A neat scheme.”

“I suppose she took it away?”

“Unless that’s what he holds clasped in his hand.”

“But, Maitland—” Donovan moved forward, and none too steadily—“why was this horror perpetrated? And why had you some of the vaccine with you?”

Maitland tapped a slender grey cone into a tray and turned, looking up at Donovan.

“As well ask why I’m here, when where I want to be is at sea. You know how I always managed to keep a small sailing craft? Well, the war gave me a chance I had waited for: a chance to go to sea in earnest. Why do you suppose I retired? Needn’t have done so. There’s no one dependent upon me. And why would nothing short of physical force induce me to budge outside your door tonight?”

“I can answer the last point, but not the others.”

“Then I’ll tell you. Two cases of *rigor Kubus* occurred in North Africa, just before our last meeting in Cairo, and one of them came into my hands. Knowing, as I did, that the rare fungus which produces it cannot grow there, I decided that these deaths (both victims died, having become practically fossilized) had been brought about by human agency. I obtained special leave in order to make inquiries. One of the victims was a distinguished diplomat. These inquiries, Donovan, led me to a horrible, but quite unavoidable conclusion. A new and deathly menace was in being. The Marquise Sumuru was loosed upon the world!”

“But I cannot imagine how she contrives to move about. Surely, with all the present restrictions ...”

“It is just these restrictions which have made it possible! The aftermath of war has given her this opportunity. Women of all classes, from the highest to the displaced persons class, are constantly travelling.”

“And where do you think she is at present?”

Steel Maitland's reply reduced Donovan to temporary, numbed silence:

"Here in London! Sir Miles Tristram was sufficiently important to warrant her personal attention. In fact, it would not surprise me to learn that the visitor who tampered with his snuffbox, the Medusa who turned Tristram to stone, was Sumuru in person!"

"Maitland—Maitland—Good God!"

"Have I surprised you?" Maitland looked up; then he stood up. "Donovan, what's the matter?"

"Maitland—heaven forgive me—in the pandemonium I had no chance to tell you. But I believe Sumuru has been right here, in this apartment—tonight!"

4

That portion of Steel Maitland's face which was not bearded, perceptibly paled as Donovan told the story of his mysterious caller. He spoke disconnectedly, and once raised his glass to his lips.

Maitland sprang forward, and took it from Donovan's hand: his eyes gleamed in a fierce way.

"Are you mad!" he said quietly. "We were seen, and heard, speaking together in Bond Street. *She* followed you."

And his words added a new terror—one, perhaps unaccountably, which Donovan had overlooked. Maitland had said that the ghastly thing called *rigor Kubus* could be produced by *swallowing* the spores—when the onset was deferred, "sometimes for hours"... The visitor had been alone whilst Donovan had searched for the missing key. The whisky decanter had stood on a buffet just inside the living-room... and both he and Maitland had drunk from it since!

"Try to recall even the most trivial details, Donovan. Both our lives may depend upon it."

"I am doing my best. And the more I think about her the more I believe that she was not Sumuru—nor any agent of Sumuru's. No woman could have simulated such fear, such despair. She convinced me, absolutely."

Steel Maitland, who was swaying from foot to foot, and whose features had grown grimly set, forced a smile.

“Sumuru could convince the Archbishop of Canterbury that she was St. Cecilia! However, tell me—what was the colour of her hair?”

But that simple question was one which Donovan found himself unable to answer. He recalled, with some astonishment, that owing to the placing of the light he had never, from first to last, succeeded in making up his mind on that point!

“There are you! You may remember that Harper’s evidence was equally useless, in this connection, regarding Sir Miles’s visitor. Ravillac’s ‘woven sunshine’ and the Russian’s ‘dark, sombre’ all over again! Did you notice her ankles?”

That singular question—the question which Maitland had put to Harper and which now he fired, catapult fashion, at Donovan, produced a return of that embarrassment to which the American journalist was subject.

“I could not well avoid doing so, Maitland. They were—shapely.”

“Anything else?”

Donovan shook his head.

“You will remember that she wore rather high legged slippers trimmed with fur. But our suspicions are groundless. She was too young—”

“I have no idea of Sumuru’s age. Whilst you continue, Donovan, permit me to check your pulse. My own is normal. But we may have to take swift action.”

Moving forward, Donovan extended his wrist.

“Her pallor,” we went on, “which at the end had become alarming, could not possibly have been induced by any acting. Finally...”

Maitland raised his eyes from his watch and dropped Donovan’s wrist. “Well—finally!”

“The most amazing thing of all. Except for her fur cape, which I have tried to

describe, and the blue slippers... she was completely nude!”

Chapter Four

1

DONOVAN glanced at the clock, then out of a window into darkness. Useless to ignore facts. It was growing late and Maitland had not turned up.

“Don’t leave the street door open tonight,” he had advised. “You may have another queer visitor. I’ll be all right now that I have a spare key. If I’m detained after dark, I shall pick up a convoy.”

The fact that they had come to no harm, had led Maitland reluctantly to accept Donovan’s view that the girl who had appeared and disappeared so mysteriously was neither Sumuru nor one of her agents. “But,” said Maitland, “she may be one of her victims. Her singular behaviour certainly points in that direction. We have a promising clue to work upon there—Lady Orpsley—your landlady. Do you know where she has gone?”

All Donovan knew was that she had gone to Switzerland, but he gave Maitland an introduction to the mutual friend who had leased the apartment for him during his absence, and Maitland had set out.

His baggage had been transferred, by a roundabout route, to Donovan’s apartment, which Maitland had proposed to make his base of operations against this formidable enemy. His parting words had been:

“Look out for yourself, Donovan. Get in early. She may have you on her list. And—oh, look out for your naked friend!”

How grotesque it seemed, this frame of mind, this fear for a man in the heart of London, when Donovan thought of perils survived—bullets and bombs! Yet, he had seen enough of the methods of Sumuru, whoever Sumuru might be, to convince him that London offered no sanctuary to those who stood in her path.

Death by *rigor Kubus* was not a pleasant death.

“Whilst certain scientists have been exploring the properties of penicillin,” Maitland had remarked, “others have been employed, you see, on almost parallel

experiments aimed at a different target.”

What should he do? Was it his duty to wait for Maitland? On the whole, he thought it was. On the other hand, with imagination on fire, to induce feverish restlessness, the prospect of such a lonely vigil appalled him. He yearned for human contacts. Of that all but incredible menace which overhung their lives he was bound in honour not to speak, but a fellow newspaper man whom he had met at the office that morning had suggested a drink at his club around this time and Donovan was inclined to walk across.

In the end inclination won.

He met the porter-handyman downstairs, and:

“Oh,” he said, “if Dr. Steel Maitland comes in, tell him I shall be back in half an hour.”

“Well—I’m just going off duty, Mr. Donovan. But I’ll tell him if I see him. Good night.”

“Good night.”

It was fairly dark, for although yesterday’s fog had dispersed, the sky was cloudy when he opened the door and stepped out into Bruton Street, so that he almost bumped into a woman who stood there.

“Oh, is it Mr. Donovan?” she asked.

Her voice possessed an ingratiating quality, and, bad as was the lighting, Donovan could see by the faint glow of a lamp in the hallway behind him, that her face was heavily made up. Now, during the time that London had accommodated so many overseas troops, it was a fact that Bond Street and Conduit Street, both less than a hundred yards from his door, had earned an unenviable after-dark reputation. This they had maintained. And although he could not imagine how this girl had learned his name, he drew the not unnatural conclusion that she was a lady of the town.

“Why do you ask?” he replied, perhaps somewhat stiffly.

“Oh, I’m not trying to get off with you,” she snapped. “Don’t be afraid of that. I

may look at bit suspicious, but it's because I didn't stop to take off my make-up. I've run all the way."

"I'm sorry." Her manner, indeed, had gone far to change Donovan's mind. "You have run all the way from where?"

"From the Colombe d'Or Theatre. I'm in the new show there. I was just going to ring the bell when you came out."

Her story hung together well, for he had noted that she seemed to be somewhat breathless. The Colombe d'Or presented revue featuring strip and innuendo, and the evening performance, Donovan estimated, would already have ended. The theatre was well patronised by London's floating population.

"I'm sorry if I seemed abrupt. As a matter of fact you rather startled me. Yes, I am Mark Donovan! Can I be of any service?"

"Well—I hope so. I'm Jackie de Lara. Maybe you've seen me at the Colombe d'Or?"

"I have only just got back to London, Miss de Lara. I have been nowhere yet."

"Let's hurry," she urged, and taking Donovan's arm began to walk swiftly along Bruton Street towards Berkeley Square.

He had observed, now, that Jackie de Lara (who had a marked North Country accent) wore no hat, although her fair hair, dressed in the modish manner, was rather badly groomed. She was wrapped in a fur coat of a not notably prosperous appearance.

"But where are we going?"

"To my place in Shepherd Market. It's no distance. You're an American, aren't you?"

"I certainly come from the United States, Miss de Lara."

"Oh, everybody calls me Jackie. Listen Mark: This is urgent. Your girl friend is hiding in my flat."

Now, this simple statement, confidently made, had a remarkable effect upon Mark Donovan. He was uneasily conscious of the fact that his mysterious visitor of the night before had left upon his mind an impression which he feared would be a lasting one. She was, by far, the loveliest girl he had ever set eyes upon; and in her voice, her manner, her helpless appeal in acute distress, Donovan had found something quite irresistible. His heart gave a jump.

“Why do you say that—er—Jackie? Did she tell you so?”

“Tell me!” Jackie exclaimed, all the time hurrying him along. “Didn’t she fall into my arms right outside your door last night? I’m not asking what the row was about, Mark. It’s no business of mine. But some girls are extra sensitive. You’ve just got to make it up.”

Onto the thrill which had set his heart jumping there was now superimposed a fit of that acute embarrassment to which he was subject. By means of what peculiar reticence his visitor had led Jackie to infer that her predicament was due to a lover’s quarrel he could not imagine. But the idea, for all its implications, was oddly gratifying.

“She spent the night with you, then?”

“She wouldn’t leave me, Mark—and I wouldn’t have let her go if she’d wanted to. I never saw a girl so scared— not in my whole life. I was afraid she was going mad. She just clung to me like a frightened baby and wouldn’t tell me where she lived or who I should call up. I stayed in with her all today until I had to go to the theatre.”

“You mean she was terribly afraid of something?”

“Afraid! My! What had you done to her?” Jackie pulled up (they were right on the borders of Shepherd Market) and stared at Donovan in the semi-darkness. “You don’t look like a brute. I nearly had her persuaded to let me go and fetch you just before I left, but not quite. She locked herself in when I came away, and then, an hour ago, she called me up at the theatre and asked me to find you and bring you along. Here we are!”

The entrance to Jackie’s apartment proved to be up a narrow stair beside a greengrocer’s shop.

“Bit dark here,” Donovan muttered—

There came a suppressed scream from Jackie. And something—a formless shadow—slipped out into the street, and was gone!

“What the devil’s that?” Donovan cried. “Quick! The switch! Where’s the switch?”

“Bottom of the stairs... Someone was hiding! Rushed right past me. Can’t you find the switch?”

Donovan took a torch from his pocket. “Here we are— eh? What?”

Jackie stared hard at a jagged rent in the woodwork. “Well! Would you believe it? The switch has gone! Someone’s pinched the whole blessed fitting! *What* will they be pinching next?”

“Quick, Jackie! Quick! Which floor are you on? This isn’t just an ordinary theft—”

“Top. But what do you mean?”

“Come on!”

He raced upstairs, Jackie following, and directed a ray of light on to a neat brass plate inscribed:

Miss Jackie de Lara.

Jackie rang the bell and then, stooping to the letter-box, called: “Claudette! Open the door, honey! It’s me—Jackie. I’ve brought him!”

Standing behind her on the landing, tiptoes with expectation, Donovan still had time to ask himself where he had heard, and recently, that name, Claudette. Then, he detected a sound of movement, the slipping of a bolt—and the door was opened.

2

She stood before him, the mystery girl.

Donovan was quite frank in his report—published later— of those extraordinary events which marked Sumuru's appearance in London, and at this point he confesses that, quite irrationally, he had an impulse to take the girl in his arms—this complete stranger who had materialised out of the night—and kiss her.

Claudette (as he supposed her name to be) wore an elaborate and somewhat revealing rest-robe trimmed with fur, which Donovan suspected must belong to Jackie. He knew, now, that her curly hair was of a glorious shade of chestnut, that her eyes were deep blue. He had no time for further consideration of this, provoking vision for:

“In you go!” said Jackie, and seizing Donovan's arm, pushed him inside. “Don't mind *me*. I understand.”

“Thank God you're safe!” said Donovan. “So it really is *you*?”

“Yes... Please forgive me for—”

“There's nothing to forgive. Tell me—did anyone knock or ring here a moment ago?”

“No.”

“Did you hear anything?”

“No—”

Donovan found himself in a tiny living-room, quite tastefully furnished, a minute kitchenette opening out of it. As he went in, and Claudette, a faint flush sweeping over her-face, timidly entered with him, Jackie, throwing her coat on a settee, to reveal the fact that she wore a one-piece dress and no stockings, grasped each by an arm, threw open a door, and:

“Go on!” she exclaimed. “What does it matter anyway? Let bygones be bygones.” Her painted face, which Donovan found to be by no means unattractive, positively radiated goodwill and her eyes were happily moist. “Never bear malice. Get in there and make it up, while I take this grease off and fry some bacon and eggs.”

With which she shoved the pair of them unceremoniously into the only other

room, her bedroom, and slammed the door!

Donovan had enough presence of mind left to notice a large wardrobe, a commodious bed, a settee, two armchairs and a dressing-table when his attention was claimed by a number of photographs of Jackie de Lara in her stage “costume.” His constitutional embarrassment rose to boiling point; he grew hot all over—and he remembered the message he had left for Maitland.

“Pardon me one moment,” he muttered and opened the door. “You are an angel, Jackie, but I must call my apartment—immediately “

Jackie, who was pulling on a large pair of wash-leather gloves, regarded him without visible enthusiasm.

“You’re the most cold-blooded American I’ve met yet! I thought the girl friend *always* came first! There it is, in that cubby-hole. Fire away.”

“Thank you. Believe me, the girl friend does come first. But this call is most urgent.”

As he crossed the little lobby and dialled his own number, Jackie whispered to Claudette:

“Make it up with him, honey! Be a good girl. He’s crazy about you!”

Two doors closed quietly as Maitland’s voice came over the line.

“Hullo—that you, Maitland?”

“Glad to hear from you, Donovan. Was getting alarmed. Your hall porter said half an hour.”

“Listen, Maitland—I can’t speak too loudly. But I’ve traced *the girl!* She’s right here with me, in this building!”

There was a perceptible change in Maitland’s voice when he replied, “You mean the girl who ran into your flat here last night, pretended to faint, and then disappeared?”

“Sure! that’s who I mean—and I’m not so certain she was *pretending*. I’m at 98

Shepherd Market, top floor. I think you're quite wrong about her, Maitland. I'm convinced that this girl is four-square. I found her here locked in and terrified. She's evidently hiding from someone."

There was a slight pause, and then:

"What's her name? Has she mentioned anything?"

"I haven't had time to question her yet. I rang you immediately. Someone has traced me here, I believe, Maitland."

"I should be surprised if someone *hadn't*! I know you are being covered. Stay right where you are—and whatever you do, keep a tight hold on that girl—"

"I aim to do so!"

"Watch you step! I'll call Inspector Ives now. Directly he gets here from the Yard, we'll be straight along—98 Shepherd Market ..."

3

Some two minutes later, a girl at a switchboard in the big building on the Embankment, said for perhaps the hundredth time that night:—

"Scotland Yard."

"Dr. Steel Maitland here. Put me through immediately to Chief Inspector Ives."

"Yes, sir."

There was a pause, and then:

"Chief Inspector Ives, here."

"Steel Maitland speaking. Listen, Ives—Mr. Donovan appears to have blundered on to the track of the woman, Sumuru! He has just rung me up from an address in Shepherd Market. He's standing by with a very important witness—or it may be the woman herself! Pick me up at Mr. Donovan's flat in Bruton Street. Bring two good men—right away."

"Be with you in eight minutes, sir!"

“Good! Someone’s ringing away at this doorbell. Expect you in eight minutes.”

And in fact little more than that time had elapsed when a police car came whirling into Bruton Street and was pulled up at Donovan’s door. Inspector Ives jumped out.

“Stand by here, Ford. I’ll be right down.”

“Very good, sir.”

Ives raced up to the first landing and rang. He repeated this ringing three times. Then, he stooped to the letter-box and called.

“Hullo there, Dr. Maitland! Open the door, sir! Inspector Ives here.”

But no one answered; and the inspector, kneeling, peered in through the narrow slot... and saw something. He sprang upright.

“H’m! Looks bad!”

He raced downstairs and out into the street in a matter of seconds. Scotland Yard was on its mettle in these days.

“Quick, Ford! Something’s wrong... We shall have to take a chance and break the door open if necessary. Can’t get any reply. He may be dead inside. Signs of a struggle. Stand by the car, Foster. Come on, Ford.”

“Very good, sir.”

Sergeant Ford followed Ives into the building.

“Rouse out the porter, Ford. He’s probably asleep. He may have a pass-key. Then follow me up, quickly.”

“Right, sir.”

4

The sweet note of a silver gong was still echoing around that marble room as Caspar crossed and drew the rose coloured curtains apart. The woman before whom he bowed low sat upright, now—and she was dressed in a filmy Grecian

robe, violet in hue. She resembled Circe, exacting homage.

“Your orders, My Lady?”

“Send Philo to me.”

“At once, My Lady.”

“And Caspar, I must reprove you. See to it that I am not offended any longer by the presence of a fish white with fungus in the mimosa pool. You will remove this distressing creature and procure one of similar colour and size, in order that the harmony of my pool shall remain undisturbed.”

Caspar bowed ever lower.

“If it is possible, dear My Lady, it shall be done.”

“The execution of my orders, Caspar, is not only possible, it is unavoidable. Nothing is impossible. Everything *can be* Preserve the harmony of the mimosa pool. In contemplating it I find peace. Send Philo to me “

“My Lady—forgive me. I will send Philo to you.”

He withdrew, the whispering of his red slippers fading into silence.

“Philo! Our Lady is waiting ...”

“Philo... Philo...”

The sibilant slippers returned.

“Philo is here. Madonna.”

The man who entered now, and behind whom Caspar drew the tinkling curtains, must have offered a puzzling problem to any student of humanity.

He wore a chauffeur’s livery, with black top-boots which displayed the possession of bulging muscular calves. His shoulder span was phenomenal, although he was a man of no more than average height, so that these mighty shoulders as well as his long arms seemed out of all proportion. Thick black hair grew low on his forehead and the pale, lined face might have belonged to a sheer

ruffian if it were not for a pair of hazel eyes sparkling with intelligence.

His walk was a silent lope—the movement of a leopard, or of a puma. His eyes burned with passionate devotion.

He stood motionless, silent, until that exquisite voice uttered an order.

“Sit there, Philo, and answer me.”

“Yes, My Lady,” the man replied in deep, vibrant tones, and obeyed. He spoke with a faint but indefinable accent.

“Draw the stool nearer. Look at me.”

“Yes, My Lady.”

But the worshipful eyes resembled those of a dog fearing the whip—as they strove to sustain the scrutiny of the unfathomable eyes which watched them.

“No man has anything to fear if his duty has been performed to the best of his ability. Look down only if you would lie. It is easier. Tell me: what occurred at the flat in Bruton Street?”

“The journalist, Mark Donovan ...”

“The interfering American. Continue.”

“He left his apartment—and was followed. Shortly afterwards, Dr. Steel Maitland returned and let himself in. The porter went off duty. I, Abdul and Varro, stole up the stairs to the landing. We heard Dr. Maitland speaking on the telephone. We rang the doorbell...”

“Why was he not taken in the street?”

“There were passers-by. It would have been dangerous.”

“Well?”

“He opened the door. We seized him.”

The woman shuddered slightly.

“There was—violence?”

“My Lady, he struck Varro insensible. What could we do? It was fortunate that the neighbouring tenants were absent, for Abdul and I had to carry two men down to the car—”

“Be silent. Let me think. You are such coarse blunderers.” She raised a slender white hand and covered her eyes. “Claudette Duquesne is still with the actress woman in Shepherd Market?”

“Yes, My Lady. Mark Donovan is with her.”

“Ah! This is interesting. Remember, no violence with this wayward child. I shall direct you personally with regard to her... Is Dr. Maitland here?”

“He is here, My Lady.”

“In whose charge?”

“Abdul’s, My Lady.”

“Is Dr. Maitland... injured?”

“Dear My Lady, what could we do?”

At which the storm broke.

“Ah! this ugliness! Be silent! Excuses do not heal. They make fresh wounds. Why are your ways so ugly? Is he conscious?”

“Abdul is endeavouring to revive him... Madonna!”

She had sprung upright, fists clenched.

“Abdul!... Abdul! ... A man with hands less delicate than the hooves of a mule! Are you mad? Rise up! Up, I say! Bring the physician Ariosto to him. Hurry! Hurry! When he has seen him, let Ariosto report to me.”

Philo had risen from the Egyptian stool upon which he had been seated, had drawn back so that he all but touched the rose tinted curtain.

“My Lady, forgive me if I have failed in this. I am afraid ...”

Then, the woman laughed. Her laughter was divine music—with a counter melody of hell interwoven.

“There is nothing to be afraid of when a duty has been performed to the best of one’s ability ...”

5

In Jackie de Lara’s flat Claudette had dropped down on to the settee and, her hands clasped in her lap, was watching Donovan. As their glances met, that provocative flush swept again over her cheeks.

“Whatever do you think of me?” she asked. “How can I hope to excuse myself for—interfering with you like this?”

Perhaps Donovan’s ardent sincerity carried conviction, for Claudette smiled, although ever so slightly. It was the first time he had seen her smile, and he thought that a man who knew how to win such a smile as Claudette’s should be a very happy man indeed.

“I am Claudette Duquesne. My father is Marcel Duquesne, the Paris journalist.”

Marcel Duquesne! It all came back to Donovan—where he had heard the name—Claudette. “For instance,” Maitland had said, “what became of Claudette, the daughter of Marcel Duquesne, who disappeared on her way home from Algiers?”

“I begin to understand. You speak perfect English?”

“I was educated here, and my mother was English, or rather, Irish. She came from Donegal. I speak French, also, of course.”

Donovan shook hands with himself for his bearing in this particularly awkward interview, for Claudette had attained a composure which was truly remarkable. Alone with him—a stranger—in that oddly decorated bedroom, she seemed so much at ease that she put Donovan at ease too; no simple achievement.

“So you are really Claudette Duquesne, who disappeared on the way home from

Algiers? The French newspapers were full of the story. But you father?"

"My poor father! I ... I can't bear to speak about him."

"I'm sorry. Truly sorry," Donovan assured her penitently. "Please don't let me upset you. Just let's forget that part and thank heaven that your own troubles are over—that you're safe, now."

"Oh!" Claudette whispered, "if I could only believe it! If I dared to think that *She* could never find me! But she is terrible. I am so terrified. That was why I ran away from your flat last night—from you. I'm afraid I fainted, but I must have recovered pretty quickly. I thought you were one of Our Lady's men."

"Our Lady's men?"

"It must sound strange, because I know now that you are not. But you are—well, good looking, and she seems to employ no one who is not good-looking."

"You flatter me," Donovan replied, awkwardly. "If you mean a biggish fellow, you probably mean what a friend of mine meant when he said that anybody would take me for a policeman."

Claudette shook her head.

"It isn't just that. But I was so distrustful, of everybody, that I was afraid to move, or even to try to get in touch with the police. For one thing, I didn't think they would believe me. I remembered your name, though, and remembered your saying you were with the Alliance Press Association. This evening, in desperation, I rang them up and asked for you. They said you had been there but had gone. That was when I phoned Jackie to try to find you. I knew you were really—you! But I feel terribly guilty, as though I'm dragging you into something—something awful—something which may ruin *your* life, too!"

But Donovan was thinking, as he watched her, that he would, very gladly, have crossed two continents just for the happiness of seeing her again. His thoughts, in fact, rather frightened him, and so he said:

"Now that you know that you are safe, try to forget your troubles, and try to explain to me just what happened. There is something more than mere chance in our meeting. I feel that we are going to be very real, firm friends. Steel Maitland

spoke to me only last night about your disappearance. Don't you think that's odd, when here we are talking together tonight?"

Claudette's eyes opened widely. "Was that—after I had been at—your flat?"

"Yes. Naturally I had no reason to suspect that you were Claudette Duquesne."

A cheerful rattle of pans and a smell of coffee came from the next room, where Jackie was humming snatches of songs, possibly from the *Colombe d'Or* revue.

"Wasn't it amazing good luck that I ran into her?" said Claudette. "I felt utterly, hopelessly, lost. She was simply splendid. She's a darling. She came up to me, you know, and took me home as one would a poor, stray thing. I shall never be able to repay Jackie."

"And now I've found you again, I shall never be able to repay her either, Claudette... May I call you Claudette?"

"But of course! I love your New England courtesy so much—Mr. Donovan! And may I call you—"

"That makes me very happy. I guess, maybe, I am a little shy. My name is Mark. What I can't understand is how you came to be in the hands of this awful woman. Who is she? What is she? and how did you meet her?"

And this is what Claudette Duquesne told Mark Donovan.

Chapter Five

1

WHEN Marcel Duquesne came from Paris to London to take up work in connection with General de Gaulle's organisation, Claudette, newly from a convent school in Derbyshire, was staying with her aunt, Lady Orpsley, in Bruton Street. (Lady Orpsley was her late mother's sister.) Claudette also obtained employment at French headquarters, and later, went out to Algiers with her father.

When she had been there for some time, Marcel Duquesne was recalled to France, temporarily, but Claudette remained. It was during his absence that she renewed her friendship with a former schoolfellow, Jean Barlow, a newly-arrived co-worker in the propaganda department.

"Jean had always been an odd girl," Claudette said. "Quite pretty, and terribly brainy. I think she spoke five languages fluently. She had gone to Oxford, and taken honours—that sort of girl. But I was very fond of her and she seemed equally glad to see me. I have wondered, since—"

Claudette had notably beautiful hands, which she used in an elusive, graceful way. This, and a trick of nearly closing her eyes and shrugging slightly, alone betrayed the French strain in her blood. She moved those slender hands, now, and the gesture spoke more eloquently than words.

It seemed that Jean Barlow had become a rabid feminist; not, Claudette was sure, because of a love disappointment, but by way of pure reasoning. She used to talk to Claudette by the hour on the subject of men's mismanagement of world affairs.

"I began to suffer from constant headaches," said Claudette. "I have thought, since, that it wasn't the climate of Algiers, as I supposed, but that Jean was sapping my vitality—trying to impose her will upon me."

"Do you mean trying to exercise some evil influence?"

"Well, in a way. She would read to me at night from a book called *Tears of Our*

Lady. At first I thought it was a religious work of some kind. It was in French with no publisher's imprint. Then I found that 'Our Lady' was the name by which the author was known, and, at first, what she had to write about really shocked me. Yes. I began to be horrified; then, in some way, I became fascinated. It was an evil book. I am quite sure of that, now. But it was dangerously clever."

"And what was it about?"

She hesitated, as if seeking for words, moving her hands characteristically.

"In a sense, it was about sex; but there was nothing really objectionable in it as far as this was concerned. It was entirely different from any book I had ever read. Even now, I can't explain in what way. But it conveyed the idea that women, as what Our Lady called 'the vessels of the soul,' had been degraded for generations to the place of—oh, mere implements. And, somehow, it made the fact quite clear that men, really, should take that place, if humanity was to become sane, and that women must direct them...."

Jean told her that the new world now in the throes of fiery birth, called for women of talent, women of beauty and of character whose horizon was not bounded by marriage to some man or another. Jean had enjoyed the supreme honour of meeting Our Lady—"the greatest woman ever born."

She promised to present Claudette; but Claudette was unwilling, indeed afraid, to meet the writer of that strange book. So that, when Jean was moved to Paris, no definite arrangement had been made.

"I felt as though a great weight had been lifted from me. I could breathe more freely..."

Then came a cable recalling her to London. Her father had been taken dangerously ill, and he had obtained permission for Claudette to join him. She was granted leave, for she was still in the French service, but told to proceed first to Tunis.

When she arrived—Jean was there to meet her! 'Duquesne! Duquesne!' I heard someone shouting.

"'Here! ... here! I am Claudette Duquesne!'"

“Lady to meet you, please. Some luggage, lady, please?”

“And then, racing along the platform, I saw *Jean!* She was asking ‘Which coach?... Oh! Claudette, Claudette, dear! I heard you were arriving, and I just had to meet you! I’ve fixed everything! We are *both* going to England at the same time! Isn’t it tremendous luck? Come on. I’ve got a car waiting—’”

They travelled by land and sea, and finally by air. Claudette was obsessed with the fear that she would not get to her father in time, so that there came a moment when she cried excitedly, “The white cliffs! England!”

“‘We shall be in London in half an hour!’ said Jean. ‘Oh! Isn’t it wonderful—at last! Claudette, dear—cheer up! Don’t make yourself unhappy. You’ll find it won’t be so bad as you fear.’”

“Then, when the plane touched down, I found a wonderful car—a Phantom Rolls—waiting there.

“This is *our* car, Claudette!’ Jean told me. ‘Isn’t it smart? Reserved for lucky girls like us...’”

“Well, of course, it seemed like a dream to me. And when, at last, we reached the outskirts, Jean shouted, “London—good old London! I can hardly believe it, Claudette, can you?”

“‘No,’ I told her, ‘except that it’s so foggy! I don’t know where we are at all. And there’s something that has puzzled me very much, Jean. Why were we given new passports at that place?’”

“‘Official red tape, I expect, dear!’

“‘Official red tape? But the war’s long over and done with. Why the new passports? *You* have carried them both. I have never seen mine. What do they say?’

“Jean stared for a moment, and then said, ‘Nothing much, Claudette. They must be in order. We got through everywhere without trouble, didn’t we?’

“That was true enough, and so I said no more. Presently, the car pulled up before quite an imposing mansion, and the chauffeur, a very dark and very powerful

man, with simply enormous shoulders, was joined by someone I supposed to be an Arab butler. He had a face as though it had been carved out of ivory, and a perpetual smile.”

Claudette gave a convincing imitation of this man’s voice and mannerisms ...

“‘Be pleased to follow me, ladies...’

“I said aside to Jean, ‘What an extraordinary looking creature! He appears to be walking in his sleep! Is he—a sort of butler?’

“‘I suppose so,’ Jean said.

“‘Your things will be taken to your rooms, ladies,’ he intoned. ‘You must be exhausted after your tiring journey. Allow me to offer you cocktails—or a glass of wine?’

“‘Oooh!’ Jean squealed (she appeared to be terribly excited.) ‘Champagne?’

“Well, we had the champagne, and I must say it was delightful. I heard Jean say, ‘We have evidently come to the right place!’ and then, her words seemed to be echoed—over and over again.

“‘*To the right place...*

“‘*Right place...*

“‘*Come to the right place...*’

“I remember whispering, ‘Jean! Jean! I feel ill! I believe I am going to...’

“And Jean’s voice went on, ‘*The right place... right place... right place...*’

“I simply can’t remember a thing after that; and I can’t truly say if I dreamed or only half-dreamed what happened next. But I heard, or I imagined that I heard, Jean’s voice saying, ‘Here she is, Our Lady. Was I right about her?’

“Two eyes were looking at me.” Claudette extended her hands in a gesture which implied bewilderment. “I don’t know if I can make you understand what I mean. But all I could see (or all I can remember) was just two eyes. They were

wonderful eyes, but they seemed to hurt me, to hurt something deep, deep inside me—perhaps my spirit. I felt— because I couldn’t really see—that those eyes were examining me all over, from head to foot. And then I heard another voice made me really wake up. But I know, now, that I wondering if Sarah Bernhardt, whom my father raved about, had spoken like that. It said:

“‘You were right, child. She is accepted. I leave her in your charge ...’

“I thought at the time that the sound of this glorious voice made me really wake up. But I know, now, that I must have wakened some time later. I found myself in bed, in a charming little room—with not a shred of clothing on!”

Again that faint blush touched Claudette’s cheeks and was gone.

“There was only one bedside lamp burning, and the house seemed quite still. I got up and searched for my frock, my shoes, my stockings. But there was nothing of the kind in the room; only a pair of fur-trimmed slippers. At first, this seemed incomprehensible—and then I grasped the idea. It was to prevent my attempting to go out!

“Well—I got angry. The door was not locked. I suppose *she* thought this unnecessary. I looked out on to a landing.

“It was empty.

“I went along to the end and looked down into the entrance hall, Which I remembered. There was no one there, and I could hear no sound. What I should have done next I don’t know, but, thrown over the post at the foot of the stair I saw a magnificent mink cape. Then, I made up my mind.

“I crept down and wrapped myself in the cape. It’s in Jackie’s wardrobe, now. (It has a strange but very faint perfume which I never smelled before.) I opened the front door. I was afraid to close it behind me when I slipped out as I should have had to bang it.

“I just turned to the right, and ran!”

Claudette caught her breath and clenched her hands.

“Were you followed?”

“Yes. I hadn’t gone far (I don’t quite know where I was) when I heard someone running after me. I groped along, and felt iron railings, and presently a gate. I pushed it open —and nearly fell down the area steps to which it led! But this saved me.

“A man—a heavy man—I think it was the chauffeur— went racing past. I came out and ran across the street. I was beginning to feel dreadfully swimmy. It was the effects of whatever they had given me. I moved along, struggling to walk steadily, and presently I heard regular, heavy footsteps. Their sound reassured me: I was certain they were not the steps of any of Our Lady’s men.

“I was right. A constable came up. I tried to speak naturally when I asked him to direct me to Bruton Street. I knew that Aunt Margaret’s flat could not be far away, but I was hopelessly confused. He showed me I was at the corner of George Street, and so no distance from it. When I got there, I found the outside door open, and—”

“Come on, you two love birds!” cried Jackie. “Supper’s ready. If you don’t want to eat, I do!”

And even as she spoke, Donovan remembered—as a man awakened from trance recalls reality.

“Good heavens! Look at the time! I had no idea. Jackie. I just hate to seem ungrateful, but there is something wrong! Maitland should have been here hours ago...”

He hurried across to the phone and dialled his own number.

“Come on, Claudette!” snapped Jackie. “Leave him to his old ‘phoning!”

“Hullo! Hullo! Maitland? Donovan here... What’s that?... Is that Inspector Ives?”

And Ives’s voice replied, “It is, sir! Thank the Lord you phoned. We didn’t know where you were, except Shepherd Market...”

“But—Dr. Maitland—”

“We’ve just broken into the flat, sir. He’s not here. But there are signs of a

tremendous struggle in the lobby—

Then, Donovan knew, and his voice became a groan.

“My God! Sumuru has got Maitland!”

2

Donovan was dazed momentarily, by recognition of that appalling fact—Sumuru had Maitland. His first impulse was to cry the bad news aloud; his second, to repress it—for Claudette’s sake. He recovered his composure, and rejoined the two girls. “Maitland isn’t back, yet,” was all he said.

Then a hundred doubts, regrets, projects, jostling one another in his brain, he made a pretence of eating.

The phone bell rang.

“Oooh!” Jackie exclaimed. “Made me jump “

“It may be for me, Jackie,” said Donovan, quietly.

Jackie put down her coffee cup and went out into the lobby.

“I’ll see, Mark.” They heard her voice, muffled in the cubby-hole, then: “Yes! It is for you. It’s ‘.he police!”

Donovan stood up, avoiding Claudette’s glance, and went over to the phone.

“Right. Thanks, Jackie.” He raised the receiver. “Mark Donovan here. Is that Inspector Ives? Line isn’t too clear. What name? Sergeant Bettes? Speaking *for* Inspector Ives? I see.”

He listened in a puzzled way to the message.

“But surely it would be unwise for me to return to Bruton Street and leave Miss Duquesne and her friend here alone, wouldn’t it?... Oh, I see what you mean... The men are already posted? Well—I suppose I must, if that’s Inspector Ives’s plan ... Right. Good-bye.”

He replaced the receiver and walked back, as Jackie was saying: “But, Claudette,

who is this woman, Sumuru? And what's her game?"

"I don't know what she is, Jackie. But she has great secret influence—"

Then, as Donovan came in, both girls turned to him, and Jackie asked, "What's up, Mark? Has something gone wrong?"

"It isn't," Claudette whispered—"Dr. Maitland? They haven't found—"

"There's no news of him, Claudette, yet But Inspector Ives has changed his plan. Now, please listen carefully. This building is surrounded by the police! It seems that some of Sumuru's people are in the neighbourhood—but well hidden. I am to set out for my flat in Bruton Street, and Ives hopes that when I'm seen to leave they will come out into the open. Do you follow?"

"Do you mean," Claudette asked... "leave us here...?"

"We can lock ourselves in," Jackie remarked.

"That's true," Donovan agreed. "But all the same you don't know, as poor Claudette knows, just what we are up against. It's because Sumuru is hot on her trail that the police are surrounding this building now. Sumuru *knows* Claudette is here!"

"Mark! It's terrifying..."

"Shucks!" Jackie cut in—"I'm not scared. The inspector is counting on you, Mark, so finish your coffee and off you go. I'll bolt the door after you. I seem to have walked into the middle of another war!"

"Thank you, Jackie—and Claudette—for heaven's sake be very careful. On no account open the door to anyone except to Inspector Ives." He took his hat and coat. "Thank you again, Jackie. You're a brick. Shut the door the moment I'm out."

And with one long, hungry look at Claudette, Mark Donovan went out—and heard the door closed and bolted behind him.

He groped his way down the dark stair and out into the street.

“Who’s there?”

A dim figure was discernible some three paces away.

“Quiet, sir! Push on! Police!”

“Thank God for that!” Donovan murmured, and went on his way with renewed confidence.

He was a man with a mission in life. Whilst Maitland’s remarkable statements and the ghastly death of Sir Miles Tristram had gone far to convince him that some rare evil threatened civilisation, the impact of these grotesque happenings had, at the same time, deadened imagination. The menace of Sumuru had remained remote, abstract. Now, it was intimate, vital.

Not only Maitland, but Claudette lay in the toils of this incalculable woman—and so Sumuru was become Donovan’s personal enemy. (Although Claudette had never heard that name, there could be little room for doubt regarding the identity of “Our Lady.”) What lay behind it all, what ultimate aim Sumuru held in view, Donovan found it impossible even to guess.

But—Maitland was missing: Claudette was marked down. This was sufficient.

Fired with that holy rage which once had fired the Crusaders, Donovan set out for Bruton Street. He had something to tell Ives which would surprise him. Clearly enough, Sumuru already had a considerable organisation. How, otherwise, could she have abducted Claudette from under the noses of the French authorities, and, quietly eliminating her identity, have had her safely transferred to a house in London?

She had agents in unsuspected quarters; witness, the behaviour of the girl called Jean Barlow. And that very night Donovan determined, the house in question should be raided by Scotland Yard: small trouble to find it, in spite of Claudette’s hazy memory on this point.

So that he had plenty to think about, but a hopeful heart as he strode along the streets. He did not believe that Sumuru would dare to harm Maitland.

Pedestrians seemed to be even fewer in number than usual. Perhaps this was because of threatening rain-clouds which had come banking from the West.

Donovan looked up.

A plane was crossing almost directly overhead. He could see its navigation lights. He thought of the nights he had known in London, when the sound of a plane would almost certainly have meant that soon there would be rainfall—a rainfall of bombs.

The atmosphere was vaporous. The lights looked like a veiled eye peering through the mist...

He began dreaming again about that wondrous meeting with Claudette—Claudette of the deep violet eyes. He put up a silent prayer that she be spared from further harm, and granted happiness—with him.

Then came the rain. It was almost tropical, that sudden downpour. In a matter of seconds the gutters were turned into cataracts. Donovan hurried, to try to reach shelter, and heard someone hurrying behind him. He stepped aside to avoid a collision with this person, who seemed to be running at racing speed—and plunged one foot into three inches of water.

“Damn!” he exclaimed, feeling his trouser leg saturated.

He stepped back on to the sidewalk. A second runner was following the first. And the first, a heavy; squat figure, bore right down upon him. A flash of bluish light shot straight into his eyes from what looked like a flashlamp.

Donovan staggered, stifled a scream of pain, and groped blindly for something to hang on to. Vaguely, he was aware of swift footsteps, in retreat. He grasped an iron railing.

He had been blinded! Someone—for no possible reason—had deliberately blinded him by means of some device carried in a flashlamp.

Clinging to the iron railings—the pain in his eyes was agonising—he tried to think. The rain, now, was a deluge. What could he do? Should he shout for help? And then he became aware of footsteps again—this time, approaching. Next, of a car moving slowly.

“Taxi! Hi! Taxi!” he shouted hoarsely.

Not only could he see nothing; he was beginning to feel faint and dizzy.

His shout was answered by a man's voice. But it wasn't the voice of a taxi driver.

"Is something wrong? This isn't a taxi. But I shall be only too glad to give you a lift..."

More footsteps. He had learnt to know them. A London policeman was coming along. He must think, he must think!

"Constable!" he called.

But that other, suave voice, drowned his own.

"I'm afraid, Constable, this poor fellow has had one over the eight."

Donovan released his grip on the railings. His hat fell off. He swayed, and clutched widely to recover his hold. The smooth voice went on, as a firm grip steadied him:

"Fortunately, I happen to know his address. It's in my direction. I'll drop him home with pleasure. D'you mind lending me a hand, Officer?"

"Very good of you, sir. Okay."

Donovan's brain was now swimming. Between pain, frustration, and a deadly nausea, he was beyond speech. He felt himself being lifted into a car. Dimly, he heard:

"What *is* his address, sir? I ought to have that."

"Number fourteen, Grosvenor Place, Constable. I live only a block away. Number twenty-four. My name is Worthington..."

A door banged. Donovan knew no more about it.

But the constable stood looking after the departing car and scratching his chin thoughtfully. It was raining as hard as ever and he was drenched, but he paused, looking about him—and saw Donovan's hat lying a yard away.

He stooped, picked it up, shook the wet from the brim, and shone a light inside.

On the leather band he read:

“Mark Donovan. Alliance Press Association. Greystone House, Fleet Street...”

3

Caspar stood before My Lady, his lids lowered, but his glance absorbing the scarcely veiled outlines of her perfect body. His sleepy eyes were not asleep.

“My orders concerning Claudette Duquesne have been carried out?”

“Yes, Madonna.”

“Send Philo to me.”

“At once.”

Caspar withdrew, walking like a somnambulist. And presently came echoing calls, diminishing in volume.

“Philo... Philo...”

Then, further away: “Philo... Philo...”

Philo crossed the marble floor with those lithe, catlike steps, to stand, eyes also downcast, before the woman on the dais.

“My Lady?”

“Be seated there, Philo, and make your report.”

Philo sat on an Egyptian stool, inclining his dark head obediently.

“Yes, Madonna. Abdul and I intercepted the American journalist. We used the blue light.”

“He went with Ariosto?”

“He did, My Lady. But a constable helped to get him into the car—where Varro

took charge of him.”

“Proper precautions were taken to ensure that the car could not be traced?”

“All precautions. Madonna.”

“Where is he now?”

“In the laboratory, Madonna.”

“Leave me. I shall consider what must be done next...”

Chapter Six

1

DONOVAN'S emotions during that journey he could never afterwards adequately describe. That he was being taken to his own execution he did not doubt. His mental faculties had been rendered vague by the action of that awful blue glare which had been shone into his eyes. His sight had apparently gone for ever.

He was in the hands of Sumuru!

Whether or not *rigor Kubus* would supervene he had no means of learning. But he feared the worst. It was almost certain, he saw now, that he had been followed to Shepherd Market—and he could not bear to think of the fate of Claudette—nor the fate of Maitland... Maitland's fearful respect for the genius of Sumuru was justified. If the woman be worthy of her hirelings, then indeed she was a criminal genius.

Even as Donovan sat there in darkness, helpless in the powerful grasp of the man who sat beside him, he found it hard to believe that he had been drugged in a Mayfair street and kidnapped with the assistance of the Metropolitan police!

"Number fourteen, Grosvenor Place... My name is Worthington ..."

The cool resourcefulness of the man who called himself Worthington marked him for a highly accomplished rogue. One thing, and one thing only, might turn the tables—the constable might go to the trouble to check up. No doubt he would include this incident in his report. Then—Scotland Yard would move.

But could they move in time?

There came a sort of hiatus, haunted by distant bells... "*Number fourteen... ding-dong... Grosvenor Place... ding-dong...*" Then followed a sudden, acute keenness of smell. Donovan became aware of an intolerably heavy perfume. But he could not identify it...

He thought that he was facing a long, low wall, a wall covered by a piece of

Oriental tapestry. Seeming to observe that its character was changing in some subtle way, he found himself studying this tapestry intently. Its design was conventional Chinese, representing dragons and a pagoda, but, as he watched, these dragons appeared to move, insidiously, and the pagoda to become mysteriously lighted. The gold of the dragon scales glittered like real gold and then grew red as though molten. The pagoda receded into uttermost distance, until, as he continued to gaze, he thought that it stood on the edge of a vast golden plain peopled with fiery dragons and so far away that now it became impossible to make it out even as a pin point.

And as his gaze was drawn on further and further into this moving design, so he, himself, began bodily to follow.

He stepped into the tapestry!

In no other way could he have described what happened. The fiery dragons slithered away before his advancing footsteps, noiselessly, like lizards in the desert sand. The illuminated pagoda no longer seemed inaccessible, for in a few strides he had reached it. Gently tinkling bells greeted his approach and he entered through a cloud of incense to find himself confronting a decorated shrine.

Upon a lacquered couch set upon a dais, a woman reclined, fanning herself. She wore a white robe of Grecian simplicity bordered with gold, and her long fan was composed of white peacock feathers. Donovan knew, without being able to analyse his impressions, that this woman was more wonderful than any he had known. He could not have said why, nor in what way.

“So you are Mark Donovan ...”

Had she vanished at that moment he could not have described her. He could never describe her, afterwards; for no one had ever been able to describe the Marquise Sumuru. But he could never forget her voice ...

He awoke from this dream (if it had been a dream) to find himself in what looked like a hospital.

And he could *see*!

The man whom he knew, when he spoke, to be “Worthington,” stood watching

him. He wore a white coat.

“Quite restored? Don’t worry about your eyes. The effect of 365 is quite transient.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Still feel a bit swimmy?”

“I feel fit to knock your block off!”

“Ah, well! We shall no doubt get to know one another better.”

“When you get to know *me* you’ll be surprised,” Donovan snapped. “Is this a private insane asylum you’ve run me into?”

“Not at all.” The man began to remove his white jacket. “It is the experimental laboratory attached to Our Lady’s London headquarters. I am in charge of it. Experiments are proceeding here, Mr. Donovan, which would stagger your American scientists—so called.”

“I bet they would.”

“Humanity is faced with only two alternatives, you see. Complete, and speedy, destruction, or complete, and speedy, reconstruction. Our Lady plans to reconstruct mankind. I regret keeping you under restraint. You have only to give me a promise of good behaviour and I will free you at once.”

“Can’t be done,” said Donovan quietly.

He had discovered that his hands were tied together.

“You owe your present circumstances entirely to your friend Dr. Steel Maitland. This man imagines that he has a sacred mission to destroy the work of Our Lady Sumuru. Others have thought this, Mr. Donovan. They might as well attempt to destroy the Himalayas. But if you will follow me (you insist on keeping your hands tied?—very well?)—you can talk over the position with Dr. Maitland—”

“Maitland! Maitland is here?—” The words were jerked out of Donovan almost against his will.

“You are fellow guests of Our Lady. Please follow me closely. Some of our laboratory equipment is delicate—and dangerous.”

“Dr. Worthington” had replaced the white jacket with a black coat, and was moving towards the shadows. Donovan stood up, and followed...

“A beautiful culture here, Mr. Donovan. It is the minute fungus which produces *rigor Kubus*... Avoid those tubes. Lower your head. I wish I had time to show you some of our latest experiments... Here we are!” He rapped on a white door, and threw it open. “A friend to see you, Dr. Maitland!”

The door was closed, and locked quietly, and Donovan’s guide departed.

In a small, square room, furnished like a waiting-room, Steel Maitland was standing—facing the doorway.

“Maitland!”

“Donovan! God forgive me!”—he stepped forward; his features were haggard—I dragged you into this!”

“Forget it.” Donovan’s voice sounded slightly unsteady. “I’m the prize fool. I fell into a booby trap a babe in arms would have seen through... and left Claudette at the mercy of these devils! Even now they may have her...”

Indeed, at the moment that Donovan spoke her name, Claudette had sprung to her feet, pale, tense, in Jackie de Lara’s flat. The two girls stared at one another.

“There it is again!” Claudette whispered.

“Ssh! honey! They’ll hear you!”

Someone was knocking, softly but insistently, on the outer door ...

“Don’t stir, Jackie!”

Jackie shook her head. “I must get to the phone.”

“Oh, listen! That knocking! If only they would *ring*—or *speak*!”

“The bell’s out of order,” said Jackie. “The stair light is broken, too.” Knocking

continued—a gentle but imperative summons. “Oh! I *must* get to the phone!”

“But the phone is right by the door, Jackie. They will see you through the letter-box!” All the time the sound continued. It had in it something almost hypnotic. “That knocking! It’s Our Lady, it’s Our Lady! I know it is. She is outside there—waiting for me! Jackie! let me go. It will be best for you...”

“I’ll break your neck if you don’t shut up!” Jackie snapped. “Let me think... It’ll drive me mad, too, if I can’t stop it. Now, don’t panic, dear. I’m going to put the light out and creep to the phone.”

There was a click as Jackie moved the switch, and complete darkness.

“Oh! be careful, Jackie—be careful!”

Claudette became aware of furtive movements.

“Jackie! where are you?”

“Ssh! keep quiet... I’m in the lobby.”

Claudette was trembling—and the knocking had ceased. Those furtive stirrings continued.

“Jackie! ... it that *you*?”

“Aye”—in a whisper—“it’s me... I’m back again.” She drew a deep breath. “The phone’s gone dead, too!”

“Oh, Jackie, dear, what are we going to do?”

“Stay in the dark. But if that knocking starts again I’m going to open the window and let out a yell that’ll wake all London!”

4

And in the small waiting-room, Donovan and Maitland had fallen into a momentary silence. From the laboratory outside, no sound reached them. One hanging lamp lighted the room, a room in which there was no furniture other than a bare oak table on which a copy of *Punch* was lying, three office chairs and

an umbrella-stand.

“Well,” Donovan breathed, “thank God you’re alive, Maitland. We have to face this thing calmly.” He glanced down at his hands. “Just unfasten my hands, will you, and maybe we can *do* something.”

Maitland’s teeth flashed queerly in the bearded face. It was a grim smile.

“Easily said, Donovan! Look at my own!”

He held up his wrists. They were tied together by a slender green cord.

“Good God! I never realised it! But why don’t you snap free?”

Maitland smiled again. “Why don’t *you*? Just try it. But go easy... There!”—as Donovan suppressed an exclamation—“all the stress comes on the *thumbs*. That’s how it’s tied. A purely Eastern trick—which is significant in a way.”

“What in hell is it made of?” growled Donovan, examining a cut on his thumb caused by his attempt to jerk the line apart.

“A very thin steel wire covered with silk. But, tell me, Donovan, how on earth do *you* come to be there?”

“That can wait. What’s bothering me is where *are* we? This appears to be a huge place. It can’t be in London.”

“M’no... but it may not be far away. How were you brought here? How long did the journey take?”

“Couldn’t say. I passed out in the back of a car—held in the grip of a fellow who must be related to Samson.”

“Dressed like a chauffeur?”

“I don’t know how he was dressed, I was temporarily blind.”

“I think I have had the privilege of meeting him—on the landing outside your door! He was accompanied by a hairy monster of even more forbidding appearance, whom I had the pleasure of knocking backwards down half a flight

of stairs! But the chauffeur thug got me with a rubber truncheon... Ssh! Someone coming!”

Whispering footsteps approached the door. It was unlocked and a smiling man in Arab dress bowed on the threshold.

“Dr. Steel Maitland, will you be good enough to follow me?”

His voice was gently unctuous.

“What of my friend?” Maitland demanded.

“He will be good enough to remain here.”

Maitland and Donovan exchanged glances, then: “I suppose there is nothing for it, Donovan,” Maitland murmured. “Don’t be rash. We haven’t a chance, even if our hands were free ... Hope to rejoin you shortly.”

The smiling attendant stood aside, bowing deeply. “This way, if you please, Dr. Maitland.”

For a moment Maitland hesitated. “Where are we going?”

“Our Lady will receive you, sir.”

“Very sweet of her, I’m sure.” He glanced back. “Well, Donovan—wish me luck!”

Maitland heard the door being relocked in the semi-darkness as he came out. The man in Arab dress stepped to his side.

“This way, if you please, Dr. Maitland.”

Silently, Maitland walked along with his smiling companion, fringing the laboratory, its equipment discernible only in the form of specks of light reflected from glass vessels. Another door was opened—and closed behind them. They went up a short stair, and came out through a carpeted passage into a lofty marble-floored place which reminded Maitland of a Roman temple.

He noted a number of antique pillars supporting a painted ceiling, rugs and skins

strewn about the marble floor. A stair led up to a bronze door. There was a square pool into which there peered a figure of Pan as it seeking some hidden nymph. A bank of mimosa bloomed beside it, and the heated air was heavy with perfume ...

“Will you be good enough to wait here whilst I announce you.”

The red-slippered feet of his guide whispered across to a semi-circular recess, a sort of shrine, approached by three marble steps and veiled by pink gauzy curtains. He mounted the steps and drew the curtains apart. They emitted a sound resembling tiny bells.

“My Lady, Dr. Steel Maitland is here ...”

Chapter Seven

1

“I HAVE been anxious to make your acquaintance, Dr. Maitland.” It was a magic voice; mystic melody. Of this commonplace it created music like that of harps softly played. “I find you unaccountably reluctant to meet me. Most men are provokingly persistent.” She gestured with a white peacock fan. “Wont you please sit down. I trust the perfume of mimosa does not disturb you?”

“Not at all,” said Maitland. “But *you* do.”

“Perhaps you are thinking that I am dressed in this—barbaric—manner in order to seduce you from what you probably regard as your duty. But you are wrong. This is my customary dress—when I am at home. But please sit down.”

The second invitation was in fact an order, an order which Maitland obeyed. The tip of the white peacock plume indicated where he should sit—beside that graceful, reclining figure. Yet, even as he moved forward, and now, in intimate proximity, he never seemed to remove his gaze from those compelling eyes.

Maitland was haunted by a memory, or the ghost of a memory which refused to materialise. Some trick of lighting or an artifice in the use of her long lashes, made it impossible to identify the *colour* of her eyes; but, somewhere, at some time, perhaps years ago, he had seen this woman before ...

“Allow me to unfasten your wrists. Such tricks as these are out of date.”

“I promise nothing if you do.”

“It is unnecessary.”

With a pair of tiny scissors she snipped the steel wire and freed Maitland’s hands.

“You must not make the fatal mistake of joining my enemies. Indeed, I know you will not want to, when I have explained my motives. It was in order that I might do so that I sent for you. But please don’t permit me to bore you. I will try

to be brief.”

Bore him! her voice played a symphony to which he could have listened, enraptured, for hours.

“You see, Dr. Maitland, our world has been brought to the edge of disaster by ugliness. Ugliness of body and ugliness of mind. If, like the old Greeks, we had worshipped beauty, do you suppose that the horrors of the recent war with Germany, the present threat of Soviet Russia, could ever have fallen upon us?”

“Perhaps—” Maitland hesitated—“perhaps I don’t understand you?”

“Few do understand me. Few men and women alive today are capable of understanding me. Those few that are, I try to find, try to make them listen. Men so hideous as Hitler and Himmler, deformed in body and warped in mind, should never have been permitted to rule any country. Consider the ape-like war lords of Japan—that land of exquisite refinements; consider those who, today, rule Holy Russia, and tell me if such as these should be allowed to disfigure the world. The West must control the East—or perish.”

“But I thought—”

“You thought, perhaps, that I was Japanese!” She laughed. Her laughter resembled a peal of fairy bells... “Dr. Steel Maitland, in this as in many other things, you were wrong. You have been misled by my association with the unhappy Marquis. Look at me. Inspect me as closely as you please. I am not sensitive.”

And in some way the spell of her unfathomable eyes was lifted, so that Maitland found himself free to look at her, unfettered. She raised her arms, so that the peacock plumes waved far above her head.

“Did the dark womb of Japan ever produce skin as white as mine? Am I shaped like a geisha?” She extended herself languidly on the couch, raised and painted one slender foot clad in a gold sandal, revealing curves, classical but unendurable. ‘The Japanese are a short limbed race. Are my lips the lips of an Oriental woman?’

But he was afraid to answer, afraid to trust himself. This woman was a sorceress. He closed his eyes and clenched his hands and was silent. She laughed again,

very softly; fairy bells in the distance.

“Yes, men desire me. Once, it might have amused me to permit those bearded lips to humble themselves upon my body; but I conquered such impulses long, long ago. I sometimes surrender myself, out of curiosity or to gain my ends. That ancient Roman who exhausted his passion upon an ivory statue experienced at least as much rapture as my lovers... You may open your eyes. I have finished tempting you.”

Lightly, she brushed his cheek with the peacock fan.

Maitland opened his eyes—and his soul was lost again in the dark pools of her own.

“You may consider it remarkable that a woman so desirable as myself (Oh, I am free from false modesty) should possess any brains, much less the scientific knowledge which is mine. Woman scientists in your own country are so plain and stuffy, don’t you think?”

And Maitland later blushed to recall that he did not rise up in their defence.

“There was in Greece a great man called Plato. No doubt—” (a note of mockery faintly disturbed the harmony of her voice)—“as a physician and a trusted agent of British Intelligence, you are familiar with his work? You will remember that he postulated a governing class bred for their high office. Above greed, immune from passion, undisturbed by those lusts, those ambitions, which lure lesser men from the path of duty, these leaders of his ideal republic would work unswervingly for peace, for beauty, for perfection.”

She paused, but Maitland said nothing, and presently she continued.

“We have fallen far below Plato’s ideal with our so-called civilisation. So far below, Dr. Maitland, that only drastic measures can save mankind from total destruction. I have been at work on such measure for, oh, ever so many years. The outburst of discord which you called the world war, interrupted me. Yet, I bent events to my purpose. I have resumed my task. It is no easy one. You see, mere virtue is not enough. Virtue is sometimes ugly. Wars are not brought about by nations. They are brought about by a small group of warped men. If the virtuous leaders of other states but recognised their ugliness, they would not permit them to live—and there would be no wars.”

Maitland remained silent, spellbound.

“Great armies are not necessary for my purpose. I concern myself only with those who dream of employing them. And whilst such as these have been playing with rockets capable of carrying atomic bombs across the Atlantic, with lethal gas to destroy whole populations, with absurd planes to fly at ridiculous speeds, I have been busy in the directions. My warfare is intensive, but equally scientific. I can control those destructive brains as no Charter could control them. If I wish, I can remove them altogether. There are sciences higher than those of explosives. Those things are unseemly. Those things must be effaced. There is no room for beauty where such ugliness exists. Destructive individuals must not be. Consider the hideous experiment known as splitting the atom. This was performed, quite successfully, ever so long ago. In fact, Atlantis disappeared shortly afterwards. Those who work for destruction must themselves be destroyed.”

Maitland found his voice.

“What would you do—assassinate them?”

“Assassinate them?” She waved her white fan languidly. “When one of your officers orders his troops to take a strongpoint held by the enemy, and all the defenders are killed, do you say that he has *assassinated* them? No. Dr. Maitland. I do not propose to assassinate; I propose to remove the ungracious, as by the surgeon’s knife, before it can spread and corrupt whole nations. But while greed, lust of power, big business, sway the destinies of men, there can be no peace. Only perfect minds in perfect bodies are fit for leadership. When beauty rules, serenity will return.”

Again Maitland heard his own voice, speaking as if from a long way off.

“This is a dream.”

“Our present conversation—or my ideals? Neither are dreams. You are trying to recall where you have met me before. One day, perhaps, I will tell you ...”

A mist began to gather before Maitland’s eyes, so that he no longer saw clearly the dais or the woman with the fan. The siren voice came to his ears from further and further away.

“If you continue to obstruct my plans, I shall be forced to deal with you as I deal with all obstacles. For by doing this, you will have become discordant. And it is the holy mission of beauty to destroy ugliness ...”

Maitland became aware of a confused clamour like that of distant shouting ...

“You must come and see me again, Dr. Maitland—or perhaps I will come and see you. But cease to interfere with my plans. Sir Miles Tristram, you know, was a man of evil life. He was wholly unlovely. You must not allow his removal to disturb you. In order that a tree shall attain to perfect harmony, it is often necessary to cut away many disfiguring branches. There is no sin but ugliness. And death can sometimes be the one graceful act in an otherwise ugly life...”

Then the musical tones which had enthralled Maitland faded like those of an Aeolian harp, and were gone. There was a floating mist before his eyes—that, he thought, of the incense which now filled the space on the dais. It was clearing, however, by slow but perceptible degrees ...

2

“Maitland!” Donovan hardly recognised his own voice. “Maitland! Are you there? ... Maitland ...”

Donovan groped in darkness. Presently, he stumbled over something—and created a clatter of empty cans.

“Where the devil *am* I!” he muttered. “It was that damnable ... perfume... Maitland!” His voice rose to a harsh cry. “Maitland!”

But there was no reply.

Quite apart from the fact that he remained wildly uncertain about what had happened, in what dark place he now groped, there was something, something urgent, which he must do first... Claudette! Beyond doubt he had been followed to Jackie de Lara’s flat. Since his departure, what had occurred there?

Donovan found himself in a twilight sleep. What was fact —what mirage? Perhaps the things which had temporarily robbed him of sight, possessed the further property of making one peculiarly prone to hypnotic suggestion. Wherever the truth might lie, he was perfectly satisfied that he had neither

dreamed nor imagined that unforgettable vision of Sumuru—for that the woman with the peacock fan was Sumuru he had no doubt whatever.

Then, he had found himself in a large laboratory—with “Dr. Worthington”—and then, with Maitland, in a small, square room... Maitland had been taken away.

What happened next?

He could not remember! It was appalling. But he could not remember!

Was he still a prisoner?

He assured himself that his hands were free. He determined to grope his way to a wall, and then to follow it round until he came to a door. There was a strong smell of petrol. He set out—then stood still.

“Is there anyone there?” came a distant cry.

“Who’s that?” Donovan asked, huskily.

“I think I heard an answer, Inspector.”

Donovan’s heart gave a jump.

“Who’s there?” he shouted.

“Mr. Donovan! Is that you? Inspector Ives here!”

“*Ives?* Thank God!”

“Are you free to move?”

“Yes—but swimmy.”

“Can you find the door, sir?”

“I’ll try. But it’s pitch dark...”

Donovan clutched his head. He must keep calm. What was it he had set out to do? Ah! of course—to find a wall and follow it until he came to a door.

He set out cautiously—stumbled again—groped around some obstacle, a cupboard, went on in the direction from which muffled voices came, and found a door.

“I’ve found the door. But it’s locked!”

“All right, Mr. Donovan,” came Ives’s gruff assurance. “Stand clear. We’ll soon have it open!”

Began a sound of wrenching and splintering, over which Donovan made his voice heard:

“Is Dr. Maitland there?”

“No, sir, he’s not.”

“My God! They’ve got him!”

“Stand clear. Here goes the door!”

Wrenching and splintering reached a crescendo, and the door gaped open to reveal a ring of police lamps, as if several giant cats crouched out here in the darkness. Inspector Ives stepped forward.

“Thank heavens, Mr. Donovan! I didn’t expect—er—”

“I didn’t expect to be alive either! Thank you for this.”

“It’s Constable Kent, here, you have to thank—not me.”

Donovan shaded his eyes, peering from face to face.

“Why—Constable!” he exclaimed. “Are you the man who helped me into Dr. Worthington’s car?”

Constable Kent grinned apologetically.

“It was you dropping your hat that did it, Mr. Donovan. I may as well admit I wasn’t satisfied with the whole thing, anyway. But when I phoned through, the inspector happened to be at the station. We got a move on!”

“Thank God you did,” said Donovan. “I feel like a fly that has escaped from the web of a particularly dangerous spider! But—where am I? And what time is it?”

“It’s almost exactly four a.m., sir.” Ives replied. “As to where we are; we’re in the garage of a damaged and condemned house on Clapham Common! I had every division for miles around looking for that car in which you were carried off. Of course, there’s no Worthington at the address in Grosvenor Place!”

“You’re telling *me!*”

“No trace was found until about half an hour ago. Then, a constable on duty on the Common noticed a car answering to the description pull up near here. He was too far away to see just what happened, and before he got here, the car had gone. The garage was locked—but he heard groans... We soon got busy.”

“Inspector! That woman has Maitland! If we pull London down, we must find him!... Tell me—Miss Duquesne?”

There was a perceptible pause before Ives answered.

“Sorry, Mr. Donovan! She left Miss de Lara’s flat shortly after you did—”

“What!”

“I’ve interviewed Miss de Lara and she has described what occurred. It seems that shortly after you went—of course, you fell into a trap: no one on *my* staff phoned you—they heard knocking on the door—”

“Surely they didn’t open—”

“No, they didn’t. But Miss de Lara crept to the phone— and found it was dead.”

“Line cut?”

“Not at all. Much simpler.” Whoever phoned you just left his receiver off the hook. That’s all that’s necessary to cut a line out! Well, the knocking stopped. There was a scurry on the stairs, and then a voice, which Miss de Lara described as ‘gentlemanly,’ called out, ‘Don’t be alarmed. This is Dr. Maitland’.”

“Good heavens! I begin to understand. She described this man?”

“Certainly. A tall man in a black overcoat, with a white muffler and wearing a soft black hat. ‘A bit of a dark ‘tache’ she said—and very keen eyes’.”

“Stop! stop!” Donovan, now, was nearly frantic. “Do you mean that Claudette went away with this man?”

“Of course she did. Why not? She thought he was your friend.”

“God help us!” He grasped Ives’s arm. “Do you recognise this person from his description?”

“I do, Mr. Donovan!” said Constable Kent.

“She has gone away with the man who posed as ‘Worthington’! Sumuru has Claudette, now—as well as Maitland!”

Chapter Eight

1

“COME in.”

“Mr. Mark Donovan, sir.”

Donovan entered a small, neat room, where Chief Inspector Ives sat behind a large, neat desk. The door was closed behind him.

“Glad to welcome you to Scotland Yard, Mr. Donovan. Please sit down. But I’m sorry I have no better news for you.”

Donovan sat down on a hard chair.

“Then—there’s no trace of Miss Duquesne?... Nor of Dr. Maitland?”

“Sorry, Mr. Donovan—”

“Inspector Ives!” Donovan jumped up—“This inaction is driving me mad!”

“We are not inactive, sir, I assure you,” said Ives, watching him sympathetically. “At this present moment, a dozen men are hunting for the house described by Miss Duquesne. It can’t have been very far from Bruton Street, as she ran there after her escape—”

“I’m afraid she won’t escape a second time!”

Donovan forced himself to sit down again.

“Don’t be so low spirited, sir! Scotland Yard can’t be defied like this—for long. Here’s a woman who commits cold-blooded murder, who abducts people—men as well as girls—and all under the noses of the police! It won’t do, Mr. Donovan—it won’t do! I can only suppose she’s mad.”

“Mad or sane, she’s a danger at least as great as Hitler was. If you saw her, heard her voice, you would understand. I have been in what she calls her Headquarters. It’s a vast place. I didn’t dream it. It’s right there—somewhere near London.”

Ives, more nearly resembling an army officer than the traditional detective, rested his hands on the desk.

“M’yes—somewhere near London. That covers a vast area, Mr. Donovan. There’s no doubt we are up against a gang that employs new methods. They take chances no ordinary criminal would dream of taking. But they have resources no ordinary criminal has, either. I should say this woman is a fanatical idealist with an enormous financial background.”

“She’s a criminal genius.”

“Like enough. She’s a genius in a way that may not have occurred to you. I mean that from the point of view of a prosecution, we haven’t a scrap of evidence! We have no case!”

“What!”

“It’s a fact. In the first place, we don’t know who Sumuru *is*. We have only your testimony—unsupported—and the testimony of Miss Duquesne and Dr. Maitland (both missing) that such a person exists! A man was certainly murdered here in London, you were attacked and taken away to some house, and the others have—disappeared. But you don’t know where this house is! As for the garage of the bomb-damaged property where we found you, any common crook could have got hold of a key to fit that. You were *intended* to be found there. For some reason or another, this woman didn’t mean to detain you. If it comes to that, you can’t even *describe* her!”

“I know I can’t!” Donovan groaned. “Nobody who has ever seen her has been able to describe Sumuru.”

“That’s what I mean. You see how abominably clever, she is? No one can corroborate another’s evidence. There’s nothing to go to a jury. Then, there’s this man who calls himself Worthington—”

“The swine who had me blinded. Plenty of evidence there.”

“Of the outrage, yes. But not of the identity of Mr. Worthington. This man seems to be the same who called for Miss Duquesne, posing as Dr. Maitland—whom she had never met. A dangerous criminal. But who *is* he? We have no records, here, of such a person. He must be a foreign importation.”

“He is Sumuru’s chief chemist. He told me so.”

“Quite. But no one *heard* him tell you! Bring him in here, and get him to repeat it. Then, we should know what to do!”

“That’s *your* business, isn’t it, Inspector?”

“A nasty one!... We’re doing out best, Mr. Donovan—”

Ives’s desk phone purred. He took it up.

“Chief Inspector Ives here... What’s that? A house near Hanover Square, you say? But are you *sure* of the car?... We’re on dangerous ground there. We can’t raid the embassies of friendly nations! ... All right, I’ll come along at once.”

He replaced the receiver.

“Any news, Inspector?” Donovan asked eagerly.

“Well—” Ives frowned in a puzzled way. “I hope so.

But it’s all rather confusing. One of my fellows thinks he has found the house to which your missing friend, Miss Duquesne, was taken when she arrived in London—”

“Yes, yes! Go on!”

“It’s certainly in the right neighbourhood. But it belongs to the diplomatic corps of one of the Balkan states! Funny business! I must be off. It’s getting late, too. Let me drop you at your flat in Bruton Street. When I’ve looked into this clue, I’ll come along and see you ...”

2

“Caspar! ...”

“Caspar! ... Caspar! ...”

Sibilant slippers crossed a marble floor; there was a musical tinkling as the rose-tinted curtains swung open.

“My Lady?”

“What does Philo report?”

“He reports. My Lady, that the house of the ex-ambassador is being watched by the police—”

There followed a moment of ominous silence—a faint splash from the pool.

“There has been some carelessness! Some outrageous clumsiness! Steps must be taken immediately. This may be dangerous. Proceed, Caspar! Proceed! What of the American journalist?”

“Mark Donovan is away from his apartment, My Lady. It is believed that he is at Scotland Yard—”

“Believed! believed! Am I served by half-wits? *Is* he at Scotland Yard or is he *not*?”

Caspar bowed so low that he resembled an inverted L.

“My Lady—I only tell you what is reported to me. I can tell you no more.”

My Lady tapped her long nails on the ivory inlay of an Arab coffee-table.

“Philo’s wits grow dull. I must find some means of stimulating them. Perhaps a year in the ruby mines—”

“My Lady! My Lady!” At last, emotion entered into the placid voice. “Spare him that!”

“We must act at once. Those records, photographs and fingerprints may fall into the wrong hands—particularly if the servants at the embassy are interrogated. Varro and Abdul are ready with the car?”

“They await your orders, Madonna.”

“Ariosto knows the plan. Tell him to apply the new preparation, 842, and to send Dr. Maitland to me here.”

“It shall be done, My Lady.”

The curtain rings emitted their bell-like tinkle. The whisper of Caspar's slippers died into silence.

My Lady laughed.

"It is all so simple—if one is wise, and calm ..."

An almost complete stillness fell upon that fantastic room, broken only by occasional faint splashings from the marble pool, when one of the golden orfe disturbed a lily leaf. Then came an angry voice and a scuffle of footsteps...

"Restrain yourself, Dr. Maitland." The oily tones were Caspar's. "This anger is useless. I do not more than to obey Our Lady's orders."

"Keep your slimy hands off me!" Steel Maitland shouted. "I can walk without support, thank you."

The rings tinkled as the curtains were drawn open.

"My Lady—Dr. Steel Maitland to see you."

The rings tinkled again as the curtains were closed. Caspar's slippers went whispering away.

Maitland looked slightly dishevelled. His eyes were hotly angry, and his hands were fastened. He stood there staring at My Lady.

"Ah! I am much obliged to you, madame. First, for having my hands re-tied—which small attention probably saved me from a charge of homicide. Second, for instructing 'Dr. Worthington' to administer an injection which means no doubt that I shall die without having strangled him!"

A ripple of musical laughter checked his words.

"How you exaggerate, Dr. Maitland! Please be seated. I fear you are a nasty, rough fellow—or so Ariosto reports."

Maitland hesitated, then, with a gesture of resignation, dropped down on to the Egyptian stool set near the divan.

“Who is Ariosto?”

My Lady clasped her hands behind her head, leaning back on a pillar.

“My chief physician—whom you know as Dr. Worthington. A man of great ability.”

“I am aware of his ability!” said Maitland dryly.

“You must bear no malice.” The wonderful eyes were nearly closed. “He merely carries out my orders. And my orders must be obeyed. I ordered Mark Donovan to be set free. He is free now. I had my reasons. One day, he will work for me—voluntarily.”

“You are an optimist! But enough of this nonsense. Scotland Yard is hard on your heels. I suppose you know it?”

Sumuru remained still.

“Scotland Yard can never disturb my serenity. I am beyond the reach of Scotland Yard. Those who are a real danger to my plans, I remove—in a manner to be a warning to others. There is never any evidence, Dr. Maitland. In my home I preserve the traditions of a past grandeur. I go about the world, freely and luxuriously. I maintain the personal staff of a prime minister. I have thousands of followers. But Scotland Yard can never interfere with me.”

Maitland was studying the lovely, provocative face, covertly.

“Am I to suppose,” he asked, “that you do me the honour of regarding me as one who is a real danger? Has your talented Ariosto booked me to a quick or to a slow death?”

Where had he met this woman before?

“You are really absurd!” She smiled slightly. “I assure you I am entirely harmless—if no one interferes with me. No, Dr. Maitland, you will not die. You will merely obey my orders. 842, which Ariosto administered, is a sedative, intended to compose your mind to receive those orders.”

Maitland became aware of a disturbing phenomenon. Either My Lady’s features

were changing, assuming a wholly different character, or his eyes were playing him tricks...

“I may be your prisoner, madam, and helpless. But nothing can ever force me to carry out your fantastic plans...” His voice sounded to his own ears as though it came from a long way off. “Whew! This place is suffocatingly hot!”

“I recall,” My Lady murmured, “that you were overcome on a former occasion, Dr. Maitland. The scent of mimosa is, of course, a heavy one. But you will no doubt become accustomed to it—in time.”

The slim, recumbent body seemed to be *floating*... floating nearer. Maitland spoke, hoarsely.

“You... have... drugged me... you she-devil!... I am... suffocating ...”

My Lady’s eyes had grown enormous—and they were close to his own.

“You are merely a little faint. This will pass. Look at me! ... I *order* you to look at me!”

Maitland seemed to be sinking into purple depths, but the beautiful, remorseless voice followed him.

“There is a small steel box locked in the wardrobe at Mark Donovan’s flat. It contains evidence which you have collected in the East concerning that Order of which I am the head. I must see this evidence. You will bring it to me. You have the key to the apartment. You are going there now. If you are disturbed, you will say, ‘Do not follow me ...

Scented purple clouds dosed over Maitland’s head.

“... ‘*Death to follow* ...’”

“... ‘Death to follow me...’”

“.._.‘to follow me ...‘“_

“Is that you, Inspector?”

Donovan sprang up and turned to the door. He was ridiculously jumpy.

“It is!”

Inspector Ives stepped in, closing the door behind him.—“Phew! My nerve’s going!”

“I was right to borrow the key, Mr. Donovan. I left the car well out of sight and took a careful look along Bruton Street. Sure enough, there’s a fellow skulking up at the Berkeley Square end! But I tricked him! I waited until a lorry came by, and ran beside it right to your door. I was in before he could have seen me!”

Donovan crossed to the buffet and poured out two drinks.

“Does it matter?” he asked wearily, passing a tumbler to the inspector.

“I think it does. *_Why_* is your place being watched? Whatever it means, they don’t know *I’m* here!... Thanks! This is welcome.”

“What news?”

“Nothing much.” Ives set his glass down. “A car corresponding to the one in which you were carried off, recently, was seen to call at a house not far from here. Unfortunately, this house is outside the jurisdiction of Scotland Yard. All quiet there. Don’t quite know what we can do—at least, not tonight.”

Donovan took a deep gulp of whisky.

“Good God! this is awful! And—*_Claudette_* may be in that house!”

“She *may* be, Mr. Donovan,” Ives agreed, and began to fill his pipe. “But if she is, she stays there. A good man is posted now, and will be relieved at daylight by another. In the meantime, I shall try to get the necessary powers.”

Donovan moved about restlessly.

“This house right in Mayfair can’t possibly be Sumuru’s headquarters,” he said. “But we know for a fact that she uses some other place near by as well. Is there

anything otherwise suspicious, to suggest that it might be this Embassy?”

“Nothing much. Except that the diplomatic party who formerly occupied it went away some time ago. There are still servants there I believe, clearing up the heavier baggage, and so on. But while the national flag hangs over the door, my hands are tied.”

Donovan nodded, miserably.

“We have got to accept the fact that Sumuru has tremendous secret influence of some sort. It may be political influence ...”

“That’s what *I*’ve been thinking!” Ives declared, putting his pouch back in his pocket and lighting his pipe.

“It would account for a lot of things. It would partly explain how she manages her abductions. In fact, there could be a better place to hide a prisoner than inside an Embassy.”

“You’re right. It’s been done before. But if we’re up against a woman who uses diplomatic immunity to cover her crimes, we’re also up against a tough proposition!”

“I agree. Why—Maitland might be in that house!”

“He might be, Mr. Donovan. But... Quiet! What’s that?”

Ives put his lighted briar in a tray, and stood up.

“What? I heard nothing—”

“S’sh! Listen!”

They stood tense, alert, and then:

“Someone just outside the door!” Donovan whispered.

“Trying a key in the lock! Quick! Where can we hide?”

“There—look—”

“S’sh, *Quiet!*”

“Behind that painted screen. What’s the idea—?”

“Light out, first of all! Slip into the lobby. Quick! Those out too... Not a sound! No rough stuff, mind. Keep your hands in your pockets. *I’m* in charge ...”

Donovan darted into the lobby, and was back in a matter of seconds.

“That’s done!”

“Right! Whoever it is will switch the lights on, I expect. Come on!”

Ives stepped into cover. Donovan depressed both switches and groped his way in beside him. “It may be Maitland,” he whispered.

“Dr. Maitland wouldn’t fumble about like that!”

Then, the key was turned in the lock, very slowly. Donovan could hear it turning. A slight draught became perceptible. The door was open. Next, the lobby light sprang up. Ives looked out through one hinge of the screen, Donovan from another. Both commanded a view of the room. Suddenly, a hand appeared in silhouette, and all the lights were switched on. Steel Maitland came in, walking softly!

Donovan was on the point of shouting his name, when, to his amazement, Ives clapped a hand over his mouth!

“Quiet!” he breathed. “Look at his *eyes!*”

And, as the restraining hand was removed, Donovan looked.

What he saw chilled him.

Steel Maitland, his cheeks, or that part of them visible through his beard, oddly white, stared vacantly about the room with a glassy stare which Donovan thought resembled that of an opium-smoker. Of the keen intelligence, the acute observation, which normally lighted them, nothing was left. They were the eyes of a man in a trance. Then, in a low voice, Maitland spoke.

“I must not delay for a moment. Someone’s life depends upon me. I must take my baggage and go. Don’t follow me ... It means death to follow me.”

He went out. Donovan heard the click of the bedroom switch. He heard that monotonous voice: “... not delay for a moment. Someone’s life depends upon me. I must take my baggage and go. Don’t follow me. It means death to follow me...”

He was horrified beyond expression. But, dimly, he heard Ives speaking: “I begin to understand what we’re up against. That man is under some sort of control. Whoever sent him here, thought the flat would be empty. But that speech was meant for you, in case you were at home.”

“We must get him, Ives! Handcuff him, if necessary! To all intents and purposes, poor Maitland is a madman!”

A strong hand gripped Donovan’s arm.

“Go easy! Go easy! *I’m* in charge of this case. We are not going to interfere with him. We are going to see what he does, and when he goes, we are going to follow him. You may never have seen a somnambulist, but I have. Dr. Maitland is practically walking in his sleep, but he’s carrying out specific orders. We want to know what they are!”

Donovan breathed hard, and then, “I think I can guess what they are,” he said. “All his notes on the case are in a steel box in his valise. And the valise is locked in the wardrobe. Somebody requires that material. What shall we do? They are probably waiting below for him.”

“For once in a while, your friend, Sumuru, has been let down by bad staff work. Those who take big chances are open to it. But I have learned something: never to disbelieve a story because it sounds impossible.”

“But what shall we *do*?”

“You, stand by here. Whatever he does, don’t interfere with him. Don’t awaken him. He’s in a trance, or asleep. When he leaves, follow on. I shall have the police car handy. Run across and jump in.”

And so, Ives having stolen downstairs, Donovan found himself alone in the flat

with poor Maitland. He could hear him moving about in the bedroom. He heard him open the drawer in which the wardrobe key was kept and heard him open the wardrobe.

At intervals he muttered, "Must take my baggage and go. Don't follow me..." It was horrible to listen to... "means death to follow me ..."

He was through with this job sooner than Donovan had anticipated, and when he came out carrying a suitcase and the valise, Donovan was a second too late to take cover!

He could have cursed himself for a clumsy fool; then he realised that it didn't matter.

Maitland's eyes were turned straight in Donovan's direction. But there was no recognition there, in fact there was no consciousness of any presence! He stared glassily right through Donovan... "Don't follow me ... It means death to follow me..."

Donovan didn't stir, and Maitland walked right past him, opened the door, and carrying his baggage, went downstairs.

Donovan followed, some little distance behind, and when Maitland stepped into Bruton Street, slamming the door behind him, Donovan opened it an inch or so and peered out, cautiously.

A car was standing by the corner of the mews across the street, and for this Maitland headed. Donovan saw the driver get down and help with the bags, and trusting to the darkness, he took a quick look, right and left, but failed to see Ives.

Maitland got into the waiting car, and it moved off. Then, Donovan stepped right out.

Where was Ives?

An answer came almost as the query formed itself in his mind. The police car had, evidently, been parked in the mews! Now, it came out. Ives stood on a running-board.

“Jump in, sir! We mustn’t lose him!”

Donovan jumped in, and the chase began.

4

“When I saw that car,” Ives explained, “standing there, I didn’t know what to do. I knew it might be one belonging to the gang. So I strolled along casually to the corner of Bond Street as if I had merely come out of another of the flats. Once there, I hared around to the other end of the mews. I found my man asleep, but I soon woke him up.”

“You hope this may lead us to Sumuru’s headquarters?”

“Well, to some place used by her people, anyway. I had no time to get a squad together, so that, whatever happens, the three of us, you, I, and Thomson, my driver, must deal with it.”

“We may disturb a hornet’s nest.”

“It’s quite possible. We have evidence to show that your lady friend sticks at nothing. Now, where the devil are they making for?”

At this hour of the morning the West End streets were deserted, so that there was no difficulty in following the mysterious car from point to point. The police driver could easily have overtaken it, but Ives’s orders were to drop well behind until the quarry rounded any corner and then to dash forward in order to keep it in sight. He had just performed such a dash as Ives spoke, falling in behind the car as its driver swung right, along Park Lane.

“Marble Arch, apparently.”

“They know they are followed, Mr. Donovan. It was unavoidable in the circumstances. And they know that this Squad car can overhaul them. I wonder what they’ll try?”

“Got the number?”

“Yes. But it wouldn’t help if they managed to slip away. I’m almost sure it’s a private car, used by the gang. In that case they can change the number plate

whenever it suits them. Hullo! Go slow, Thomson!”

“They’re pulling up! They’re pulling up!”

“Easy Thomson, easy! Slow down—”

“They’re drawing in to the verge!”

“Where the Park railings used to be!”

“Not another car in sight.”

“Not likely to be, at this hour.”

“Good heavens, Ives! You see! You see! Someone has been flung out!”

Craning forward, Donovan had seen the leading car drawing in on the bend right to where the Park railings had formerly stood. He saw now, the near-side door swing open ... and he saw a man’s body topple out!

“Good God! It’s *Maitland!*”

“Open up, Thompson!” The police car leapt forward. “Stop where he lies. You go ahead when we get out. Pass that car and jamb it! Make no mistake. Whoever’s inside —bring ‘em in... dead or alive! ...” A shriek of brakes. “Here we are. Jump, Mr. Donovan!” Both sprang out. “Let her go, Thompson. Bring those men in, remember!”

Away streaked the car in the wake of the now racing quarry, and Donovan found himself bending over Steel Maitland where he lay.

“An old trick,” said Ives savagely. “But it rarely fails. We dare not leave him lying there with not a soul about. Is he—”

“He’s alive. But he’s quite unconscious. Ives, there was someone else hiding in that car.”

“I know. Although he never showed himself when Dr. Maitland got in. Do you think he’s been knocked out?”

The inspector shone a ray from his lamp into the pale, bearded face.

“There’s no sign of injury. But it might have been a blow on the head.”

“Do what you can. I’ll run across to the box on the corner and get a car and a doctor.”

Ives ran off, and Donovan gave a more careful overhaul to Steel Maitland. He was no medical man, but he understood first-aid, which includes at least the rudiments of the business. Maitland lay like a log. But Donovan could find no signs of injury to head or limbs; and all his ribs were intact. He suspected that he might have struck his skull when thrown out of the car, but failed to detect any evidence to support this.

Donovan was uncertain just how late it was, but noted that no one passed that way during all this time, until a constable turned up. His manner bristled with suspicion.

“Hullo! What’s this?”

“Someone thrown out of a car, Constable. He happens to be a friend of mine “

“Does he? Let’s have a look at him.”

Donovan stood up, and the Constable stared challengingly into his eyes before stooping over Maitland. Donovan decided to relieve the tension.

“My name is Donovan. Chief Inspector Ives, who was with me at the time, has gone to a police box to call a surgeon. I’m expecting him back at any moment.”

“Chief Inspector Ives? Oh! Are you are friend of his?”

“I know him fairly well. He is an old friend of Dr. Maitland’s, here.”

“Dr. Steel Maitland?”

“Yes.”

“Phew! Never saw him before, sir, Sorry to see him like this. But he’s well known to the force. Who’s the sprinter?... Oh, it’s the inspector.”

Ives came doubling up and was saluted by the constable.

“Never salute a plain clothes officer,” the inspector snapped, irritably. “Devil of a lot of trouble getting that arranged,” he explained apologetically. “Stand by, Constable, to lend us a hand. Excuse my bad temper. They’ll be here shortly.” He looked down at Maitland. “Any change?”

“No, I’m sorry to say. He seems to be breathing regularly, too, and—”

“Is that you, Donovan?” came a voice from the ground.

It would have been difficult to say which of the three jumped highest. The voice was the voice of Steel Maitland—and Steel Maitland was sitting up and staring all about him!

“Take it easy, Doctor,” Ives warned.

“Oh, hullo, Ives! You there, too? Now—” he stood up, unsupported—“how the hell did I get *here!*”

“Go easy,” Donovan urged.

“Thanks—I’m all right. Except for a racking headache... Gad! it’s coming back! Donovan! Donovan! *She* is there—Claudette! That devil woman has her again!”

“You are sure? You are sure?”

“Sure? I tell you she’s there, Donovan—in that damnable place filled with mimosa! ...”

4

In that fabulous marble apartment for which, already, many men were searching, an ominous stillness reigned. Philo, of the massive shoulders, stood before his beautiful, dreaded mistress, his powerful hands clenched, his head bowed, and dew of perspiration on his low brow.

My Lady sat upright in a high-backed ebony chair which bore the arms of a long dead cardinal. Then, she spoke. “You have failed.”

“My Lady!”

“Silence! Listen. Your information concerning the movements of the American, Donovan, was false. He had returned to his apartment. He was joined there by a Scotland Yard officer—_unknown_ to you! But for the quicker wit of Varro, in the car, all would have fallen into the hands of the police.”

“Dear My Lady, although they had to abandon the car in Bayswater, they saved the steel box. I have it here_—_

“The car will set the police on the scent. They had also to abandon Dr. Maitland. By now he will have recovered from the treatment. He is not a Mark Donovan. He is not in love with one of my women. He has all the resources or the Secret Service behind him. You fool! You witless fool!

Bending, she struck Philo a sharp blow on the cheek. He did not flinch. My Lady laughed.

“You have worked in the ruby mines, Philo—

Now, he displayed something resembling human emotion.

“Madonna! Not that! Not that!”

“Your great physical strength fits you to endure privations. Your dull, animal brain has become a menace to me. I thought I could train you—for you have certain qualities—”

“My Lady! I beg of you—”

“One more task I shall entrust to you, Philo. It will be the hardest of all. Should you fail—”

“I shall not fail: I shall not fail!”

“Stand upright. Go. Tell Caspar to send Sister Jean to me, here, at once ...”

Chapter Nine

1

DAWN was smudging out the lamplight in Donovan's flat and painting a pretty haggard crew before Maitland's story drew to an end. There were many interruptions, too. Telephone reports concerning the mysterious Embassy, and one visit.

Thomson, the police driver, came in to give a personal account of what happened after he had left Ives and Donovan near Marble Arch. The wanted car was speeding along Bayswater Road when he sighted it next, and before he could overtake, its driver swung dangerously off the main road and headed for Westbourne Terrace. Thomson shot past. But he came round fairly smartly and followed.

They had tricked him. He found the car abandoned, empty. But the driver, the other passenger, and the luggage had vanished.

Thomson jumped out and scouted around for a long time. He had no luck. The fugitives might have gone into any one of a dozen houses or blocks of flats in that neighbourhood. He could pick up no trace of them, and there was no passer-by to help him...

Steel Maitland related how he had set out to find Lady Orpsley's address in Switzerland. He took steps to get in touch with her at the earliest possible moment, then, later, went along to the autopsy on the body of Sir Miles Tristram.

This appalling incident, so far, had merely been reported as a sudden death. The full facts had not been divulged to the newspapers, nor was it intended, at any rate at present, that they should be. Maitland was able to offer valuable information to the Home Office pathologist, who confessed himself utterly at a loss to account for the condition of Tristram's body. No case of *rigor Kubus* had, hitherto, come under his notice.

A large green sapphire was clenched in his hand ...

Maitland had been delayed in one way and another, and had arrived, as they both

knew, at Donovan's flat during the time that Donovan was in Shepherd Market. Of the fight on the landing he gave same graphic details ...

"But just what happened next?" Ives asked.

Steel Maitland ran his hand through his thick black hair and smiled wryly. He had lost the pallor which had alarmed Donovan so much, and was again, so far as manner and appearance went, his normal self.

"A simple question, Inspector, but a hard one to answer. Quite briefly, I don't know!"

"You mean," Inspector Ives suggested, "that there's a gap in your recollection?"

"There are many gaps, which together must have covered a longish period, as I realise now. It's clear to me that you and Donovan have a strange tale to tell as well, and it may have some bearing on mine. This is so queer that I hardly expect you to believe it."

"I am prepared to believe anything," Ives declared, "since what happened to Mr. Donovan. So you may go ahead."

"Well, here goes. I passed out, there on the stairhead, but recovered to find myself alone in a small room with which I was entirely unfamiliar. There was nothing distinctive about it, except perhaps a piece of Chinese tapestry which hung on one wall—"

"Phew!" Donovan ejaculated. "This is uncanny! I thought I had *dreamed* about that tapestry! But don't let me interrupt."

"As, apart from a rather swimmy head, I felt quite restored, I decided to try the door. I was flat out to make a run for it. The room was curiously silent, and it appeared to have no windows. It was lighted by a shaded lamp on a bookcase. But there was nothing in any way alarming about it otherwise. I tried to do as I have stated. The word is tried."

Maitland paused, and a memory of what Donovan and Ives knew, later, to have been a moment of stark horror, evidently claimed his mind. His whole expression changed.

“I could not stir a limb! As I lay, on my side, and facing the tapestried wall, so I was forced to remain. I learned that I could not reclose my eyes. I could not move a muscle! Even now, at this moment, the mere recollection has covered me with perspiration. I did not, could not, doubt that I was in the second stage of *rigor Kubus!*”

Ives moved uneasily in his chair, glancing aside at Donovan.

“Help yourself, Inspector,” Donovan said. “We could do with drinks all round, if you don’t mind.”

He stood up.

“I don’t like the smell of this case,” he declared. “*I* saw Sir Miles Tristram, too.”

“However,” Maitland went on, “as I lay there fighting against mad panic, the Chinese tapestry was drawn aside and a woman came out into the room, and stood there watching me. She wore a dark cape of some smooth, glossy fur over what I took to be a white evening frock. There were gold sandals on her bare feet, and there was a scarf of Indian silk with a design worked in gold thread, tied over her hair. She was smiling, and her eyes shone like jewels. Even before she spoke, I knew... that this was Sumuru!”

“One glimpse would be enough,” Donovan whispered.

“Donovan, you will confirm what I am going to say. I didn’t believe there was a human being anywhere in the world, who radiated such *force!* Her spirit so transfigured her flesh, seeming to shine through like a white fire through delicate porcelain, that I lost all awareness of the woman and was conscious of nothing but of the appalling power of her mind. Not that she tried to impress me with pompous words, but simply that I experienced a sensation or being in the presence of something unique, dynamic, dangerous.”

Donovan nodded, but did not interrupt again.

“Her first words were, ‘You have no one but yourself to thank for this, Dr. Maitland.’ And although her speech seemed effortless. I knew that I listened to a very rare thing: perfect diction. Every word that she spoke registered. ‘But I have no wish to torture you. The muscular paralysis will pass. You are not suffering from *rigor Kubus.*’ I hardly expect to be believed—” Maitland looked

at Ives and then at Donovan, almost appealingly— “but I never doubted her word.”

“I was about to say,” Ives interrupted, as he served drinks, “that I should like to meet the lady. But on second thoughts, I’m not so sure!”

“She told me very quietly, in that beautiful voice, that I had been closely covered for some months past. They had quite made up their minds that Tristram and I must never compare notes. Tristram, it appears, had got hold of evidence to prove the real identity of Sumuru. By the way, I was wrong about her nationality. Whatever country she belongs to, it isn’t Japan. She made no bones about the murder. There are others,’ she said, ‘who might dream of interfering with me. And, however you may try to hush up the facts, the truth will leak out. No one cares to die of *rigor Kubus*. Sir Miles’s death will serve as a sharp object lesson’.”

“It has!” Donovan remarked, and took a gulp of whisky.

“Sumuru informed me that she had seen Tristram, personally, and that she had outlined the object of her campaign. She described this as the suppression of ugliness. Al-though she didn’t actually say so, I believe, as I suspected, that it was Sumuru who brought the sapphire to Charles Street and who put the poison spores into Tristram’s snuffbox. He recognised his visitor, perhaps, and made the mistake of trying to blackmail her. We all know what his terms for silence would be. We have seen how Sumuru replied.”

Apparently, this singular woman insisted that she, alone, could save the world from a Third World War, which would destroy civilisation. She had the financial resources and was building up the necessary organisation for her reign of beauty. It was not and would never be a reign of terror. But she would brook no interference.

““You have accumulated a quantity of material,’ she said, ‘which, although it could not bring me within reach of your absurd law—I am above the law—might inconvenience me if you placed it before the authorities. Claudette, who is here with me, and your friend, Mr. Donovan, are in great danger whilst this material remains in his charge ...”

Those were the last words spoken at this interview which Maitland remembered.

“I had an impression that Sumuru was disappearing like something vaporous. At last, all that I could see of her was her eyes. It’s humiliating to confess that one has been hypnotised by a woman, but I believe this is what happened—not only then, but again later. As for my own part in all that followed, I simply can’t help you at all. There are a number of hazy memories and others that are crystal clear. Time ceased to exist. I occupied a small but well-appointed suite and was waited upon by some sort of Eurasian butler, wearing Arab dress: a fellow who eternally smiled. On one occasion I was taken to a waiting-room... and Donovan was brought in!”

Maitland paused, looking bewildered, and then went on:

“I believe that everything I touched was drugged—even the water. Looking back, I realise there are so many gaps. Then comes a clear memory—my meeting with a dark and powerful rascal who said his name was Dr. Worthington.”

“I’ll get that bird one day!” growled Donovan.

“Oh! you know him? Well—I wish you luck? He spliced me up in a large and first class laboratory, forced an injection into my spine, and I was hustled into a room like a Roman atrium. I remembered that I had been there before. But I simply couldn’t recall (and can’t recall now) what had taken place on the earlier occasion ...”

Maitland described his last interview with Sumuru.

“What happened next I cannot say. In a dim way, I seem to remember being here, in this flat, and of looking for a key. Dr. Worthington shares in those memories, too...”

“I believe he was the other passenger in the car,” said Ives savagely.

“It’s quite possible. But I have no recollection of being in a car at all. My next, clear memory is one of finding myself lying on the ground in Hyde Park and of hearing your voice, Donovan!”

That they were opposed to an enemy who used strange weapons was a thing

beyond dispute. To what extent unfamiliar drugs played a part in Sumuru's campaign and how much of those experiences shared by Maitland and Donovan must be counted due to this woman's personal magnetism, was a problem they found hard to solve. Ives remained obstinately sceptical concerning her hypnotic powers.

"Unless you had been drugged she could have done nothing," was his verdict.

But there was another queer thing. Maitland and Donovan were unanimous on the point of Sumuru's remarkable beauty. But neither could tell Ives the colour of her eyes or of her hair! Maitland was quite unable to hide the fact that he regarded her with something approaching awe.

"She may be the World's Desire, Donovan; every man's ideal."

Ives scratched his head. "I suppose you mean Helen of Troy. That would make her something past middle-aged, wouldn't it?" he inquired dryly.

"There's another very queer thing," Maitland added. "I am positive on one point: At some time, somewhere, I have seen this woman before ..."

Nevertheless, since none of them had any idea of her real identity, speculation alone remained. Ives suggested, ironically, that supposing he were lucky enough to "bring her in," as he phrased it, neither would be able to identify her.

"On the contrary," Maitland assured him, "I could identify her in a million. She is absolutely unmistakable."

"Yet you can't describe her."

Maitland smiled wanly, and lighted one of his odorous cheroots. "A fact which, of itself, is somewhat extraordinary ..."

3

Donovan's frame of mind during those days he found it hard later to recapture. It was fortunate for him that he had private resources, for his work at this time fully justified the sack. He simply couldn't synchronise the everyday world with that other, shadowy world which he knew to exist, which had ordained death to Sir Miles Tristram, into which Claudette had disappeared.

A shocked coroner's jury had returned a verdict of death from natural causes, brought about through infection by a tropical germ, which suited Ives very well. But, as Sumuru had predicted, sensational reports concerning the state of the body were soon in circulation and someone writing over the signature "Medico" contributed a letter to a daily newspaper pointing out that *rigor Kubus* was not only a tropical disease, but also a very rare one, and suggesting that further investigation was indicated concerning the manner of infection.

Inspector Ives drew Donovan's attention to this letter.

"I called at the office and saw the original. It was typed on notepaper headed with a Harley Street address, and signed 'Montague Worthington. M.D.'! I was round there ten minutes later. The house is entirely occupied by dental surgeons!"

"Worthington again! That man's impudence passes belief. Of course, it's all part of a plan to notify whomever it may concern that Sumuru has handed out what she probably regards as justice. But, after all, there are several people we know who could identify Dr. Worthington. What are you doing about him?"

Ives sat on the edge of Donovan's desk, looking at him sideways.

"How many tall men with dark moustaches do you suppose there are in London? Am I expected to arrest them all and hold a parade to be inspected by yourself, Constable Kent, and Dr. Maitland?"

"What about this girl Jean Barlow who was Claudette's co-worker in Africa, and who evidently had her kidnapped?"

"Her existence has been confirmed, Mr. Donovan, and her duties in the French service. But both she and Miss Duquesne were relieved of further duties about the time they left Algiers. And they have both disappeared. We are trying to trace Jean Barlow's family. Nothing like this case has ever come my way. As yet. I haven't seen one of the principals. The best I have to go upon is just shadowy descriptions, and most of the people concerned seem to have vanished!"

"Has no clue been picked up at Sir Miles's house?"

"Ask Dr. Maitland. He's working on the thing for the Intelligence people. He knows far more about it than I do."

Inspector Ives was in a bad humour, and Donovan did not press him further.

During the considerable time which elapsed before he found himself again deeply involved in the mesh of Sumuru's mysterious web, Donovan never entirely threw off a sickly fear that there might be some aftermath of the unknown drugs administered by Dr. Worthington. He knew that Maitland shared this dread. But, in fact, neither suffered any ill effects. Spasmodic pain in the eyes, in Donovan's case, disappeared quickly.

"I knew already," Maitland told him, "that this formidable woman had gone far ahead of the recognised pharmacutists. Whether she, herself, is a highly accomplished chemist or whether she employs one, we don't know. But her knowledge of drugs is phenomenal."

Donovan did not know how Maitland was employed at this period. But he suspected that he deliberately kept his own counsel in order to protect him from Sumuru. That he was afraid of her he was at no pains to disguise. On one occasion he said:

"Although all the powers of law and order are behind me, Donovan, I don't think, frankly, that I have a chance..."

In his secret heart, Donovan doubted it, too. But overriding every other doubt, every other fear, was his hopeless longing for Claudette. Her image was eternally before him. He recalled each intonation of her voice, and every one of those quaint, graceful gestures which betrayed her French parentage. It is true that the figure of Sumuru haunted his dreams, but as something aloof from his life, not, indeed, of this world, as a vision of Isis unveiled in a secret shrine; lovely but terrible.

He fought against the insupportable idea that he should never see Claudette again. Yet—he hadn't a notion where to look for her! The usual routine of advertising, and circulating photographs Ives had dismissed as worse than useless. "She is in a prison. But we don't know where."

Chapter Ten

1

“WHAT are you writing, Donovan?”

A rattle of typewriter keys ceased abruptly. Mark Donovan looked up from his work.

“An account of the history of Sumuru, Maitland—what I know of it—to date.”

Maitland dropped into his favourite armchair and lighted a cheroot which smelt like a prairie fire.

“Good. Should make fine confused reading.”

“It does.” Donovan stood up and stared out of the window. “It’s bewildering. Do you know, sometimes I just can’t believe we have really known this woman—seen her—listened to her voice. It beats me. You escaped her clutches by a sheer miracle. But I go through hell every time you are out after dark.”

Maitland nodded.

“I never go far, alone—after dark. Anyway, it’s my job, Donovan. I have to take chances. Just think. A prominent man, Miles Tristram, is murdered here in London, by means of the horrible infection called *rigor Kubus*. So far we have no clue to his murder ... I know what you’re going to say, but we have no evidence, Donovan. Claudette Duquesne, the daughter of a famous French writer, is spirited away—”

Donovan clenched his hands.

“Good God! Where is she? Where *is* she? Sometimes I wonder shall I ever see her again!”

Mainland’s expression was sympathetic as he stared at the broad shoulders of the man by the window.

“I know how you feel—I know. But we are all doing our best. We can do no more. And, so far, there’s no clue to her whereabouts. I can’t guess if there’s any connection, but I learn now that her father has vanished from his Paris flat.”

Donovan turned quickly.

“What do you say, Maitland?”

“It’s true. He has just—disappeared!... Then, we have both been attacked, drugged, and hauled before this amazing criminal. She seems to live in some place like an Eastern palace. She employs highly efficient thugs of various nationalities. She has a private laboratory in charge of a distinguished looking scientist known to you and me as Dr. Worthington—”

Perhaps unconsciously, Donovan tightened his fists again.

“Ha! One day I mean to balance my account with Dr. Worthington!”

“I have a few small points of difference to settle with him myself,” said Maitland dryly. “But the thing is—we don’t know the location of this Arabian Nights abode. We don’t know how to *find* Dr. Worthington.”

Donovan stirred restlessly, but didn’t turn.

“There’s this house recently used as an Embassy. I have hopes that some clue may be found there.”

“It will be too late, Donovan.” Maitland shook his head. “Every possible diplomatic obstacle has been put in our way. By the time the police get permission to investigate, there’ll be nothing to see. A more promising line of inquiry is the girl, Jean Barlow—”

“Jean Barlow? You mean Claudette’s alleged friend?”

“Yes—the ‘friend’ who arranged her abduction by Sumuru! We have got in touch at last with Jean’s father. He is a country vicar—up in Cumberland. The story Claudette told you is true enough. Both girls were employed in the French propaganda department—”

And now Donovan turned and took a step towards Maitland.

“Well?”

“Well—the Reverend Lawrence Barlow has regular letters from his daughter, it seems. I have seen some of them. Jean states that she is at present employed on a confidential job in London. But the address, Scotland Yard has just reported, is merely an accommodation one—a stationer’s shop in Kensington.”

“But—”

“Oh, the next person to call for letters addressed to Jean will be held, I promise you!”

“But the letters themselves?”

“Rather wild. I should say that the missing Jean is desperately unhappy—Hullo!”

The phone bell interrupted him. Donovan crossed and took the call.

“This is Mark Donovan... Yes, I’ll tell him... Inspector Ives, for you, Maitland.”

“Thanks.” Maitland took Donovan’s place. “Hullo, Ives— what is it?... *What?*... Great Scott! that’s a bit of luck!... You want me to come round? Right... Yes—I’ll be along right away... I am hoping for big things from this ... Good—starting now ... I shall bring Donovan.”

Maitland replaced the receiver and stood staring at Donovan.

“What’s happened?”

Maitland smiled grimly.

“An almost incredible slice of luck—at last. Do you know Ian Forrester?”

“Not personally, but many critics think he’s the best of the younger actors on the London stage. As a matter of fact, I was assigned to attend his opening tonight in *Hamlet*. But I passed the job on to a junior. I had no heart for it.”

Maitland’s gaze remained fixed upon him.

“Yet—I think you may be there after all, Donovan—”

In Chief Inspector Ives's office at Scotland Yard, a man was pacing up and down, up and down, before the large, tidy desk at which the chief inspector remained seated. His dark blue suit was almost too well tailored, for he was of a build and bearing which could have carried rags with distinction. His thick, light brown hair was brushed in a manner deliberately negligent, a manner which accorded well with the pale, classic features.

Ives, who had never met Ian Forrester before, found himself wondering if that ivory pallor was habitual, and if Forrester's blue eyes had always held a haunted expression.

"I understand that it's a painful business, Mr. Forrester, but I must ask you to go right back to your first meeting with Miss Barlow."

Forrester nodded, squaring his jaw.

"Of course, Inspector." His voice, which had gone far to make his great reputation, possessed a music rarely heard on the modern stage. "I want to tell you everything that can possibly help us to trace her. Well, it was in Algiers, late in '44. I was touring with an Ensa party, and the French authorities had invited me to contribute an item to a programme—an excerpt from *Tartuffe*."

He illustrated the allusion with a Gallic gesture.

"It was at this concert that I met Jean."

Forrester paused in his promenade, and stood, arms folded, looking out of the window across the Embankment. Ives did not interrupt him. He was trying to make up his mind how deeply Forrester cared and how much of his despair was Thespian...

"You have never seen her, and so it is hard for me to make you understand. She was employed at that time by the French authorities in some sort of secretarial capacity. She is a remarkable linguist—"

There was a rap on the door.

"Excuse me," Ives muttered. "Come in."

A man announced, “Dr. Steel Maitland and Mr. Donovan,” and withdrew as they entered.

Ives made the introductions.

“How do you do, Mr. Forrester?” Donovan said, studying the actor’s pale features with sincere sympathy. “I have gathered a rough idea of the facts from my friend Maitland. This is all very disturbing for a man with a big first night to face up to.”

“Oh my God!” Forrester spoke on a note of despair. “I had dreamed for years of playing Hamlet in London, as the realisation of my wildest hopes. Now—I don’t give a damn whether I play or don’t play!”

“You have all my sympathy, Mr. Forrester,” Maitland assured him. “Inspector Ives has given me a brief outline of the story. Don’t give in yet. You are not the only one—is he, Donovan?”

“Mr. Forrester, a girl I—well, I’m crazy about her—has vanished in just the same way!”

“What do you mean? Recently?”

“Quite recently,” Maitland replied, in a deliberately cool way. “And we suspect by the same agency. Now, take it as calmly as you can, and please give me all the facts.”

“I’ll do my best. I’m sorry to hear that we are brothers in misfortune, Mr. Donovan... The facts are fairly simple. I have already told Inspector Ives that I met Jean in Algiers, late in ‘44. She was working for the French propaganda people; and—we grew fond of one another. I may add that, as well as being highly talented, Jean is—lovely.”

“All Sumuru’s women are lovely.”

Forrester paused, staring.

“Did you speak, Dr. Maitland?”

“No,” Maitland murmured. “Forgive me. I was thinking aloud.”

“Oh!” Forrester’s expression was a puzzled one. “I returned to England some time before Jean. But of course we corresponded. Then, at last, I got a letter to tell me that she was coming home. She gave me no address, but, a week later, I received a telegram. It was rather mysterious. It asked me to meet her in the porch of St. George’s Church, Hanover Square, that night at nine o’clock—”

“You hear that, Maitland?” cried Donovan. “It was the very night I met Claudette!”

Maitland nodded.

“It was, Donovan. Go on, Mr. Forrester. The night was a foggy one, I recall.”

“It’s amazing you should remember that, Dr. Maitland—but it was. I met Jean. She seemed to be frightened—of something—or of someone. I can’t quite describe her mood. She looked wonderful—exquisite, but...”

And Ian Forrester gave an account of the meeting which was so vivid that no one of the three men present ever forgot it.

3

Fog was so dense by the time that he reached their strange trysting place that at first he failed to discover Jean shrinking in the shadow of a church pillar. She ran to him—threw herself into his arms.

“Ian, darling! It’s been just plain hell to be separated from you!”

She was trembling wildly.

“But, Jean! Why this queer meeting—out in the street?”

Some of Jean’s secret terror had touched her lover. He was dismayed ...

“Don’t ask me, darling! Please don’t ask me. I know how odd it must seem. But there’s no other way. Just five minutes with you, and then—I must bolt!”

“But, Jean—my dear! Bolt *where*? What’s the urgency? I’m at work like a pack-mule on my *Hamlet* production at the theatre—but surely we can meet for lunch tomorrow?”

Jean clung to him tightly—as if, he said, she feared that someone would tear her away.

“Ian—it’s impossible,” she declared, breathlessly.

“Impossible?”

“Just impossible—”

“You are terribly worried about something, Jean. My darling! What is it? What has gone wrong? Your father doesn’t object?”

“Oh, no—my dear! Father would never object to *you*. It isn’t Father—”

“Then what *is* it?”

But, Jean, slipping from his arms, turned like a trapped thing, staring through the fog.

“Who’s that?” she whispered. “Over there? No—opposite the church!”

Forrester began once more to share her singular fears. But he tried to reply calmly.

“Unless I’m mistaken, a passing policeman.”

“Oh! Please forgive me!” She pressed her head against his shoulder. He could feel her heart racing. “I know how queer I must seem. Ian—I will get a note to you at the theatre—tomorrow. Now, I must go!”

He did not release her.

“Go? But where? Why? Can’t we cut along and have some supper at *Ciro’s* or somewhere?”

But Jean tore herself away.

“No. Don’t ask me why again. I’ll try to explain—next time...”

“And,” said Forrester sadly, “she was gone! I did my best to follow her, but I lost her in the fog.”

Forrester dropped into a chair, as if exhausted by his unhappy memories so sharply revived.

There were some moments of silence in Inspector Ives’s office before Steel Maitland spoke.

“And where did you see her next, Mr. Forrester?”

“I have met her three times since then, always by appointment made by her on a note sent to the theatre.”

Forrester replied without raising his bowed head. “And where did these meetings take place?”

“In Kensington Gardens. Always, Jean seemed to be terrified—distraught. She watched every passer-by. She refused to tell me where she was staying or how she was employed. But two days ago—our last meeting—I forced a confession from her... She was in the clutches of some damnable secret society—a society with a world-wide organisation!”

He stood up, confronting the three who listened, an angry, unhappy figure.

“Ah!” Maitland muttered. “Now we’re coming to it!”

“She was forbidden to marry without the consent of her superior. This, apparently, had been declined. But Jean was desperate. She asked me to arrange with my sister, who lives in Kent, to put her up and keep her hidden. I was to meet her, with my car, at the Albert Memorial, and drive her straight down there. When we parted, I followed her. It was dusk—”

All listened tensely.

“Yes, yes!” Maitland prompted—“And where did she go?”

“This is the queerest thing of all.” Forrester paused, looking from face to face. “She slipped in at a side entrance to the grounds of Lorimer House!”

“Lorimer House,” said Donovan. “You mean the house that used to belong to Sir Martin Lorimer, the Victorian painter—a show place, nowadays?”

“It *was* a show place, before the late war, Mr. Donovan,” Ives interrupted. “But during the war and right up to now it has been the headquarters of the St. Erik Ambulance Corps.”

“Is that so?” Donovan looked frankly bewildered. “I ran across units of their outfit on almost every battle front I covered. Highly efficient. Wasn’t it founded by the Baroness Rikter—widow of the Swedish millionaire?”

Forrester replied.

“It was. And the Baroness herself—a really strange coincidence—had called on me at the theatre, only about a week before—”

“What’s that?” rapped Maitland. “What for?”

“To ask me to donate the first night’s box office returns to St. Erik’s! With great regret, I was forced to decline. My management wouldn’t hear of it. But I promised the old lady a substantial cheque. She is simply charming, of course.”

Steel Maitland stood up suddenly and began to walk about.

“Must be,” he muttered. “H’m! Extraordinary. What did you do?”

“I could think of nothing to do. Besides, Jean had made me promise to do nothing except to make those arrangements until we met again... Well, she never turned up! I waited until this morning—then phoned Lorimer House. I asked to speak to the Baroness Rikter. They put me through.”

“Well?” Donovan urged, excitedly.

Forrester shook his head.

“The Baroness was most sympathetic. But she assured me that Jean Barlow was quite unknown to her!”

“Phew!” Maitland’s promenade grew swifter. “What did you do, then?”

“I came straight here, to Scotland Yard—”

Chapter Eleven

1

OUR Lady was seated on a cushion beside the marble pool, amusing herself with the golden orfe which lived among the lilies. These fish have vegetarian tastes, and she had some pellets composed of delicacies which experience had proved to be much appreciated by her red-gold pets.

Their tameness (or perhaps her personal magnetism) was distinctly uncanny.

She would hold a pellet over the clear water, between finger and thumb, and some four inches above the surface. The excited fish, swarming to the top, would spring out, one after another, in an attempt to seize these tempting morsels. With her disengaged hand, Our Lady would try to catch each competitor. When she succeeded in capturing one, the fish would lie passively in her palm, accept the pellet from her fingers, and then dive back into the pond, to go swimming around in wild abandon—perhaps in triumph.

Each success Our Lady applauded with a peal of her soft, musical laughter.

Bending over the surface, which reflected her slender arms, white as the petals of the floating flowers, she more nearly resembled a water nymph than a woman of flesh and blood. Perhaps Ariosto, who had entered unannounced, was thinking so as he stood watching her.

Ariosto wore the correct morning dress of a physician, which suited his tall, athletic figure. The saturnine face, too, was that of a clever man. But his strangely brilliant dark eyes might have frightened a nervous patient.

Tiring of her sport, Our Lady dried her hands and leaned back against the figure of Pan beside which she was seated. She laughed up at Ariosto.

He bowed ceremoniously.

“You wished to see me, Madonna?”

“Yes, Ariosto, my friend. Sit there and talk to me.” She indicated another

cushion near her own. "I must not be dominated. Talk to me."

"For ever, Madonna, if you wish."

Ariosto dropped down beside her. She dabbled white fingers in the pond.

"Forget the courtier, my friend. It is the scientist I wish to consult." There was a red gleam, followed by a loud splash. "See! one of my golden orfe sprang right over my hand, and plunged back again below the leaves!"

Ariosto bent towards her.

"He was saluting your beauty, Madonna."

She smiled slightly, watching him under drooping eyelids.

"You are incorrigible. Listen to me. We are in danger greater than any we have known since the bull-headed Nazis invaded our sanctuary in Crete."

"Yet we survived the invasion of the bull-heads."

"True. But the pitcher that goes too often to the well... You have completed your arrangements to leave?"

"Most reluctantly—I have," Ariosto's deep voice struck a note more deep than usual. "Since *you* are staying, I—"

"You will leave as arranged. The little sister Jean has brought this upon us. She must pay the penalty. But, unfortunately, so, to some extent, must we. All essentials from the laboratory have been removed?"

"All, Madonna."

She leaned back against Pan, her eyes nearly closed.

"Abdul and Varro are known by sight to Steel Maitland and to the American. So is Caspar. They will report to Paris tomorrow."

"They are on their way," Ariosto replied quietly. "I, too, am known to them—as Dr. Worthington."

“True... There must be yet another *example*, Ariosto, my friend—an *example*. We left our mark upon the body of the man, Miles Tristram, and by now every member of the Order Will have heard that to attempt to betray me means death by *rigor Kubus*. I fear that the little Jean failed to read the lesson aright. And so—there may be others who dream—”

“You cannot mean that—Jean ...”

She shook her head, laughing softly.

“Jean was granted every opportunity to repair her lapse of discipline. I exacted no promise from her. I waited—and watched. When she met this man, she was followed. It is because of what the little fool *told* him that our peace is disturbed.” She dipped her fingers in the water again. “Injure Jean?... No, no! She is too beautiful. How shallow your reasoning, Ariosto! So like the boasted wisdom of man! A woman suffers a thousand deaths in her memories of one ...”

“I understand.”

Ariosto averted his eyes.

“You have seen the man of her choice. I have studied him closely. As you know, I visited him at the theatre. He has physical beauty, and a certain poise. But a flexible voice is his only talent. I do not desire to transmit his brains to a future generation. Ian Forrester cannot mate with Jean. We have no use for him.”

“I agree with you, Madonna. But Philo has learned, as you say, that she has confided secrets to this man, which—”

“That was what I meant, Ariosto, when I said that we were in great danger. That is why we are changing our plans. It may be too late—but Ian Forrester must be silenced, and those who know the meaning of a body turned to stone must be warned again. Philo, in this case, works alone. It is his last chance. He has failed me once. *You* will give him the necessary means—and then make your departure.”

“Dear Madonna!” Ariosto pleaded—“to administer the drug is—”

But the golden voice was inexorable.

“You will instruct him—and then, you will leave.”

Ariosto stood up, and bowed.

“It shall be done. Yet—”

“You have prepared the little Jean?”

“As you instructed me.”

“I will give you the exact time, later. Ian Forrester plays Hamlet tonight. Do you recall the last words spoke in the play by Hamlet, Ariosto?... They are, ‘the rest is silence’.”

She dipped her fingers in the water.

2

Steel Maitland lay back in the armchair, a cheroot protruding at a truculent angle above his black beard. His eyes were half closed. He had been seated so for a long time, silent in thought.

Donovan typed industriously.

Donovan found the task which he had set himself—that of analysing the character and the motives of Sumuru, of endeavouring to account for her presence in London—a palliative. In some degree, it seemed to him, he was aiding in the quest for this inexplicable woman who had stolen Claudette from him.

The light was getting bad, but he typed on and did not interrupt his flow of ideas by crossing to the switch.

One thing about Sumuru seemed to be clear enough. She was not a petty criminal. She did not belong to the increasing gang of crooks who went out for furs and jewels, for loads of merchandise to sell to the Black Market. Her target was a more distant one. In short, Sumuru was an idealist of sorts.

She despised dictators and dictatorships—apparently because they were what she called “ugly.” She condemned war. She believed, according to available

evidence, that she had some super-plan to exile war for ever. Her crimes of violence were presumably directed, and directed exclusively, against those who sought to interfere with the development of this super-plan.

Yet what did it all boil down to, unless to a new dictatorship—a dictatorship of women?

Would the world of selected beauty envisaged by Sumuru be a better world to live in than those of Franco? ... of Stalin? ... of Attlee?

From his own personal point of view, Donovan doubted it.

He did not approve of the types of society favoured by any one of these. But, little as he knew of Sumuru's ideal state, he could find small ground for awarding it higher marks.

She might promise, as other tyrants had promised, a glorious future to citizens of her dream empire, but, once that empire had been established, would her promises be fulfilled?

Analogies came readily to his mind. They were terrifying, exact. Sumuru's manner of dealing with obstacles bore a close resemblance to the ways of Herod, of Nero, of Hitler. Her fanaticism must be accepted. Her ideals, also, perhaps were sincere. But he found it hard to reconcile death by *rigor Kubus* with any scheme of beauty...

Who was this woman?

The police and Secret Service of the world had failed to find out.

Her capital expenditure must be enormous.

What were the sources of her revenue?

"You'll strain your eyes."

The warning growl came from Maitland. Rattling of keys ceased.

"Yes." Donovan sighed. "Getting mighty dark. Let's light up."

As he crossed the room, the doorbell rang.

“This will be Ives,” said Maitland.

It was, and a moment later the inspector joined them.

“Any news?” Donovan asked, automatically.

Ives shook his head.

“None on my side.” He stared at Steel Maitland. “Given the job up, Doctor?”

Maitland knocked a short cone of ash from his cheroot.

“It’s given *me* up. I just don’t know what move to make! The Paris Surete reported this afternoon that no trace can be found of Marcel Duquesne. Their investigations are at a standstill. But I have been thinking hard for the last hour—and do you know what I have been trying to think out?”

“Can’t imagine.”

“I’ll tell you. I have been trying to recapture a memory. I have been struggling desperately to recall where and when I first met Sumuru “

“You have spoken of this several times,” said Donovan. “It puzzles me. Because I can’t imagine anyone ever forgetting her.”

“Nor can I,” Maitland agreed. “But I think I can explain the lapse. It’s one of those cases of misdirection, as the stage magicians call it. I mean that I must have met her under circumstances which left a totally erroneous impression in some way ... If only I could place that first meeting!”

“It might help, or it might not,” Ives declared dourly. “For my part, I find the whole thing bewildering, and the longer I work on the case the more I feel that I’m fighting with phantoms! Here’s Scotland Yard combing London for a woman nobody can describe, who lives in a house like a palace that nobody can find!”

“You must have asked yourself more than once if there *is* such a person,” Donovan suggested.

“I have! You must remember, there’s absolutely no evidence to prove it.”

“So you tell me,” Donovan replied wearily. “What about a drink before we start?”

That curious crowd which assembles before a West End theatre on the occasion of an important first night had dispersed by the time that they arrived. As the car drew in to the kerb:

“I’m not hoping for much,” said Inspector Ives. “Heaven knows, I should be glad of a glimpse of this miracle woman, but I don’t expect to find her sitting in the stalls.”

“We shall see,” Maitland murmured. “I am beginning to wish—”

“Beginning to wish what?” Donovan asked.

But Maitland shook his head.

“Too late now, anyway.”

As they went in, the manager hurried forward to meet them.

“Dr. Steel Maitland? ... My name is Granville.”

“Good evening.” Maitland shook hands. “Chief Inspector Ives and Mr. Mark Donovan.”

Mr. Granville, a quietly spoken little man who looked overworked, greeted them with a tired smile.

“There’s not a seat in the house, as you may suppose. But you could stand at the back of the pit. The first act is nearly over, and when the houselights go up you can take a good look around the audience. Most of them will be coming out during the interval.”

“Thanks,” said Ives. “Will you lead the way.”

The way was along a narrow passage. At its end a door was unlocked by Granville.

“Just slip through here,” he whispered. “I will rejoin you when the curtain’s down...”

They found themselves in the darkened theatre.

“... And therefore as a stranger give it welcome,

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,

Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

But come—”

Forrester’s fine voice dominated a hushed audience...

Maitland bent to Donovan’s ear.

“Am I going mad, Donovan? Can you see that woman in the O.P. stage box? Note the profile—”

“Good God!” Donovan muttered. “*Can* it be?”

“I could almost swear to it... Stay where you are! S’sh! We won’t get around until the end of the scene...”

“Or such ambiguous giving out, to note

That you know ought of me:—this not to do,

So grace and mercy at your most need help you,

Swear.”

“Swear,” the ghostly voice echoed; and Hamlet answered:

“Rest, rest, perturbed spirit! So, gentlemen,

With all my love I do commend me to you:

And what so poor a man as Hamlet is

May do, to express his love and friending to you,

God willing, shall not lack. Let us go in together;

And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.

The time is out of joint:—O cursed spite.

That ever I was born to set it right!

Nay, come, let's go together ...”

The curtain fell, its fall loosing a storm of applause pent up throughout the scene.

“Quick!” Maitland rapped. ‘Through here! The way we came! We must get to that box!’

Chapter Twelve

1

ON the stage, that nervous tension prevailed which seizes, like quivering fingers, upon all concerned with a first night. The stage manager perspired abundantly. Those who had appeared in Act One were taking their curtains in appointed order.

Applause was enthusiastic, and sustained.

“Mr. Forrester!... *Mr. Forrester!*... Keep the house light down, George ... *Mr. Forrester!*”

The moment had come for the star to acknowledge the plaudits of his audience.

But no one could find him.

Now, the audience began to call out.

“Ian Forrester!... Ian Forrester!”

“What the devil’s become of Ian?” one of the actors asked another. “Has he collapsed somewhere?”

“I can’t think. He’s been frightfully strung up all day—more than normally strung up, I mean.”

Alarmed by the uproar in the gallery, where stamping had started, in time to the reiterated chant, “Ian Forrester—Ian Forrester.” A harassed stage director ran upstairs and threw open the door of Forrester’s dressing-room.

“Is Mr. Forrester here, dresser?”

“No, sir. He hasn’t come up yet...”

So matters stood, backstage.

In front of the house. Steel Maitland had found Mr. Granville. As Donovan came

up, he heard:

“Well. Dr. Maitland the party in the stage box? Yes—I suppose it could be arranged. Although I can’t imagine why you should wish to see Lady Carradale —”

“Lady Carradale, you say?”

“Yes. Lord Carradale was killed in an air crash in the war, you may remember “

“Oh but she has guests.”

“A gentleman. I believe. No one else. Excuse me—I will see what I can do.”

Granville hurried away.

“You know, Maitland,” said Donovan. “I’m not so sure about that box party. I took another look from the far corner of the pit rail, and I could see no one in there that looked a bit like—”

“I’m sure of that *profile!*” Maitland answered. “What’s more, there’s something very queer going on... Listen to the audience.”

From where they stood, by the door of the office, it reached them, muffled—stamping of feet and the crying of Forrester’s name.

“Ian Forrester...”

“Ian Forrester...”

“I’ll slip through the pass-door,” Ives muttered, “and try to find out what’s become of him.”

The inspector poked his head in at the box-office window, and the clerk’s voice was heard—“You would have to see the manager—”

“Look at that!” Ives tossed a card on to the glazed plan. “Show me the pass-door.”

The clerk came out, and hurried off, closely followed by Ives.

“... Ian Forrester ...”

“Ian Forrester...”

Granville returned, looking more overworked than ever.

“If you will come this way, Dr. Maitland,” he said nervously—“the audience is getting quite out of hand. I can’t imagine why they don’t put up the houselights. Ian Forrester is refusing to take his curtain, for some reason.”

Meanwhile, Inspector Ives was making a room-to-room search, amid a scene of consternation. People were running hither and thither quite aimlessly.

“Put up the houselights!”

“Where’s Granville? We shall want him on the stage...”

All dressing-room doors were open, and the occupants of the rooms not to be found—with one exception. On this, closed, door Ives rapped sharply.

“Is Mr. Forrester in there?”

“He is not, sir,” a voice replied. “My name is Merrick. I am Ian’s understudy—and I have less than four minutes to dress...”

2

Granville rapped on the door of the box, opened it, and announced:

“Dr. Steel Maitland, who wishes to see you, Lady Carradale.”

Maitland stepped in, followed by Donovan. As the door had been opened, uproar from the auditorium burst upon them like a tempest. Apparently, hope had not been abandoned that the missing actor would be found, for the houselights remained obstinately lowered. But many people were filing out from the stalls. There was a charivari of excited comment. And, from upstairs, there came a concerted and deafening demand for Ian Forrester’s appearance.

There were two people in the box: a big, burly man whose grey hair was cropped close to his skull, Teutonic fashion, and who wore tortoiseshell rimmed

spectacles; and a woman, lying back in a chair set in the shadow, who surveyed the intruders somewhat superciliously through raised lorgnettes. She was of a dark, Spanish type, her heavily marked eyebrows tending to overpower her features. She wore black.

Maitland bowed, as Granville withdrew.

“I am exceedingly sorry to disturb you, Lady Carradale— and you, sir. But I was under the impression that you had another guest—”

“You were mistaken, Dr. Maitland.” Lady Carradale had a high, rather harsh voice. “A friend of yours, you thought?”

“Well—hardly a friend! My business was official.”

“Indeed! You don’t look like a policeman.”

“No. Beards are unusual in the police, Lady Carradale. I can only ask you to forgive me for this unwarranted intrusion.”

“But not at all, Doctor. It is a pleasure. Will you and your friend honour us with your company?”

“Many thanks. My friend—Mr. Donovan—and I are most appreciative—”

The houselights went up.

All those on their way out, stopped, and turned!—as the tableau curtains were drawn apart, and Granville stepped on to the stage. The gallery became silent.

“Ladies and gentlemen—”

“Forgive me again, Lady Carradale ... I must go. Good night, and thank you.”

Maitland and Donovan hurried from the box. As the door closed:

“Through to the stage!” said Maitland. “We have been tricked, Donovan! She slipped out! There *was* someone else in that box! We must look up the history of Lady Carradale... through here!”

On the stage, a nervous hush prevailed. Granville’s voice could be heard,

explaining to the audience that, owing to the sudden and inexplicable illness of Ian Forrester, the part of Hamlet during the rest of the play would be taken by Mr. Douglas Merrick. In these unhappy circumstances, he was sure, etc....

“But where can he possibly have *gone*?” a woman’s voice whispered agitatedly.

And, quietly as possible, stage hands changed the set.

“Is that you, Ives?” Maitland asked suddenly.

Ives elbowed his way through a group and joined Maitland and Donovan.

“It’s me right enough. Come outside, where we can talk.”

“What news?”

As they stepped out into a narrow passage inside the stage door, Ives replied:

“He’s got the news!”

Ives pointed to a man in his shirt sleeves seated in the doorkeeper’s box—a stout, red-faced man who had a glass of whisky beside him and who appeared to be the only person in the building unaffected by the night’s happenings.

“Doorkeeper—what do you know about all this?” Maitland demanded.

The doorkeeper leaned through his little window.

“All there is to know, I reckon,” he replied. “Just before the curtain comes down, a chauffeur bloke hands me a note—or rather, *two* notes. One for me, and one for Mr. Forrester. He says the one in a envelope *must* be handed to Mr. Forrester the moment he comes off. See? Well, I gets hold of his dresser and tells him to stand by on the side—”

“Describe the chauffeur,” snapped Maitland.

“Big chap. Very hairy.”

“Go on!”

“I’ve just got back here, and I can tell the curtain’s down, and I’m putting on my

hat to nip along to the corner, when Mr. Forrester, dressed like he come off, runs past me and out into the street!”

He paused on this dramatic line.

“Well—go on!”

“There ain’t no more to go on to. I can see there’s a woman in the case, and I don’t think a lot about it. I puts my hat on and goes along to the corner—”

“But why the hell didn’t you report this before?” Ives growled.

“I’ve told you, Inspector. When I come back—and I’m not gone more’n three minutes—how am I to know Mr. Forrester ain’t in the theatre? Nobody tells me—not till you tell me.”

“My God!” Maitland muttered, and grasped Donovan’s arm—_”She_ has got him! Why didn’t I realise his danger in time? Why didn’t I foresee this!... Under our very eyes, Donovan! Under our very eyes ...”

3

Night was giving place to morning when a man wearing a grey chauffeur’s uniform entered, with almost silent tread, a charmingly feminine little boudoir, furnished in satinwood upholstered in violet, and stood before a long, narrow couch upon which Our Lady reclined.

She wore a loose rest-gown. A tray, with coffee and biscuits, stood beside it. She no more than glanced at the man. He stood, powerful fists clenched, head bowed.

“I am here, My Lady.”

“So I observe, Philo. To report—failure?”

“No, My Lady. Success.”

She sat up; and her remarkable eyes opened widely, so that their beauty became fearful.

“Then you have done well, Philo.” She lay back again, laughing gently. “From my box I saw the note handed to him in the wings as he left the stage. I knew that, so far, all went smoothly ... Sister Jean?”

“Has been prepared for her journey, My Lady.”

“He got into the car without—urging?”

“The moment he saw the little Jean lying back on the cushions, Madonna. I closed the door and drove off.”

“How did he behave?”

“Like a madman, My Lady. But he could open neither of the doors. *She* was unconscious. On the Heath—at the spot selected—I unlocked the door, and he leapt out and attacked me. In his fury he almost overpowered me. But I tripped him—and silenced him. I gave the injection near the top of the spine, as Ariosto had shown me... He did not awaken again “

“And you left him standing, as I ordered?”

“As you ordered, My Lady.”

My Lady laughed again, softly, and extended her hand.

Philo bent and kissed the delicate fingers.

4

The next person to set eyes upon Ian Forrester was a man called Thorndale.

Thorndale was a gardener, one of whose duties was to tend the heating furnace of a house overlooking Reigate Heath. This necessitated his leaving home before six o'clock in the morning and walking from the town across a part of the Heath and golf-course. From a mound dominated by a giant fir he usually obtained his first glimpse of his employer's chimneys, visible from that point above the crowns of encircling trees.

This was a misty, cold morning. In fact, the mist was so dense in patches as to deserve the name of fog.

One such patch occurred in the dip immediately below the mound supporting the King fir, and here, grumbling to himself, Thorndale paused to try to re-light his pipe, which had gone out largely because of lack of tobacco.

However, an artist in coaxing a cinder into a flame, he contrived to get his pipe going again, and resumed his slow tramp, both hands thrust into his topcoat pockets. He climbed up the path to the mound, and to some extent, out of the mist. As he passed the great mast of the tree, he paused for a moment, staring.

Someone appeared to be standing there—a man in black.

“Good morning, sir,” called Thorndale. “Bit foggy like.’

He went on his way—but received no reply.

This simply led him to suppose that the stranger who stood by the big tree was a surly fellow... then, led him to wonder.

Had there been someone there? Or had he imagined it?

He turned back.

Reclimbing the mound from the other side, he obtained a clear view of the figure. He had not been mistaken. There was a man there right enough. But...

Thorn dale’s pipe fell on to the turf.

A moment later he was running, headlong, even his precious old pipe forgotten, in the direction of a garage fronting the Heath at which as he passed he had seen men at work...

“What are you talking about, mate? What’s the panic?”

An older man, and a daft looking boy, joined the mechanic to whom Thorndale had tried to tell his strange news.

“I’m talking about a *ghost!*” said Thorndale, breathless, but defiant. “There’s a man up there”—he made vague gestures in the direction of the mist wantoning over the Heath—“standing under a tree... He’s all in black—with a dagger in his belt—Jewels on his hands ... A ghost, I tell you!”

The two men and the boy exchanged glances.

“Barmy,” said the boy.

The mechanic aimed a blow at him—which the daft boy ducked.

“No harm done if we go and see.”

“That’s all I’m asking!”

“I’m staying here,” the older man announced, with a suspicious look at Thorndale.

And so a procession of three inquirers set out for the big fir tree.

Within ten paces of it, the mechanic pulled up.

“Blimey!” he remarked.

“What did I tell you?”

It was the daft boy who approached the pallid statue of Hamlet—who touched it—who fell back, shrieking—who ran like a hunted, wild thing across the Heath, directionless, without purpose.

“He’s turned to stone!” he shrieked as he ran. “He’s turned to stone ...” So was found the body of Ian Forrester.

Chapter Thirteen

1

“NICE view of the Embankment from this part of Scotland Yard, Ives.”

“Yes, Doctor, very nice. Every time I look out I wonder if Sumuru is walking by down there. Because I shouldn’t know her if I saw her.”

“M’no...” Maitland lighted a cheroot. “This case must be giving you nightmares, Inspector. I hear that the Commissioner has been blowing off steam.”

“He has,” said Ives grimly. “There was a conference yesterday. You see, although breaking up this organisation, Order, or whatever the gang may be called, is a Secret Service job—and *your* pidgin—their murders are my job... and I can make no headway “

He banged a large, muscular hand on the desk, angrily. Maitland nodded, and:

“The newspapers are getting very sarcastic, too,” he remarked. “The death of Sir Miles Tristram was passed over without much fuss, but the death of a popular actor is another cup of tea entirely. Then, all these disappearances are beginning to arouse public uneasiness. Questions in the House and so on.”

“Don’t I know it!” groaned Ives. “My particular, private hell is due to the fact that I’m perfectly well aware who is responsible for them. But (a) I have no evidence against her; (b) I don’t know who she is or where she is!”

Maitland replaced his lighter in his pocket.

“Personally, I never go far without a bodyguard. Sumuru doesn’t jib at trifling obstacles, and I’m undoubtedly a nuisance to her. It’s true that she recovered all the tangible evidence I possessed, but she can’t strangle my memory without strangling *me!*”

He stood up, and began to pace restlessly about the office.

“You know,” said Ives, slowly, “the death of that poor young actor gave me an idea. I don’t know how it’ll appeal to you—but I think it’s worth considering.”

Maitland paused, looking at him.

“What is it?”

“Well, Ian Forrester was murdered—a spectacular business —merely because of an affair with a girl (who can’t be traced) belonging to this female Stalin—I take it, as a sort of warning to others. Very well. What about your American friend—Mr. Donovan?”

“Well, what about him?”

“He’s tied up with one of these girls, too, isn’t he?”

“Yes—Claudette Duquesne. He’s desperate about her. But, of course, she has disappeared!”

“Quite so. But—and I’m working entirely on your own theory here, Doctor—this woman Sumuru may have some use for Mr. Donovan, or think she has. It certainly looks that way to me. So, suppose *you* were to disappear?”

Maitland walked over to the desk and stood looking down at the inspector. His cheroot assumed a very truculent angle.

“What!”

“It could easily be arranged. Give the impression that Mr. Donovan’s movements were no longer under supervision. The gang might take the opportunity to bring him and the girl together again. You see my point?”

Maitland laughed, but not mirthfully.

“Yes—I see your point, Ives. But Donovan is an old friend. I wouldn’t dare to expose him to such danger ...”

Ives leaned forward.

“I don’t believe the danger would be so great as you think. I could undertake

never to let him out of sight of the C.I.D., day or night. And, if we could convince the gang that *you* were not in London, but really have you tucked away somewhere handy—you see?”

“Yes,” Maitland murmured. “I see.” He began to walk about again. “Oddly enough, Ives, the idea of disappearing had already occurred to me!”

“Really?”

“Yes. I thought it might help to extend my span of life. What I had in mind was this: All my friends, yourself included, have commented upon the beard which I grew in the Navy. Well—I propose to remove it. If, secondly, I can get my hair bleached, the result, if not attractive, should be striking! The bother is the intermediate stage—”

“Easy enough!” Ives declared. “Do what the attendants at Drury Lane Theatre used to do: rub in wet pipeclay and let it dry.”

Maitland paused and stared.

“H’m. Messy—but, I suppose, effective. I have discovered a bearded Naval Lieutenant—through Naval Intelligence—who could pass for me anywhere—that is, by sight. I thought if he went up to Edinburgh to look into the disappearance of those two Ross girls who vanished last week, I might, as you suggest, tuck my new self away somewhere—”

“We should have to keep a close watch on the lieutenant,” Ives broke in anxiously.

“That is understood. He will have full instructions as to his behaviour whilst in Scotland, where accommodation has been arranged in the name of Dr. Maitland. But—what about Donovan?”

“I don’t think Mr. Donovan should know anything about it. Not because I doubt him for a moment, but because—”

“He is far too naive to be a convincing actor? I agree. Deluding Donovan is going to be a beastly business, but I think it must be done, all the same ...”

The taxi was rattling through morning mist. Mark Donovan felt unhappy. He glanced anxiously at Maitland.

Maitland was muffled up in his check travelling coat, the collar raised and the brim of his hat pulled down so that it cast a shadow on his face.

“You look none too well, Maitland. You’re quite pale. Whatever started you off on this sudden journey North?”

“Well—I suppose it *was* a sudden decision, Donovan. Two girls, sisters, and famous beauties in Edinburgh, disappeared, leaving no trace. Both were highly cultured, and held degrees—one, of Arts, the other, of Science. It looks like Sumuru’s work!”

“Sure. It does. But I’m sorry you decided to go, personally, all the same. You are certain, Maitland, that you will be well taken care of?”

“Certain. For yourself, Donovan, take no chances. We are nearly at the station, and there’s an important question I have to ask: Did you ever, during your interviews with Claudette Duquesne, notice her ankles?”

Donovan stared, perturbed by an idea that Maitland might be running a temperature.

“Her ankles!”

Maitland laughed.

“Sounds odd, I know. But one of the few things I have learned about the Order of Our Lady (for so it is known) is that members of the gang have a design representing a snake with its tail in its mouth, delicately tattooed around the left ankle. I believe I have mentioned this before? It’s done so lightly as to be practically invisible through even the finest stocking. But it’s always there.”

“And you are suggesting that Claudette—”

“I don’t say so. It was merely a conjecture. Hullo! Here we are!”

The taxi pulled up amongst many others discharging passengers at the great terminus. Donovan glanced at the station clock.

“You have run it pretty close, Maitland.”

“Yes.” Maitland was looking about him alertly. “But I have a reserved compartment... Here you are, porter—”

The porter took a suitcase which Maitland handed to him.

“No heavy baggage, sir?”

“No, that’s the lot.”

They followed the porter in to the platform and proceeded along the train to a compartment marked “Reserved.” Evidently, this was Maitland’s.

“It’s none of my business,” said Donovan. “But doesn’t it rather draw attention to your journey to travel in a reserved compartment with the blinds down?”

Maitland, scanning every face within range, laughed and turned.

“I have my reasons, Donovan! Don’t worry about me.”

The door was unlocked and Maitland stepped into the darkened interior.

“Shall I put this case on the rack, sir?”

“No, thanks. I’ll take it... Here you are, porter.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The guard blew his whistle.

“Take care of yourself, Donovan—”

Maitland closed the door.

“Cut it mighty fine, sir,” said a voice in the shadowy compartment.

“Had to, Lieutenant.”

Whereupon, Maitland threw off his topcoat and hat, stripped the false beard from his face, which was heavily powdered to obscure a sharp frontier of tan broken

by lighter skin where the beard had grown. His hair was close-cut and greyish white.

A man who had been seated just inside the door, put on the check travelling coat and Maitland's hat. He was a dark, bearded young man—unmistakably a sailor in mufti—and he bore a really marked resemblance to Maitland.

Maitland, meanwhile, had thrown open the further door of the compartment and was looking out. An empty train stood alongside the Scottish express. The door of the compartment facing him was open. Maitland stepped across and entered the other train.

“Good-bye. Good luck. Don't forget to wave to my friend!”

The express began to pull out.

On the platform, Donovan was standing and wondering what had become of Maitland... Now, a window was lowered—and a bearded face looked out.

“Good-bye, Maitland! Take great care of yourself!”

The man at the window waved ...

3

Sumuru wore a perfectly tailored grey suit. She sat at a large and workmanlike desk in a small but workmanlike Office. For all her elusive but arresting beauty, she might have, been mistaken for a capable secretary. Indeed, later events were to reveal the fact that she *was* a capable secretary, amongst other things.

Philo, livery discarded, and dressed in tweed, stood before the desk. He resembled a formidable strong-arm-man. No doubt he was.

“My Lady?”

She watched him intently.

“Sit there, Philo... What have you to report?”

Philo seated himself uneasily in a high-backed chair.

“Dr. Maitland has left for Scotland.”

My Lady laughed—gentle, musical laughter.

“He hopes to trace the Ross girls! He never will! Continue, Philo.”

“His American friend, Donovan, who saw him off, has gone to his club.”

She nodded.

“Report to me directly he returns to his apartment in Bruton Street. I must know this *immediately*.”

“You shall, My Lady.”

“And has Paris reported that all the members of our party have arrived there safely?”

“All, Madonna. Ariosto arrived last. Does My Lady permit me to speak?”

“Speak on, Philo.”

Philo stood up. His strange eyes burned with fanaticism.

“You take too many risks, My Lady. Now—we are alone. I, with no one to assist me, am responsible for your safety. At any hour, at any moment, we shall be visited here by the police, and—”

Sumuru raised her hand.

“Philo—listen to me. I demand services from my people which call for high initiative, great intelligence, and complete rejection of fear. Such devotion can be won only by example. I, myself, must be fearless—and infallible. Nor can I afford to idle in luxury behind the screen which has been thrown about me. I, too, must labour and run supreme risks, if I am to be worthy of the devotion of my followers. And so, in this crisis, I remain—with you—”

“Dear My Lady!”

“Danger is best conquered by rejecting it, Philo. Send a message to Claudette, and order the Embassy car to be ready in ten minutes ...”

Chapter Fourteen

1

HAVING spent some hours at the office, Donovan returned, after lunch, to Bruton Street and sat down to bring up-to-date his chronicle of experiences from the time that the woman known as Sumuru had appeared in London. That it would ever achieve publication he doubted: that its contents, should it be printed, would be believed by anyone, he knew to be out of the question.

But he assembled his notes and went to work.

All this took place on one of those misty, gloomy afternoons which it seemed to Donovan might be expected at any season in England. He had wondered more than once, reading of plans afoot to attract tourists, what steps the responsible parties had in mind to correct (a) the liquor licensing laws; (b) the climate.

He got well going on the chapter dealing with that midnight chase to Marble Arch, and soon, as is the way of a professional writer who loves his job, forgot everything but the narrative of those crazy events. So deeply was he immersed in his story, so continuous the rattle of his typewriter, that it is at least possible he may have become for a time immune to outside interference.

Donovan welcomed immersion in work. By no other means could he forget Claudette, forget that he stayed inert while she struggled hopelessly against the inexorable power which held her...

He paused once, thinking that he had heard someone at the door, but could detect nothing, and went on typing...

Again he paused, vaguely puzzled, and turned.

Sumuru stood behind his chair!

Donovan sprang up as if propelled from a catapult. He was dumbfounded. He stood there staring at her as a man might stare at an apparition.

Sumuru was smilingly composed.

She presented a model of all that an exquisitely groomed woman should be, in her plain tailored suit and a waist-length fur cape. Her suit was grey; her shoes, gloves and hat were black, and to the hat was attached a diaphanous veil through which Sumuru's wonderful eyes watched him as through a mist.

She spoke first.

"Still reluctant to meet me. Am I so repulsive?"

The note of light raillery, a smile on her lips, completed Donovan's stupification.

Here stood a dangerous criminal for whom, at this very moment, police were combing London. Here stood a murderess, self-confessed—and a new type of white slave trafficker as well.

He confronted her—still wordless.

"I took the liberty of letting myself in, you see," she murmured.

Donovan swallowed audibly.

"During the time that Dr. Maitland was my guest, I had a duplicate made of the key which he carried."

Donovan clenched his hands, strove to remain control. Then, he moved.

"Where are you going?"

And, at last, words came—hot, angry words.

"Can you doubt where I'm going? Straight to the phone! You walked into my apartment like a burglar. You'll walk out a prisoner. This will be better than a month's vacation for Inspector Ives!"

"You are grotesquely uncouth. But perhaps this foggy morning has upset your liver. Am I not a model of all that a well-groomed woman should be? Surely you admit that I am attractive?"

"I admit that you are a dangerous criminal, a murderess, a slave-trafficker."

She laughed gently.

“You are a rough fellow, Mark Donovan.”

He stood, fists clenched, watching her.

“Maybe I am a rough fellow. But I don’t fight with women o—as a rule. In your case. I have often asked myself if you are really a woman at all—or a female demon!”

“I have heard that some female demons are uncommonly alluring.”

“Demon or woman, you go from here to gaol! We know you murdered Sir Miles Tristram, and we know you murdered Ian Forrester!”

“Another of poor Dr. Maitland’s theories, I suppose? Do you mind if I sit down?”

“Sit down by all means—while I call Scotland Yard!”

Sumuru seated herself in Maitland’s favourite chair.

“I see that you are determined to be unsociable. But, before you hand me over to the police, surely you want to know if Claudette is well?”

Donovan groaned.

Those few words had turned his world upside down, made right of wrong, and wrong of right. Sumuru, and Sumuru alone, could restore Claudette to him. He clenched his teeth —ground them together.

“My God!... Why do you say that? Why do you tie my hands?”

Sumuru shook her head reprovably.

“Because I am—what did you call me?—a female demon, I suppose. Really, I begin to despair of you. A beautiful spirit in a beautiful body is so rare—and so many physically fine men are such fools.”

“Where is Claudette?” Donovan spoke threateningly. “Answer me!”

“You shall see her ... if you wish. But please refrain from hurling stupid charges at my head. There can be no evidence to associate me with Miles Tristram, for I

never entered his house. I interviewed him elsewhere. He was foolish enough to defy me. I entrusted the matter to Dolores. A pretty girl, and highly accomplished. Ariosto is devoted to her, and she to him. She is Spanish.”

“Are you felling me that this girl poisoned Tristram in cold blood?”

“Spanish blood is never cold, Mr. Donovan. She carried out her orders with natural enthusiasm. Sir Miles, an ugly character, had a steel dispatch box locked in his desk. He was awaiting Dr. Maitland’s visits in order to show him its contents. Dolores brought this box away with her—”

“Leaving a dead man and a valuable sapphire behind!”

Sumuru extended her gloved hands.

“Money means little to me, personally ... As for the actor, Forrester, well—your statement is ludicrous. One of my servants called upon him. He was a nuisance. No, I am not interested in money. Yet, one can do so little without a sound financial background. I managed this while still quite young. An attractive girl can, you know, if she keeps her eyes fixed inflexibly upon that objective.”

“Is that so?” Donovan growled.

Sumuru nodded.

“Many men have desired me. But the only men to whom, temporarily, I have given myself, have been unusually wealthy. Love I have never encouraged. Today, I am quite unusually wealthy, too—and free.” She opened her handbag and took out a small onyx case studded with diamonds. “Will you try one of my cigarettes?”

“Thank you: I prefer my own. What brand are yours—Lucrezia Borgia’s?”

Sumuru’s laughter rippled like a peal of silver bells.

“How absurd you are! I assure you I am entirely harmless, if no one interferes with me. I merely set a different valuation on human life—that’s all. Surely the late war must have taught you that to think otherwise than lightly of one brief span of physical existence is mere sentiment?”

She lighted her cigarette with a curious gold lighter which produced no visible flame.

“Is nothing sacred in your eyes?” Donovan asked harshly.

“Many things. Beauty especially. But we live so many lives. Don’t you know that? I fear your American education has left you lamentably ignorant. All the things that really matter seem to have been omitted from the curriculum. Am I slandering Harvard or Yale?”

“Neither. You are merely talking rubbish.”

“Sturdy Yankee common sense. *Common* is the operative word. Not in its implication of vulgarity, for, if gauche, you are never vulgar, but in the sense of superficial knowledge common to all. Plato would have put you in the infants’ class—if he had had one!”

“I should have guessed Pluto, rather than Plato, to be your guardian spirit!”

Sumuru laughed again—and her laughter rang with the careless gaiety of that of a young girl.

Donovan knew, in this moment, that Sumuru was ageless. Even as she laughed, he felt his courage oozing away. He grew terribly afraid of her. Her very beauty appalled him. It was the beauty of a poised cobra.

“I begin to despair of you,” she said. “Yet I worship beauty—and you have physical beauty.”

“Do you count assassination beautiful?”

Sumuru sighed.

“It may well be. You see, American and English morality, although they differ so widely in sex matters, are alike in what you call the sanctity of human life. Your police will comb continents for someone who has killed a possibly worthless man or woman. But your airmen will blanket a town with explosives.”

“That’s in war!”

“How irrational! You are sentimentalists—but not for the many; only for the few. You allow a Duce to shower death on innocent natives; a Fuehrer to rape his sleeping neighbours; a Comrade to drive thousands into labour camps. The sanctity of human life, I suppose, prohibits your destroying these reptiles? Armies, bombs, wholesale destruction, could be avoided. A sum, less than a war costs daily, would be sufficient to ensure the removal of any such as these.”

A sort of crazy logic in this woman’s views, and perhaps the magic of her voice and the witchery which was Sumuru, began to get hold of Donovan. He found himself considering her arguments, seriously; found himself wondering, if perhaps, men’s ideas of international amity were all cross-eyed.

He tried to recapture his just anger, to shake off the spell of Sumuru.

“You will do the same again,” she went on, dreamily puffing her cigarette. “You will watch ugliness preparing scientific weapons which, this time, will quite destroy the present phase of European and American civilisation. You will do nothing until it is too late. Your leaders, who may have virtue, will not understand the difference between beauty and ugliness. So, you will be obliterated, together with the ignorant fools who will plan, are planning now, this holocaust. But if I, or anyone else, stepped in and removed the *cause* before the menace had time to mature, do you know what you would do to me—if you could catch me? Put me on trial for murder!”

She flicked ash into a tray.

“Murder, my dear Mark Donovan—when your soldiers and diplomats would be planning organised slaughter of the entire population dominated by these insane scoundrels! No, my friend: the rulers of the future must be trained from childhood to rule. They must know. They must see. They must be immune from your sloppy sentimentalism, from your common greed, from your snobbish fear of stamping out an evil thing simply because it wears decorations and calls itself a Premier or a Marshal.”

“Stop! I’ll listen to no more poisonous nonsense! Where is Claudette?”

Sumuru dropped her half smoked cigarette in the tray, and stood up.

“Shall we go and see her? ... Or would you prefer to send for a policeman?”

In Chief Inspector Ives' office at Scotland Yard, a transfigured Maitland faced the inspector across his neat desk.

"I think that was managed very neatly, Ives! My departure for the North was made so spectacular that I don't think it can possibly have been overlooked by Sumuru."

"I agree," said Ives. "Although nobody was spotted who might have been on the look-out."

They grey, clean-shaven, and now bespectacled Maitland, shook his head.

"The gang is too clever for that. But I believe someone was there all the same. Do you think it safe for me to take up my new role, Inspector? Could I possibly be recognised?"

Ives surveyed him critically.

"I doubt it. Clean-shaven, near-white hair, and those spectacles—I should hardly know you, myself, Doctor."

"Don't call me 'doctor'." snapped Maitland. "I am plain Mr. Sandford—"

He paused as Ives' telephone buzzed. The inspector bent to the instrument...

"Inspector Ives here... What's that?... Yes! I see... Hold on... Listen, Doctor—sorry!—there's something afoot, I think! Mr. Donovan has just driven away from Bruton street with a lady—in a Rolls sedanca de ville!"

"Good God! Is he being covered?"

"Yes. Motor cyclist... Wait a minute... Are you there, Thomson? Did this lady *arrive* in the car? Oh, I see. It drove up when she and Mr. Donovan came out... Very smart woman, you say, and wearing a hat with a veil... H'm."

Maitland was standing at Ives's elbow.

"They are on no account to be stopped, Ives! But we *must* know..."

Ives raised his hand...

“What’s that, Thomson? They have driven over to the former Embassy?... We’ve got ‘em this time, Doctor! We’ve got ‘em! Mr. Donovan and the woman have gone into the house we’ve been watching for days past—and I got the O.K. from the Foreign Office an hour ago to inspect the premises! If the woman is Sumuru! What do you want us to do now?”

“Nothing—until I get there! Come on! Ives—the trick has worked!”

3

A graceful Rolls sedan stood at the door in charge of a dark-skinned chauffeur. His manner to Sumuru was obsequious. As Donovan followed her in:

“Don’t bother to memorise the registration number,” she said. “It isn’t mine.”

He became aware, as the car glided smoothly off, of a faint, peculiar perfume which he knew he should never forget. Sumuru seemed to read his thoughts.

“You have noticed that my fur is perfumed with spikenard? The secret of its preparation is supposed to be lost, you know, although it was highly prized in, the days of the Caliphs.”

Donovan did not reply. He was wrestling with his conscience.

The drive was a short one; yet, throughout it, he was keenly conscious of the intense vibrations which emanated from his companion. Her personality was electrical and infinitely disturbing .

He found himself standing before a tall building. A flag hung limply above the door.

“Why did you bring me here?”

“I thought you might like to see the house for which your industrious friend, Inspector Ives, has been searching the neighbourhood. It was occupied, until recently, by members of the embassy staff of what, I suppose, you would call a friendly nation. Officially, it remains theirs, although the occupants actually left a week ago.”

Donovan found nothing to say.

“Shall we go in?” Sumuru asked, in her soft voice. “Or are you still thinking about policemen? I saw one on the corner of George Street.”

Donovan went in.

Sumuru opened the door with a key.

A lobby, in bronze and marble, bore indications of having been stripped of many of its appointments. As Sumuru closed the door Donovan turned and looked at her.

She was smiling.

“Is this another of your borrowed houses?”

“In a sense, it is. Why?”

“I have good reasons for feeling anxious.”

“Yes—I suppose that is true. But you must remember that you came here voluntarily. You are my guest, while you remain. Is it sufficient?”

And looking into those mocking, wonderful eyes, Donovan knew that it was.

As he wrote, afterwards... “This may be hard to understand. No doubt one who reads will say: What a fool! After such previous experiences, why trust this woman? ... I can only reply: You have not met Sumuru. A criminal I recognised her to be, one outside the law; one having crimes of many of which I knew nothing, chargeable upon her. But her serenity, her calm courage, her consciousness of power, set her high above any criminal I had ever know in my crime reporter days, had ever heard of since. One would as soon think of doubting a commander-in-chief. Her word, I knew, was inviolable. Why?

“I have tried to explain...”

A marble staircase led up to a balcony. There was evidence to show that a carpet had been removed from it quite recently. As Donovan stared doubtfully around, Sumuru threw a door open.

“Wait in there,” she said. “I will send Claudette to you.” She brought her lips close to Donovan’s ear. “Make love to her, Mark. She is made for love. Don’t waste the golden moments.”

Sumuru left him closing the door. He heard her fading footsteps on the marble stairs.

He found himself in a small but lofty apartment chiefly notable for a fine Adam mantelpiece. A mahogany desk upon which were writing materials and a lamp with a green glass shade stood before one wall. Several good rugs remained on the polished floor, and he saw two armchairs.

There was nothing else.

Immediately, Donovan crossed and tried the knob. The door had not been locked, and he looked out for a moment into the empty lobby. He was tremendously strung up. His heart was beating too fast. He reclosed the door, went over and stared out of the window, which had no curtains.

The Rolls had disappeared. London looked grey and normal. Just across the street a policeman was directing an American Air Force sergeant, one hand resting on the man’s shoulder and the other, outstretched, pointing in the direction of Hanover Square. Quite a fair amount of traffic was about.

“Make love to her, Mark. She is made for love. Don’t waste the golden moments...”

Then, Donovan heard someone opening the door behind him.

He turned—as Claudette came in...

She wore a plain frock which, however, fitted her slim figure to perfection, and light reflected from the lobby behind her gleamed wonderfully on her hair. As their glances met, she grew suddenly pale and then, as Donovan gripped her hands, that divine flush stained her cheeks—and he knew that her lips were his to claim.

He claimed them.

But although she returned his kisses, he was conscious of a strong reserve which

Claudette seemed to be exercising —and now she fumblingly forced a slip of paper between his fingers.

He released her, failed to read some message which she flashed from her eyes, and glanced down at the note so mysteriously offered. He saw a fragment torn from an envelope. On this the following words had been pencilled:

“Be careful. Someone is listening.”

He put the note in his pocket and nodded to indicate that he understood. Then, he spoke, choosing his words.

“Claudette, darling—where have you been?”

Claudette dropped into an armchair and seemed to make a great effort to compose herself. Donovan knelt on the rug, holding her hands again.

“I have been here—most of the time.”

“Here!”

“Yes. I thought I was coming to meet *you*. But of course—” she shrugged in her own individual way—“I might have known that Our Lady would never allow me to run away.”

“Then—you have seen her? I mean, not in a dream?”

“Yes. At last, I have seen her, spoken to her.”

Something in Claudette’s voice, in her expression—one almost of veneration—prompted Donovan to do what must have seemed to an observer, had there been one, a truly singular thing.

He glanced swiftly down at her ankles, those slender patrician ankles.

She wore stockings of spiderweb texture, which he guessed might have been borrowed from the tenderhearted Jackie de Lara on the night of Claudette’s departure. When he looked up again, perhaps his expression had changed, for Claudette slightly shook her head.

“No—I am not a member of the Order... yet.”

“Yet?”

Donovan seated himself on the side of her chair and threw his arm around her shoulders. “What do you mean by ‘yet’?”

“I suppose I mean that it’s inevitable, sooner or later.”

“Inevitable! Claudette dear, I don’t understand at all. I know how you came to be here. I know you were abducted a second time—by that dusky blackguard who calls himself Worthington. But I don’t know, I simply can’t imagine, why you have *stayed* here. You had only to run out and claim the protection of the first policeman who passed. Why, it’s just a matter of minutes to my own door!”

Claudette raised her eyes to him. Their expression was wistful, almost sad.

“Do you think I ever forgot that?”

Donovan stooped and kissed her hair.

“Darling, why didn’t you come?”

“In the first place, because it would not have been of the slightest use. In the second place, because if you had tried to hide me from Our Lady or had attempted to interfere with her, she would have retaliated. I don’t know what might have happened to you. Then—there is another reason.”

“What can it be?”

“My father.”

“Your father! But I heard that your father had disappeared—that they have failed to trace him!”

“You mean the police have?” She smiled up at him. “Very likely. He is with the Paris Circle.”

“What do you mean by the Paris Circle?”—“There are Circles in all the chief capitals. Our Lady had begun to form them before 1939. She went on all through

the war. She was working against time. She believed that if the atomic experiments succeeded before her plans were complete, civilisation would be destroyed.”

“Does she still think so?”

“Yes, That is why, now, she permits nothing or nobody to stand in her way. I have had a letter from Father. You know, don’t you, that he is a very brilliant man? Well—he is not a prisoner, as I am; he is a working member of the Order. And he entreats me to join him!”

For a moment, Donovan was silent, dumbfounded.

Maitland’s suspicions were based on solid fact. Sumuru was the head of a powerful secret society having world-wide ramifications. Terror was not her chief weapon, but she never hesitated to employ it when necessary. His heart sank. Recalling the able men and women who had been hypnotised into slavish obedience by such a creature as Hitler, what must be the influence wielded by this dazzling woman who called herself Sumuru? Marcel Duquesne! A name revered in French journalism; that of a patriot and a gentleman. She had won over Marcel Duquesne!

At last:

“Claudette,” he said, “does your father know that this woman whose projects he is working to forward has committed murder? Not once, but God alone knows how many times!”

Claudette clasped her hands between her knees and stared down pensively.

“You should not say that—Mark.” She pronounced his name with delicious hesitancy. “Our Lady knows that to bring about any great change in the present idea of government must involve war of some sort. But she confines her war to individuals, to those who would become responsible for involving others.”

“This is a great change of heart, Claudette. You told me, not so long ago, that the book called *Tears of Our Lady* was evil.”

“Perhaps I did. But, then, I had not met Our Lady.”

“Does that mean that you believe in her? That you condone her killings? That you approve of her aims?”

Claudette looked up.

“I believe in her implicitly. She is the most wonderful woman in the world. And I approve of her aims. Who could disapprove? She wants to restore peace and beauty to life. But I cannot make up my mind about her methods. She considers that the end justifies the means. She has given me time to think this over.”

“Suppose you decide that you wish to be free—what will happen?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would your father suffer?”

“No. I am sure of that. But—”

“Yes,” Donovan prompted, for she hesitated, and he held her close. “But what?”

“But I don’t think we should ever see one another again...”

4

Now, here was a man squarely at the crossroads, suddenly brought face to face with the greatest crisis in his life.

The genius of Sumuru began to appall him.

He recalled how she had said that Ariosto (known as Dr. Worthington) was deeply devoted to the girl who had murdered Sir Miles Tristram. He saw his fate starkly uprise before him. He lost all enmity for the man who had so impudently blinded him on a London street. He found himself thinking of Dr. Worthington as of a companion in misfortune. The chains that bound him to Sumuru were silken chains—but nevertheless unbreakable.

Sumuru employed the beauty of women to secure the serfdom of men!

And already, in spirit, Donovan was stretching out his hands to welcome the same servitude!

In short, he must acknowledge the power of Sumuru or give up Claudette ...

It was finding himself faced with this alternative, no doubt, which restored his naturally combative spirit. *Was there no other way?* Must he accept the word of Sumuru as final? Must he, a free citizen, bow to the will of a gang leader? For this was what it amounted to.

He stood up and began to pace the floor.

“Listen,” he said. “Who really rents this house?”

“The flag still over the door must have told you.”

“Then what is Sumuru doing here?”

“I never heard that name, Mark, as I have said before. But I suppose it is the name by which you know Our Lady. I am only at liberty to answer if you promise to keep whatever I tell you absolutely secret.”

Another quandary! Yet, the implication, that Sumuru was prepared to accept his word, Donovan found in some way flattering. What use it would be to learn the facts if he were not to use them didn’t seem any too clear; but he saw that he had no choice.

“Very well... I promise.”

“The wife of the minister who lived here is a member of the Order. Our Lady has been her guest, and it was arranged when Madame Druse returned to her own country that Our Lady should retain her rooms for a time.

This perfectly simple statement let a flood of light into dark places. Donovan began fully to appreciate the size of Maitland’s job—and the difficulties which confronted Inspector Ives. A criminal able to claim, and to secure, diplomatic immunity is a tough proposition for any police force. Small wonder they had failed to find “the house near Hanover Square.”

And, meanwhile, here was he, pacing up and down and noting, every time he looked out of the window, the presence of a member of that police force on the other side of the street! The constable who had directed the airman was standing by a pillar-box glancing idly right and left.

Suddenly, Donovan stopped before Claudette, knelt down at her feet and clasped his hands over her knees.

“Claudette! I couldn’t go on without you! Love has hit me very suddenly and very hard. Just tell me this: If things could be straightened out, would you marry me?”

“Of course I would, Mark. It came just as suddenly to me. Do you suppose I should have let you kiss me like that if I hadn’t cared for you?”

Donovan didn’t know what Sumuru, or whoever was listening, heard during the next few minutes, but it wasn’t conversation...

“Who is going to prevent us walking straight out, now?” he asked, presently.

“I don’t think anyone would try to prevent us, Mark.”

“Aren’t we behaving rather like two frightened children? After all, darling, Sumuru no doubt is a dangerous woman, but we could be in another country before she had time to act. There’s a policeman right across the street. We have only to step over and join him and we’re safe—even from Sumuru.”

But Claudette shook her head.

“If we did get away, and she left us alone, I should never see Father again.”

“You would see him just as soon as the police had their hands on Sumuru!”

“The police will never have their hands on—” she hesitated—“on Her.”

Claudette spoke the word in a hushed way, and as though it had a capital H.

And, as often happens in such cases, the awe with which Sumuru had impressed Claudette, began to creep over Donovan, too. He seemed to feel her presence, to hear again her thrilling voice. The light banter of which she was capable never for a moment more than masked the powerful personality of the woman; indeed, it revealed it, terrifyingly.

Sumuru, smart as a fashion plate, smiling, gay, who could calmly order a man’s secret execution; Sumuru, who had conquered Donovan with her eyes, who had

sent Steel Maitland out to deliver into her hands that evidence against her which had taken years to accumulate! Sumuru...

“What does she want with *me*, Claudette? Do you know?”

“Yes.” Claudette’s eyes were lowered for a moment, a flush swept over her face. “She wants me to be the mother of your children. And she wants you to take charge of her propaganda department. My father is working on it, now.”

Donovan dropped Claudette’s hands, jumped up, and began to walk about again.

So this female Dictator had selected him to be her Dr. Goebbels! It was grotesque. It would have been funny if it had not been diabolically tragic. The silken web. Its texture was so like that of the woman who had spun it; light, flexible, inexorable. Words spoken by Inspector Ives flashed, tauntingly, through Donovan’s mind.

“I’m trying to point out that we have no case to go to a jury, even if we were sure of the identity of the culprit...”

“Who *is* Sumuru?” he asked, abruptly.

“I don’t know. No one knows.”

“Is London her headquarters?”

“No.”

“Where, then?”

“I don’t know, Mark. And if I did, I couldn’t tell you.” Glances of ever-increasing urgency which Claudette continued to give him brought home, at last, a circumstance of which he had lost sight in the excitement of those golden moments—golden moments of which Sumuru, prophetically, had spoken.

They were overheard; They were caught, helpless flies, in a web from which there seemed to be no escape. What folly to make plans under the eyes of the enemy!

Yet, common sense rejected the apparent reality of the situation. Had they been

living under the rule of an undisputed autocrat, then they should have known and must have accepted the fact that their lives were not their own. But they were in England, under a Socialist government. There was a policeman across the street.

But experience told Donovan that if he attempted anything contrary to the wishes of Sumuru he would bitterly, and speedily, regret it.

He groaned aloud.

Claudette stood up and grasped his arm.

“Don’t despair, Mark. I believe I know what you are thinking. But for my sake, whatever the police do, or Dr. Maitland does, do nothing yourself. It would only mean... we should lose one another.”

From somewhere, somewhere far away, came a sound which resembled that of a silver bell...

“Mark! Mark, dear! You heard it? That means we have to part again—”

“Claudette!” He seized her in his arms—“Listen to me—”

“Mark! it’s no good! You must see that I simply *dare* not disobey her orders! For my father’s sake—for yours.”

Donovan clasped her convulsively.

“Good God! What shall I do!”

“I don’t know, my dearest—I don’t know,” she whispered. “But you must come with me now, and I will show you the way out. You must go—”

“I know the way “

“No, no—not that way! Come, please come!”

“Not unless you come with me!”

“For God’s sake, if—if you love me—do as I ask!...”

Chapter Fifteen

1

A SCOTLAND YARD car pulled up immediately opposite the house which displayed an Embassy flag. That constable whom Donovan had noted, not so long before, directing an American airman, stepped to the door. Inspector Ives sprang out.

“You are positive, Thompson, that no one has left?”

“No one, Chief Inspector. The woman—a very elegant person, and Mr. Donovan, got out of the car. It was the Embassy Rolls. The chauffeur drove away. Denby followed. The woman opened the door with a key and she and Mr. Donovan went in.”

“Good. Stay out of sight, Doctor, while I try the bell.”

White-haired, bespectacled, Maitland lay back in a corner of the car.

Ives crossed to the house and rang the bell.

There was no response.

An ornamental knocker attracted his attention, and he banged this vigorously—then rang the bell again.

Nothing happening, he gave it up, and returned to the car. Maitland leaned out.

“Waste no time, Ives!” he snapped—“and *don't* call me ‘doctor’! You have your authority. Get a man to smash that lower window, and we can be in before a crowd gathers.”

Ives turned to Thomson as another, plain clothes man, got out.

“Smash the window, Thomson, and open the catch.”

“Very good, sir.”

Thomson, wearing the expression of a mischievous schoolboy, extracted the heavy crank from its place, crossed over and shattered a large pane of plate glass. He knocked dangerous fragments away before inserting his arm and forcing the catch.

This proceeding quite naturally assembled an excited audience.

“There’s a crowd gathering,” said Maitland, alighting. “Sooner we are in, the better.”

He ran across as Thomson climbed in at the window.

“Open the front door!”

Thomson nodded, and disappeared. A few moments later he reappeared at the street door.

“Come on, Ives.”

Maitland and Ives entered close together. Two more police had come up, and Ives paused to give them instructions.

“Move on any loiterers—and grab anybody who tries to come out.”

Thomson, the driver and the other man, who had ridden beside him, entered the house behind the inspector. The last man in closed the door. They found themselves in the stripped lobby from which a bleak marble staircase led to floors above.

“You two,” rapped Ives, “search the upper rooms. Thomson stay with me.”

The pair ran up and the echo of their footsteps might soon be heard as they crossed uncarpeted floors of empty rooms. Meanwhile, Maitland had entered the apartment dominated by an Adam mantelpiece. He noted the smashed window and the mahogany desk, its lamp green-shaded. But a glance was enough to convince him that no one was there.

Nor was there another door. Nevertheless, he detected something.

There was a faint, pleasant, but quite unmistakable perfume—a perfume he must

always associate, to the end of his days, with Sumuru...

He turned to Ives, who was staring about him critically.

“Do you notice a faint perfume?”

Ives nodded.

“No one uses that perfume—or no one I have ever met—but *one* woman—”

“Sumuru?”

“Sumuru! She has been in this room—and recently!”

“Funny you should remember it. It’s hardly perceptible.”

“I can smell it,” said Thomson. “But is it very faint.”

“Sumuru,” Maitland assured him, “is an artist in all things. She doesn’t reek of scent. But this elusive something—I have no idea what it is—might be described as her signature. She has been in here.”

“Come on!” Ives shouted. “Spread out. All the downstairs rooms ...”

They went to work methodically.

“This place has been stripped,” Thomson said.

“They got everything out while we were held up by red tape,” Maitland replied bitterly. “Red tape is strangling civilisation ...”

And now, searchers began to shout from floor to floor.

“Nobody up here, sir!”

“Nothing in the basement...”

“House is empty...”

Maitland stood in the lobby, leaning wearily against the newel post at the foot of the marble stair.

“Of course the house is empty. God knows what’s become of poor Donovan. I shall never forgive myself.” He turned haggard eyes in Ives’s direction. “We may hunt for ever, Ives. We are hunting a phantom ...”

2

Donovan knew nothing of all this.

At about the same time that Maitland expressed that gloomy opinion, Donovan found himself standing in a narrow recess from which he had an excellent view of part of George Street. He had submitted to the old-fashioned routine of being blindfolded with his own pocket handkerchief and led to this spot. The handkerchief had been removed, from behind, and he had honourably kept his eyes closed whilst he counted ten.

He looked over his shoulder quickly.

What he saw was a commonplace wooden gate, badly in need of a coat of paint, which evidently communicated with back premises, and was used by tradesmen delivering goods. It was locked, or bolted. No one seemed to have noted his sudden appearance. He set out, walking more or less at random.

He had said good-bye to Claudette... had it meant good-bye for ever? He had found love, and now, it seemed, he was putting love behind him.

What to do next he had no idea. Should he call up Inspector Ives and give him the news that he had been inside the suspected house? He was under no obligation to remain silent on this point. But, if he did so, what would happen? The house would be raided...

Donovan was certain as if Sumuru had told him, that this possibility had been foreseen. Neither Sumuru nor Claudette would be found there.

To return to work was quite out of the question. His brain was seething with confused ideas, sweet memories, futile regrets. And all the time Donovan was walking on through London’s busy streets without having the slightest notion where he was going.

Vaguely, he remembered, later, passing his own door, pausing, and then staring back over his shoulder, possessed by a sudden conviction that he was followed.

Except for a policeman strolling in his direction, there was no one of a suspicious character in sight.

He went on past the expanse of Berkeley Square, and again forgot his surroundings ...

How could he get in touch with Maitland? Where was he, and when would he return? If he were to retain sanity, certainly he must discuss the situation with *somebody*.

One thing, slowly, was becoming clear. He must not go to the official police. To do so would mean disaster, for himself and for Claudette.

Donovan was heading, at this time, across Hyde Park, roughly in the direction of Lancaster Gate. He pulled up to light a cigarette. A constable appeared walking over the grass, not far behind him. That resolution, newly formed, not to take the police into his confidence, subconsciously impelled a change of route.

He set out again, bearing off left—and twenty yards on, saw another constable coming along a path which crossed the one he was following.

Although Donovan was no great distance from Hyde Park Police Station, it occurred to him, all the same, that he had never before seen so many police in the park. This reflection soon passed from his mind, however, and he became occupied again with confusing thoughts regarding his future procedure.

It was the apparition of a third constable, almost at his elbow, which brought his to his senses. Quite obviously, this man intended to stop him!

Donovan glanced to the left, and then behind. Directly in front of him, now, was the police station. And he saw that he was surrounded! One man was immediately on his heels, another closing in on his left, and a third standing beside him.

It was the third man who spoke.

“Mr. Mark Donovan?”

“I am Mark Donovan. Yes.”

“I must ask you to step into the station, Mr. Donovan, to answer a few questions.”

The truth became inescapable. He had been arrested!

3

This state of affairs was due to the prompt action of Detective-sergeant Thomson. This officer was disguised, temporarily, as a constable—a favourite trick of Ives’s, who maintained that whilst almost any other loiterer might be suspected of being a detective, nobody ever suspected a constable.

Thomson, coming out of the ex-Embassy during that futile search, had received a report which led his steps to an establishment just around the corner—the shop of a fashionable modiste, trading as Rubaix.

He saw Mark Donovan, with whose appearance he was acquainted, walking rapidly away—and he noted that Donovan’s manner was markedly distraught.

All had strict orders to keep the American journalist under observation, but not to let him suspect this, and Thomson took immediate steps to insure that he be shadowed. This done, he reported back to Inspector Ives.

“Thank God!” said Maitland.

“He may have been got at!” growled Ives. “Shepherd him into the first police station he comes near to and let me know when he’s in ... Do you agree, Doctor?”

Maitland nodded.

“Yes—and I should be glad if *you* would agree not to call me ‘doctor’!”

“Sorry! Clumsy of me... What is this about a dress shop, Thomson?”

It appeared that the car in which Mark Donovan and the woman had driven up, had been taken around the corner and pulled in before Maison Rubaix. This car had been trailed for some time and was rarely out of observation. It belonged to Madame Druse, wife of the departed diplomat, and remained in London in charge of a chauffeur. It was garaged off Farm Street—was actually back in its

garage now.

Thomson had interviewed this chauffeur quite recently. He was shortly rejoining his employers abroad. They had returned to the Continent at short notice, apparently, and a butler (his name was Currie) who had been engaged by the minister's wife, had stayed behind to supervise removal of personal belongings and so on.

This man, an Englishman of good character and accustomed to high class service, had also received a visit from Thomson. And it was largely owing to what Thomson learned from Currie that the long awaited authority to search the house had been obtained.

Currie said that after the family left, he had attended to the requirements of a lady known to him as Mrs. Windsor, a guest of Madame Druse, who had arranged to stay on until her own flat should be ready for occupation. Mrs. Windsor had a lady companion, Miss St. Claude. Sometimes, servants of Mrs. Windsor came in if there were visitors and also on Currie's evenings out, but invariably left at night. They were foreigners. Madame Druse's car was put at Mrs. Windsor's disposal.

The butler's duties were finished, however, and he was living in temporary retirement in rooms in Chelsea—where, in fact, Thomson had called upon him.... Now, it was reported, only a few minutes before, a white-haired lady had come out of Maison Rubaix, accompanied by a nurse, was saluted by the chauffeur, and driven off to Victoria. A detective who followed on a motor cycle phoned to say that the old lady and her companion booked first-class tickets to Reigate and joined the train. The chauffeur then returned the car to its garage...

"I'll step round and have a look at this Rubaix woman," said Ives.

"7 must keep out of sight," Maitland remarked. "So, go easy. Don't alarm these people. I am chiefly worried about Donovan. He may have been drugged and given some sort of 'instructions'..."

Madame Rubaix was interrogated tactfully by the soldierly-looking Ives.

Monsieur was mistaken in thinking that the client was his sister. She was Lady Donnelly, and being in poor health, always travelled with a trained nurse...

It may be noted here that later that day it was learned that a Lady Donnelly actually lived in the Reigate area. She was called by phone—and she confirmed Madame Rubaix's statement! Was she a friend of Madame Druse, Scotland Yard inquired. Yes, by arrangement with "dear Mrs. Windsor" she had borrowed Madame Druse's car that afternoon.

Interviewed by the Surrey police, Lady Donnelly and her resident nurse stuck to their story. Further inquiries concerning "Mrs. Windsor" led nowhere. The chauffeur, a Rumanian, declared that he had never driven that lady to the flat spoken of by Currie...

Maitland was given this information by Ives over the phone, towards evening. He had retired to a quiet hotel at which rooms had been engaged for him as "Mr. Sandford," undoubtedly members of this damnable order," said Maitland on a note of desperation. "Madame Rubaix is another of them. I should be disposed to hazard a guess that the missing Madame Druse is a fourth." He paused, muttering what sounded like smothered curses. "Don't you agree?"

"Yes—you are probably right," Ives replied. "Any further news of Donovan? Still fighting mad?"

"No. But I'm going along there, now. I don't think there's any doubt he knows something. But he has sworn secrecy or some such rot. Probably the girl was hidden there. So far, Doctor, our net has caught no fish!"

4

What, then, had happened to Donovan when he was conducted into Hyde Park Police Station, to make him fighting mad?

After being kept waiting for some time, he was invited to enter a dim office, where he found an inspector seated behind a high desk. As Donovan came in, a constable beside him, the inspector waved to the man to withdraw. He did so, closing the door behind him. Donovan noted, though, that there was another door beside the desk, half open, and throughout he had an impression that someone stood behind it, listening.

The inspector looked up.

"Mr. Mark Donovan?"

“I am Mark Donovan. What can I do for you?”

“Well—” the inspector tapped his desk with a pencil—

“you were recently seen to leave a certain house. We have been watching this house. So we should be glad if you would answer a few questions concerning the people who live there.”

It had come! Here were the crossroads. Just what Donovan had hoped to avoid had happened. If only he could have discussed his position with Steel Maitland before being called upon to give evidence to the police!

However, he answered, quietly enough.

“Certainly. What do you want to know?”

“Well—” the inspector glanced down at some note—“I should like to know if you went there alone, or with someone else.”

“With someone else.”

“May I ask his name?”

“I went with a woman. I have never learned her real name. I know her as Sumuru.”

Donovan was sure that the inspector glanced rapidly aside —through the doorway.

“Sumuru. Unusual Is it a professional name?”

“In a sense, I suppose it is. She is probably the most dangerous criminal at present at large in Great Britain.”

“Indeed. Then this is where you are in a position to help us. Tell me, Mr. Donovan, was this woman in the house when you left?”

“To the best of my knowledge. That is, I didn’t see her leave.”

“Anyone else?”

Now, he was squarely up against it! What Claudette had told him about the organisation he was bound in honour not to divulge. That he had met her at the house he was at liberty to report if he chose. But the result, if he did so, would almost certainly be that which Claudette had foreseen. He made a quick decision.

“There are reasons. Inspector, why I don’t want to answer that question.”

“Say just one reason, Mr. Donovan,” came a loud voice... and Ives stepped into the office! “Call it Miss Claudette Duquesne—and we shall all understand one another!”

“Good God!” The words were jerked out of Donovan explosively. “What’s the meaning of this?”

He was furiously angry. Ives shook his head, watching him.

“Sorry, Mr. Donovan. But you have been carefully shepherded all day, I assure you. I’m responsible to Dr. Maitland, you see. When a report came in that you had a beautiful visitor, we took prompt action. To arrest her was out of the question. We haven’t a case. But we have good grounds to suspect those premises. I quite expected you to come away in a peculiar frame of mind. You know what I mean?”

Donovan nodded, but continued to stare angrily.

“So you were watched—and your behaviour rather suggested that you were hardly yourself. We had you carefully rounded up. I wanted to judge for myself if you had been tampered with. As soon as I was sure you hadn’t, I dropped the play acting.”

“I am deeply obliged!” said Donovan—for it certainly appeared to him that he had been used as a stooge. “If this is Maitland’s idea, send him my thanks and best wishes.”

And this time it was Ives who glanced aside through the doorway...

Chapter Sixteen

1

MORE than a week elapsed, and nothing happened. It was a period of mental agony for Mark Donovan. He kept in constant touch with Scotland Yard, and sometimes saw inspector Ives; but for all that he could learn to the contrary, the case might have been at a standstill. Those crimes ascribable to Sumuru which had been given publicity—and the public did not even suspect the whole truth—were already half forgotten.

A world inured to mass violence no longer dwelled upon one or two mysterious murders. It was true that successive deaths from *rigor Kubus* had stirred up a spate of newspaper correspondence, and at one time there was a threat of panic. Some people feared that this thing might be a form of plague .

Of Sumuru he had heard no more. Of Claudette it was torture to think.

Maitland's silence he found unaccountable. But Ives assured him that Maitland was safe.

Zest for life had left Donovan. He spent his spare hours adding to the account he was preparing of Sumuru's activities. To this task he bent his troubled mind.

That he was covered, tirelessly, by Scotland Yard day and night, he knew quite well. But, rather than deriving assurance from this, he was disposed to resent it. His mood was a black one, and he cherished a grievance against Maitland for keeping him thus in the dark.

Seated at his typewriter one day plunged in a depression deeper than usual (he was writing about Claudette), he heard the phone bell and crossed to take the call.

"Hullo... Mark Donovan here."

"Hullo, Donovan!"

The voice was Maitland's!

“Maitland! By God! I’m glad to hear from you at last!” All Donovan’s resentment left him. “It’s been the very devil not knowing what had become of you—and Scotland Yard either couldn’t, or wouldn’t, give me any information... Where are you? What’s happened?”

He heard Maitland laugh.

“Lots. I’m at the Hotel Morgan—not to be confused with the pirate of that name. A reasonable and peaceful abode, where I am known as Mr. Sandford, a solicitor from the North.”

“But I thought you *were* in the North! What’s the idea?”

Resentment began to return.

“The idea is to save my life, Donovan! Sumuru also thinks I’m in the North, so that there hasn’t been an attempt to murder me for nearly twenty-four hours—that I can recall. I want to see you—”

“And I want to see *you!*”

“As a decoy-duck you have proved a failure, Donovan—”

Donovan’s resentment returned in full force.

“I did my best for you,” he said bitterly. “Mismanagement on your side balled the thing up.”

“Oh!” said Maitland. “Perhaps you’re right. Well, anyway, I’m most anxious to see you. Listen. Take a taxi to, say, Paddington. Then make sure—if you can—that you’re not followed. Take a bus back to Charing Cross—and then walk. Do you know where this hotel is?”

“Yes—I think I know.”

“Ask for Mr. Sandford, and give your name as Marks. Come as soon as you can... Good-bye.”

When Donovan set out a few minutes later, he found that he was in a mood happier than he had known for a long time. Above all, he welcomed a chance of

action. He hailed a taxi.

“Savoy,” he said, and got in.

As the man started off, Donovan looked out of the rear window, and grinned delightedly. This was good fun again!

A motor cyclist—appearing from nowhere—was threading a sinuous route through the traffic, behind.

Scotland Yard!

When they came to the big hotel in the Strand, Donovan knew that the cyclist was hot on his track. But of any other tracker there was no evidence.

Donovan’s next appearance was at a service door on the Embankment side. He walked a few paces, and then boarded a tramcar. He was taking a boyish delight in defeating the agents of law and order. As he paid his fare, a motor-cycle spurted past the tram.

Scotland Yard had won, so far!

“Now, how did he figure that out?” Donovan muttered.

However it was ‘figured out,’ when, at last, Donovan entered the lobby of the Hotel Morgan, he congratulated himself on having thrown the shadower off his track. There was no sign of the motor-cyclist.

This was one of those discreet, family hotels, of which few outside the limited and select clientele had ever heard. The receptionist, a capable looking woman, smiled at Donovan interrogatively.

“Is Mr. Sandford in, do you know?”

“I will find out, sir. What name?”

Donovan hesitated for a moment.

“Er—Marks.”

Donovan waited, feeling awkward.

“... Oh, Mr. Sandford, Mr. Marks is asking for you... Yes, very well.... The third floor, Mr. Marks—Number 38.”

Donovan, uneasily, crossed to the lift and was taken up to the third floor.

“Fourth door to the right,” the liftman directed, and Donovan approached this door and rang the bell.

The door was opened almost immediately by a tall, white-haired man, of pale complexion, who wore spectacles.

“Er—is Mr. Sandford...” Donovan glanced again at the number, wondering if he had made a mistake.

The white-haired man laughed loudly and shot out a welcoming hand.

“You give me new confidence, Donovan! Come right in!”

“*Maitland!*”

Donovan paused, holding the outstretched hand, and staring, amazed. But Maitland pulled him in and closed the door, then began to pace about the small room.

“What has become of my Naval beard, you inquire? Why is my hair white? Why do I wear spectacles? Well, you can’t have forgotten *my* former interest in amateur theatricals. Here I am, at it again! Sit down.”

“This is simply fantastic!”

“It’s pretty grim, too.”

In his rapid, staccato fashion, Maitland outlined those facts not known to Donovan—and Donovan’s simmering anger gave place to a growing sense of guilt. His passion for Claudette had put him in a false position...

“My standin, or substitute,” Maitland concluded, “who is posing as myself, up in Scotland, has had one very narrow squeak!”

“You mean that Sumuru—”

“Yes. She has swallowed the bait, hook and all! Someone tried to gas him in his own room only last night.”

“Good God!”

Maitland nodded shortly.

“But he’s alive—and so am I—”

The phone buzzed, and Maitland took up the instrument, listened, said, “Thanks. All correct”—and replaced the receiver.

“Scotland Yard reporting you have just arrived!” he explained dryly. “And now, I have a bone to pick with you—”

“I know, Maitland!” Donovan stood up, restless, irresolute. “I feel—”

“My dear fellow, I can guess how you feel. You have seen Claudette, and she has told you that you will never see her again unless you—belong to the murder gang! Am I right?”

“No, Maitland. Even Claudette doesn’t belong to it, yet.”

“Good, Donovan—excellent. For, faced with such wheels within wheels one feels inclined to give the thing up. It’s a new kind of organisation. Heaven knows how high up the social scale it goes. Almost anybody might turn out to be a member. We don’t know friend from foe. It’s staggering.”

“At least we know that Sumuru directs the whole horrible thing.”

“Quite so. But who is she?”

“Furthermore, a Spanish girl, Dolores, poisoned Tristram, for Sumuru told me so
“

“She may have told you so,” Maitland snapped irritably. “But that’s not evidence. And in any case, who *is* Dolores? Where is she? Even if we found her and had her detained, we should find that she could produce a faultless alibi. An ex-Commissioner said recently that there have been many murder cases in which the police have known the criminal but failed to find evidence sufficient to

ensure a conviction. The present case is an outstanding example.”

“It is,” Donovan agreed miserably. “If I can get no news of Claudette, I think I shall go mad.”

He found it almost impossible to believe that nearly two weeks had gone by since he had spent those golden moments with Claudette, harder still to accept the fact that all the resources of Scotland Yard and the Secret Service had failed to trace her. No arrest had been made in connection with the deaths of Sir Miles Tristram and Ian Forrester, and, since the coroner’s jury had returned ambiguous verdicts, public interest already had waned.

Maitland stood up and stared out of the window. It offered a prospect of a blank wall.

“I quite understand, Donovan.” Irritation had gone from his voice: he spoke with deep sympathy. “Of course, I know you saw her that day—and no doubt certain inducements (I can guess their nature) were put forward to win your support. In return for some sort of information you had to promise secrecy, I suppose. Well—you can do nothing about that. But I hope sincerely it wasn’t information which I should have.”

Donovan was touched by his manner.

“I give you my word it could be of little use, Maitland. It merely confirmed what you have just been saying—that the thing is a world organisation, that influential people belong to it.”

Maitland nodded.

“You were very sticky with Inspector Ives when he questioned you. I was listening behind the door... Don’t glare! But Ives put two and two together. Too late, he discovered the private exit by means of which Sumuru slipped through our fingers. Oh! I understand! I understand! No one expects a man to sacrifice the woman he loves. There are no reproaches coming, Donovan—although you were taking desperate chances with *my* life.”

Donovan’s mercurial spirits sank again.

“Maitland—I feel like the lowest insect that crawls. But what could I do? What

could I do? If it comes to that, what can any of us do, with an organisation that has members all over the world? Important people, socially and politically. It's a fearful thing. We have no means of knowing who belongs to it, and who doesn't."

"As I have said, the Nazis all over again, Donovan, but this time international—and with a woman Fuehrer! Hitler, in the art of winning disciples, was a child beside Sumuru. She knows every move in the game. She has the brain of a genius, the courage of a tigress. For my peace of mind, tell me one thing:—You have not bound yourself in any way to Claudette—or to those people?"

"In no way. But anything I do against Sumuru will react upon Claudette!"

"Stay out of it, then," said Maitland shortly. "I am by no means certain that Sumuru is still in London, but there is one line of inquiry from which I hope for some result."

"What is that?"

Maitland dropped on to the side of the bed and lighted a cheroot.

"The Baroness Rikter, President of the St. Erik Ambulance Corps."

"But the baroness—"

"Has her headquarters in one of the few houses in London which might contain that amazing apartment where you and I once interviewed Sumuru—"

Donovan experienced sudden excitement.

"The marble room, with the lily pond and the banks of mimosa? The silk curtained recess? The—"

"Just so," said Maitland quietly. "Lorimer House, the former home of Sir Martin Lorimer, the Victorian painter. The house to which Jean Barlow went ... I have been studying the history of the baroness, Donovan. And I find that she nursed the Baron—one of the wealthiest men in Sweden—during his final illness. Their marriage was a death-bed ceremony—a gesture of appreciation."

"Who was she, before, then?"

“A nursing sister from a well-known Stockholm hospital. We have been unable to learn any more about her.”

“But what are you going to do?”

“That’s where the solicitor business comes in! And that’s what I’ve been waiting for. I am at last empowered by a prominent patron of St. Erik’s to inquire what is to be done with their vast surplus funds. I am taking Detective-sergeant Locker along with me in the capacity of my managing clerk. He is highly observant and intelligent. I have an appointment with the baroness for that purpose, at five o’clock this evening!”

“And I can’t come?”

“And you can’t come!”

2

My Lady sat at her large, workmanlike desk in her small, workmanlike office. She wore nurse’s uniform—silver grey with scarlet facings. A uniform cape was draped over a chair. Philo, standing before her, rested one muscular hand on the back of this chair.

“My Lady?”

“All is ready for our departure, Philo?”

The golden voice was calm, untroubled.

“All is ready, Madonna—and the sooner we depart the better.”

Sumuru’s eyes opened widely for a moment—and Philo’s glance fell.

“That is for me to decide. My orders concerning Dr. Steel Maitland were bungled. Those responsible will report to Paris and await me there.”

“They left this morning, My Lady.”

“He is still in Scotland?”

“According to latest reports, he is.”

Sumuru's eyes became nearly closed.

"We can never be safe whilst this man remains at large. But all I came to England to do I have done—except that one thing. No, perhaps another. What of the American, Donovan?"

"I have no one to watch his movements, Madonna. And it is impossible for me to perform so many duties at the same time. But he has kept in constant touch with Scotland Yard."

My Lady began to arrange a number of papers on her desk.

"And how is the little Claudette?"

"She is very unhappy, Madonna. Always, she weeps. Dear My Lady! you take too many risks! This solicitor who is coming here—"

She looked up, sharply.

"Silence, Philo. For such work as mine, I need vast capital. Most of my own I have expended. This man, Sandford, comes to inquire about the disposal of surplus St. Erik funds. I must satisfy him. Then—we shall go."

"Ah!"

That deep note conveyed otherwise inexpressible relief.

"The golden orfe from the lily pool have been safely forwarded?"

"Yes, My Lady."

Sumuru smiled.

"Remain out of sight whilst the lawyer is here. Let one of the regular St. Erik's nurses admit him and show him into the office adjoining the Arab lobby."

"Yes, My Lady."

Philo bowed low, and retired ...

“If you will wait a moment, Mr. Sandford, I will take your card to the baroness.”

Maitland, professionally attired, and carrying rolled umbrella and a black hat, bowed stiffly. He had been cultivating a slow and hesitant style of speech for the role, although the girl, a sturdy and competent looking nursing sister, was too characteristic to merit guile.

“She is expecting me?”

“Yes, I believe so “

“Thank you, nurse “

The girl went out, partly closing the door of this small, cedar-panelled room; and Maitland spoke in a low voice.

“This is like the inside of an Arabian palace. Did you notice those wonderful mushrabiye windows?”

Sergeant Locker nodded.

“I believe it’s known as the Arab Court, sir. Were you never here before?”

“Er—” Maitland hesitated—“I’m not sure. But, if so, I have forgotten it.”

“It was in this Court that Sir Martin Lorimer painted his famous picture ‘The Slave Girl,’ I believe. For years the house has been a show place—until St. Erik’s took it over during the late war.”

“Indeed.” Maitland was staring around at the panelled walls. “Do you happen to remember if there is a *marble* room in Lorimer House?”

Locker frowned thoughtfully.

“Not in the part once open to the public. But I think I have heard that the studio, upstairs, is a reproduction of some Roman villa.”

“H’m—very curious.” Maitland was haunted by evasive memories. “You tell me that you have never met the baroness?”

“No, sir. But I have seen her. An old lady of sixty or so, with silver hair. Carries

an ebony stick and leans on it when she walks.”

“I see,” Maitland murmured abstractedly... “Ah! here comes the nurse.”

The girl threw the door open and stood aside.

“Will you please come this way, Mr. Sandford. The baroness will join you in a few moments.”

They followed her across the Arab Court and up a short stair to a small, workmanlike office in which there was a large, workmanlike desk...

“If you don’t mind waiting here.”

They sat down, and again the nurse left them.

“So far, all very businesslike,” Maitland commented. “St. Erik’s run a fleet of ambulances, don’t they?”

“Yes, Dr. Maitland—”

“Damn it! Don’t use that name!”

“Sorry!” Locker flushed guiltily. “A slip on my part. Yes —they got them to most of the battle fronts during the war. But I understand they have all been returning to Sweden recently—hullo!”

They both detected the sound of a tapping stick, approaching...

Chapter Seventeen

1

BARONESS RIKTER wore a grey, caped uniform faced with scarlet. In one hand (silk mittened) the baroness carried an ebony cane with a scrutched silver handle. She stooped slightly, leaning on her stick, as she entered. Her small, chiselled features were of an ivory pallor and her beautifully dressed hair, worn short, was silver like the crutch of her cane. Slightly tinted spectacles enhanced the venerable appearance. Cleanness perhaps was the dominant note, and her garments exhaled a faint but not unpleasant odour of antiseptic.

She halted, looking from face to face.

“Mr. Sandford?”

“I am George Sandford... My managing clerk, John Wilkes, madam.”

“Ah!”

The baroness spoke labouredly and with a marked accent. As Maitland placed a chair for her:

“Thank you, Mr Sandford,” she said wearily. “My own labours have not lightened my years. Sit there, Mr. Sandford, and tell me what you want to know.”

But Maitland had grown temporarily distrait. His mind was questing in the past, forcibly striving to hunt down that elusive memory, now suddenly taunting him again.

As he had bent solicitously over the aged lady, this memory—or a part of it—had leapt to life... the baroness’s features, in profile, conjured up the image of a Greek cameo.

Where, in some hazy past, had he glanced aside at a woman and thought that she resembled a Greek cameo?

There was moonlight in the memory—and silence—and some quality recently

conjured up by the Arab apartment through which they had come...

He remembered his assumed mission.

“Certainly,” he said. “I don’t wish to waste an unnecessary moment of your time. I realise how hard you work in an admirable cause. The position, however, is quite simple. My distinguished client instructs me to give him a personal report of your intentions regarding the future of the St. Erik’s Ambulance Corps. This should be easy enough?”

Covertly, but eagerly, he studied her, mittened hands resting on the top of the stick.

“It is quite easy. There is more need in desolated Europe today for the aid which we bring to the sick and the hungry than existed during war. My staff will be even more busy than before. But we are giving up our London headquarters.”

Even in repose, this woman radiated tremendous authority...

“I see... No doubt, Baroness, you have prepared a complete statement of accounts to date, and a prospectus of your probable outlay in the future?”

She tapped her stick on the floor peremptorily.

“But certainly, Mr. Sandford. Is my integrity in dispute?”

Her sudden vehemence was startling.

“No, no! Please don’t misunderstand me. I speak simply as a man of business—”

The baroness stood up—a swift, surprisingly lithe movement.

“If I had foreseen that statistics were called for, I should have come provided with them! Be good enough to excuse me for a few minutes. Mr. Sandford, and I will return with my secretary—”

She began to cross the room.

“Really, it is not—”

The baroness glanced back—so that again Maitland had a glimpse of that pure

profile.

“I wish you to interview my secretary.”

Locker opening the door, she went out. The *tap—tap— tap* of her stick recede into silence...

Steel Maitland, his fists clenching, stood staring at that half opened door.

Tap... tap... tap...

His own obtuseness appalled him. Perhaps same hypnotic quality in the eyes had, hitherto, stifled memory. Obscured by lenses, this quality might not assert itself. But something he had tried, long enough, to recall, something which persistently had eluded him, now, amazing to himself, had crashed into recognition...

He walked again from Mena House along the path to the Great Pyramid... moaning of a dance band faded... he heard the rhythmic beating of an Arab drum... Beside him glided a beautiful woman ... In the clear moonlight he saw that her profile was of Grecian purity.

The desert reached out to touch them silently. Her golden voice was hypnotic. He remembered how it appeared, at the time, to blend with the music of an Arab pipe someone was playing in the village. Now, every word of that extraordinary conversation repeated itself like a record of the past...

“I suppose you are a naval surgeon?”

He had not replied immediately, but at last:

“I am tempted to suppose that *you* are a reincarnation of Sherlock Holmes. How did you arrive at your conclusion?”

“Is it correct?”

“Yes.”

She had laughed, that soft, trilling laugh, which possessed a quality akin to the note of a nightingale.

“Your budding beard and your blue socks.”

It was a plausible explanation, but he had hesitated to accept it. He was becoming fascinated, knew it, and resented it. He had wondered at the time if the tradition of the “beautiful spy” had perhaps a solid foundation.

“You are keenly observant. The beard is conspicuous, but I thought I had contrived to conceal the socks. Are you living in Egypt?”

“Only temporarily. I have a certain portion of my job to finish here—and then I shall go.”

“War job?”

“No—like job. You see—the war will never end.”

“Never end?”

“Never—this time. It will simply merge imperceptibly into the next.”

“Cheery outlook!”

“Isn’t it!”

And all the time they were walking on and on towards the frontiers of the desert.

“I hope you are wrong.”

“I fear I am not ... If you have walked far enough, Commanders, please say so.”

“Do you mean you want to go back?”

“I am not going back. I was thinking of you.”

“Not going back!” He had been amazed.

She had spoken previously of the spirit of the Pyramid. Perhaps she had meant the legendary Woman of the Pyramid—that ageless siren who lured men to destruction. What did she mean when she said she was not going back? He knew of no house beyond, and she couldn’t possibly be living in the Arab village!

“No. I merely called at the hotel to see a friend.”

“But you can’t go wandering about here, alone, at night!”

Again, that laughter, that tinkling laughter of bells.

“I shall not be alone. Look—here are two of my servants to take care of me.”

He lived it all over again—how he had turned, sharply... Was it a trap?

Two white-robed, muffled figures—apparently a pair of Bedawi—stood immediately behind him!

“What’s this? Where have they come from?”

“They have been following us all the time, Commander. I have greatly enjoyed our chat. I hope you weren’t bored? Thank you so much... Good night.”

She nodded, smiling—or so Maitland thought—and resumed her leisurely, graceful walk. The Arabs, never glancing in his direction, followed a few paces behind.

She never once glanced back .

Now, he knew! He saw the same woman stretched on a cushioned divan, fanning herself... Her tones, when she spoke, were those of a magic lute...

“What is it, sir?” Locker spoke anxiously. “What’s happened? Have I missed something?”

Maitland laughed, unmirthfully.

“Good God, Locker! You don’t understand! You don’t understand! *Missed* something? We have been missing *everything!*... The Baroness Rikter is—Sumuru!”

2

Tap... tap... tap...

Philo came, with those panther steps, down the marble stairs, to stand at their

foot, one large, hairy hand resting on the bronze sphinx which ornamented the newel post. The beautiful apartment had been almost completely dismantled.

Baroness Rikter entered through an arched opening formerly closed by heavy draperies. She stood there, watching him. Her spectacles she had discarded.

Philo bowed his head.

“Look down, Philo. Look down! For that is wise!”

“My Lady! You return! What is it?”

“What is it, Philo? What is it, you ask me? It is that the ‘Mr. Sandford’ who sits down there is—Steel Maitland!... Steel Maitland, who, you tell me, is in *Scotland!*”

“My Lady!”

She held the ebony stick between her mittened hands, a grotesque parody of age—and, suddenly, it snapped.

“How well I am served, Philo! How wonderful is my information! The arch-enemy—the one opponent I fear;—is allowed openly to enter my doors! How much does he suspect? How much does he *know*? Can the man delude himself to believe that bleached hair, removing his beard, wearing a pair of spectacles, could deceive *me*? Pah!”

She cast aside the broken ebony fragments. Philo stood mute.

“But can I delude myself to believe that similar devices will fool *him*? No! At first, he doubted. He never once betrayed himself... But, now, he knows!”

“My Lady! My Lady! What shall we do?”

Philo’s voice conveyed deep emotion—fear for one venerated, adored.

“‘My Lady, My Lady!’ Would to heaven Ariosto were here—Abdul—any of them—but *you!* ... Be silent. Let me think.”

Philo bowed his head, humbly.

“There is no one now in Lorimer House, except Claudette and Sister Clair who attends her, who knows me other than as Baroness Rikter?”

“None, My Lady—no one who has ever been in your private apartments.”

Sumuru, sinking down into an ornate Arab chair which almost alone remained, began to laugh. That exquisite laughter echoed weirdly around the denuded room.

“My private apartment! Yes—I have lived in the midst of my enemies and watched them combing London for me! I have received them in this room as an empress receiving subjects. Yet they have never suspected! Had I been well served, they would never have known... Let me think.”

She rested her chin in one delicate hand, closing her eyes. It was an oddly masculine pose...

“I *must* hold them here—if only for a few precious minutes. I *must* have time to get well upon my road before the hue and cry is raised... With all to be won, or lost, something must be sacrificed... Dr. Arlington!... Telephone Dr. “Arlington at once. He will be at the hospital in Kensington near-by. Put him through to me, here. Dr. Arlington is a man of keen wit—and my good friend...”

3

In the small and orderly office below, Steel Maitland paced to and fro, to and fro, constantly watching the half open door. Suddenly, he pulled up.

Sergeant Locker came in, ostentatiously carrying a large brief-case.

Maitland spoke in low, eager tones.

“You got through to the inspector?”

“Yes, sir,” was the equally guarded reply. “Three cars are on the way... S’sh!”

Crisp footsteps heralded the return of the nurse who had received them.

“The baroness asks me to apologise for this delay, Mr. Sandford. She will not detain you long, though.”

“That is quite all right, thank you, nurse,” Maitland assured her—and the girl retired, closing the door. Allowing a moment to elapse!

“The Division has been notified, Locker? No one will be allowed to leave?” Maitland asked.

Locker nodded.

“Chief Inspector Ives is arranging that, sir. Unless she’s gone already, she won’t go, now.”

“H’m!” Maitland resumed his promenade. “I’m not so sure! You don’t know Sumuru! If only I had foreseen it—if only I had provided for such a thing! But the sheer daring of the woman took me completely by surprise. Good God! how she has been laughing at us all!”

“Do you think she suspects, then?”

Maitland stopped—stared.

“*Suspects?* She knew me at the very moment she entered this room! My disguise was not intended to stand up to the X-ray eyes of Sumuru!”

“Then,” Locker exclaimed excitedly, “we may be too late already!”

“Even so—what can we do? We have not warrant to arrest the Baroness Rikter! We can only wait and question her in the usual way. Invite her to remove that wonderful silver wig, for instance... What’s going on?”

Upon the strange, pregnant silence of the great house had intruded a murmur of voices and shuffle of hurried footsteps.

“Perhaps the Chief Inspector has arrived!” said Locker, and threw the door open... “No—someone going upstairs... Looks like a doctor...” He stepped out, calling, “Oh, nurse, is anything wrong?”

Maitland stood by the open door. The nursing sister paused on her way upstairs, looking back.

“Unfortunately, yes. The baroness has been taken ill. Dr. Arlington has just gone

up to her room. Our own medical staff is dispersed, you see.”

She hurried on and out of sight. Steel Maitland snapped his fingers irritably.

“This is some damned trick, Locker! It’s a trick!”

Locker scratched his chin.

“If she’s still upstairs, I don’t see what she hopes to gain by it, anyway. You don’t suppose that girl’s in it, do you, sir?”

“The nurse? Possibly not. But one never knows. I imagine the scheme involved a sort of inner organisation, of the existence of which the rest of the staff were ignorant... Hell! Where the devil is Ives?”

“I can’t believe,” Locker declared, “that anybody could impersonate the Baroness Rikter for years and not be—”

“There *was* no impersonation!” Maitland rapped. “This woman *is* the Baroness Rikter! That’s why we’ve been all at sea! Who else she is we have yet to find out... Hullo! is this Ives, at last! Run and see, Locker—”

4

It was almost at this moment, as far as, afterwards, could be ascertained, that Mark Donovan, staring dejectedly out of his window into Bruton Street, where dusk was falling, heard the phone bell. He crossed and lifted the receiver.

“Hullo! Yes—this is Mark Donovan... *What?*”

He found himself to be clutching the instrument with quivering fingers.

“I called you just to say good-bye, Mr. Donovan...”

He spoke in a whisper.

“Sumuru!”

“Herself! I had hopes, at one time, that you would recognise the truth, and consent to work for it But—for the present—I fear I must leave you in your ignorance, leave you in your own ugly world—”

Donovan thought she was gone. His heart throbbed madly.

“Stop! Stop! Claudette!...”

He heard the soft laughter. There was a pause.

“For her, too, I had dreamed ambitious dreams. But it was not to be—yet. And so. I have an order for you—”

“Yes! Yes!”

“Go at once,” the golden, imperious voice continued—_”at once_ to Lorimer House. You will find your friend, Steel Maitland, there. Give him this message from Sumuru:— ‘My Lady never forgets.’ You understand? ‘My Lady never forgets’ ...”

Chapter Fourteen

1

IN the Arab Court at Lorimer House an altercation was being waged, the nursing sister stubbornly disputing Inspector Ives's right to interview Baroness Rikter. With every moment that passed in this way, Maitland was becoming more and more resigned to defeat.

"It rests with you, Ives. Officially, at the present moment, I am helpless. I am plain Mr. Sandford!"

Ives was growing angry.

"You have my card. Sister, and you know that I am a police officer—"

"Certainly, Inspector. But I cannot imagine what you are doing here, and I cannot consent, without—"

"I am here," Ives interrupted her, "to question a dangerous criminal whom I have good reason to believe to be on these premises—"

"But how can this possibly concern Baroness Rikter?"

The girl, unruffled, was calmly determined.

"That I must find out. Therefore—I must see the baroness, at once."

"But I have tried to explain to you that she has been taken ill. Dr. Arlington is with her, now. Unless he consents, I can do nothing. Surely, you see?"

Ives's endeavours to restrain himself became more and more obvious.

"Yes—I see ... Is this Dr. Arlington the baroness's usual medical adviser?"

The girl shook her head emphatically.

"No. She called him, I understand, because he has a first class reputation and was near-by."

Locker exchanged glances with Maitland, and then:

“Who else is with the patient, miss?” he asked.

“One of our nurses—Sister Clair—who often assists the baroness in her private apartments. She was with her when the baroness was taken ill.”

A disturbance, subdued but persistent, proclaimed itself. The sounds seemed to come from the entrance lobby.

“What the devil’s happening *now*?” growled Ives, suspiciously...

“But I say he *is* here! And I must see him!” a distant voice asserted.

“There is no Dr. Maitland here, sir—”

This, in a woman’s tones.

Then I must see the Baroness Rikter ...”

“Ives!” said Maitland urgently, “am I dreaming, or is that Donovan?”

That he did not dream was made clear almost immediately —as Donovan burst into the Arab Court...

“Maitland!”

“Good God! Donovan! What are *you* doing here? And why do you bawl my name—”

The nurse looked from face to face in growing bewilderment. Another sister ran in from the lobby.

“Maitland! Maitland!” Donovan went out—_”She—Sumuru —called me on the phone, and—”

“What do you say?” Ives shouted.

“*What!*”

The exclamation came from Maitland’s lips like a pistol shot.

“She told me you were here and to come along at once—”

“How long ago?” Ives demanded. “How long ago?”

“Less than ten minutes. I—”

Maitland turned swiftly, and grasped the nurse’s arm in a firm but kindly grip.

“Sister! Be good enough to lead the way to the baroness’s room! My name is Maitland—Dr. Steel Maitland—and I will take full responsibility. Come on, Ives!”

The second nurse had joined them, and now looked on,

“But, really—Mr. Sandford—or—Dr. Maitland!...”

“Lead the way!” snapped Ives peremptorily. “Or you’ll be obstructing a police officer in the execution of his duty—”

2

The bedroom of Baroness Rikter was approached through a charmingly feminine little apartment evidently used as a boudoir. But it seemed to Maitland, looking around, that the place held nothing revealing, nothing intimate. Further inspection enabled him to account for this impression. His forebodings grew blacker.

It has been partly stripped. Of this fact he detected several items of evidence.

The nursing sister now quite composed again, crossed to a door beyond. She had accepted an inexplicable situation.

“If you will wait for a moment, gentlemen, I will speak to Dr. Arlington.”

She rapped on the closed door.

“Come in.”

The voice was high-pitched, irascible. The nurse went in.

“I’m laying ten to one against us!” Maitland murmured.

The nurse stepped out again.

“Please come in.” She spoke in hushed tones. “But don’t make a noise.”

Maitland signalled to Donovan and Locker to remain. He went in with Ives—and was confronted by a grey-haired, choleric man who glared uncompromisingly.

“Dr Arlington?” he said quietly. “My name is Steel Maitland—a brother practitioner. Your patient?”

But Dr. Arlington continued to glare.

“I don’t recall asking for a second opinion, Dr. Maitland—much less a third—”

The bedroom struck that same note of incompleteness. The divan bed, a dainty thing of cane and lacquer, stood remote from the door, a heavily shaded lamp alight beside it. Dr. Arlington persistently obstructed any direct view of its occupant.

Suddenly, Ives spoke.

“Where is this Sister Clair, Doctor?”

“If you refer to the nurse who was here when I arrived, sir, she left me some time ago on an errand to the nearest chemist, and I regret to say has not returned. Why? Are you also a medical man?”

“No, Doctor, I’m not! I’m a police officer!”

“A police officer!”

But Maitland’s patience was nearing breaking point.

“It is rather gloomy by the bed, Dr. Arlington,” he said coldly. “And I am anxious to examine the baroness. Please forgive me. I know it must seem like a vulgar intrusion. But I am, in fact, acting for the Foreign Office.”

“The Foreign Office!” Dr. Arlington echoed again. “What the devil has the Foreign Office—”

“It is all most regrettable.” Maitland pushed past him to the bed. “May I ask: Are you well acquainted with Baroness Rikter?”

“I had never previously met her, sir.”

“Perhaps you would be good enough to tilt the lamp shade—so that the light shines on the patient’s features—”

“My patient is suffering from an indiscreet use of sleeping tablets, Dr. Maitland. Sister Clair, her regular attendant, informed me that insomnia—”

But Maitland, bending over the bed, apparently did not hear him. He was so absorbed indeed that he did not straighten up until a cry came from Ives.

“That woman’s wearing a wig!”

“I was already aware of the fact that my patient wore a wig, sir—”

That Dr. Arlington was in any way implicated in this extraordinary matter would not have crossed the mind of one in a thousand. Not until later, in fact, did it cross the mind of Steel Maitland...

“And it doesn’t fit, either!” Ives added.

Maitland looked at him steadily, expressionlessly.

“Because it wasn’t made for her!... This is not the Baroness Rikter—”

“What do you say, sir?” Dr. Arlington demanded. “What do you say?”

“I say, Dr. Arlington, that this is *not* the Baroness Rikter! You have been tricked. We have all been tricked.” He spoke bitterly now, and raising his voice, called, “Donovan!”

Donovan came in from the outer room.

“Yes, Maitland! What is it?”

“See for yourself!”

A moment later, Donovan was on his knees beside the bed, a man transfigured.

“Claudette! Claudette! Maitland—it’s *Claudette!*”

Maitland was holding himself tightly in hand.

“So I had observed, Donovan,” he replied tonelessly...

“What is the meaning of all this?” Dr. Arlington cried.

“Claudette, darling! Claudette ... Oh! she’s not—”

At which moment Claudette opened her eyes. Her pupils dilated and contracted queerly; but with the sigh of a contented child she placed her arms around Mark Donovan and drew his head down beside her own on the pillow. Then, she fell asleep again...

“I repeat. Dr. Maitland—what is the meaning of all this?”

Dr. Arlington was very red in the face.

“The meaning is, Dr. Arlington, that Sumuru—whom you *may* not know—has slipped out of the net again. This lady is Miss Claudette Duquesne.”

“Well, I’m damned!” said Ives.

Claudette, without opening her eyes, murmured dreamily:

“Listen! Listen! Don’t you hear... that tapping...”

3

When, at last, Steel Maitland stood once more in the famous marble studio where half the notabilities of Victoria’s reign had been entertained, he looked about him with a grimly bleak expression.

He was a man disillusioned—a man disappointed in himself. There was the recess, approached by three steps, where *she* had reclined, like a pagan empress. There was the lily pond. He looked around at the beautiful Oriental pillars which supported the painted ceiling—at the bronze sphinx guarding the staircase. He turned to Ives.

“What blind fools we have been,” he said.

Chapter Nineteen

1

“WE are two short at this strictly informal conference, Dr. Maitland,” said Colonel Stayton briskly.

He had the lean figure of a horseman and those light blue eyes which suggest that they have been bleached by an Indian sun. His office, with its book-lined walls and homely appointments, large windows commanding a view of the Thames, signally lacked the austerity which marked that allotted to Chief Inspector Ives in the same building. Perhaps Ives was considering the point; for he was there, if somewhat subdued by the presence of the Assistant Commissioner and a Superintendent.

“Yes, Colonel Stayton.” Maitland stood up. “But I think I hear them, now.”

There was a rap on the door and a man announced:

“Miss Claudette Duquesne and Mr. Mark Donovan, sir.”

The door closed behind them as they entered. Donovan looked like a man who had secured long leave of absence from hell. Claudette was pale, but lovely.

“Ah, Claudette!” Maitland greeted her—“This is the Assistant Commissioner, Colonel Stayton—”

The colonel shook hands.

“Welcome to Scotland Yard, Miss Duquesne!”

“Ominous words!” said Maitland laughingly. “Mr. Donovan represents the Alliance Press of New York.”

“Let me remind you, sir, that whatever takes place in this office is off the record!”

“Sure, Colonel!” Donovan replied, glancing aside at Claudette—and there was a

new gaiety in voice and manner.

Inspector Ives was known to all, so that when Superintendent Mason had been introduced, the party was ready for business.

Colonel Stayton cleared his throat, adjusted reading glasses, and glanced over a page of typed notes. He looked up.

“Now—I believe that every one of you has something to add to my information concerning this woman known as Sumuru,” he began briskly. “A long list of crimes stands against her name. These crimes include abduction—and murder. But Scotland Yard is in the unhappy position of having no adequate evidence upon which to secure a conviction. That’s our first difficulty.”

He glanced around interrogatively, and then continued.

“Our second is even greater. We don’t know who this woman *is*! No one can describe her. She is variously reputed to be the widow of a Japanese marquis and the widow of the Swedish millionaire, Baron Rikter, founder and first president of the St. Erik Ambulance Corps. She may quite conceivably be both, of course. But one of these ladies is said to be a young and singularly attractive person—namely, the Marquise Sumuru—whilst the other, Baroness Rikter, is old. When I add that the baroness has disappeared I have indicated our third, and greatest difficulty. Miss Duquesne—I appeal to you:—Are the Baroness Rikter and Sumuru one and the same person?”

Claudette looked swiftly at Mark Donovan, and then replied:

“Yes!”

There came a momentary silence, broken by Maitland.

“I can confirm this,” he said.

Colonel Stayton cleared his throat again.

“We have therefore to accept the astonishing fact that the baroness—well known and respected for her many charities—lived continually in disguise!”

“It was a simple disguise, Colonel Stayton,” Claudette interrupted composedly.

“Merely a silver wig—you have seen it—but wonderfully made, slightly tinted spectacles (you have those, too) and an appearance of age.”

“But the change of voice and of facial expression was astounding,” Maitland declared. “If Sumuru were not the world’s greatest criminal, she would be the stage’s finest ornament.”

“She is *not* a criminal,” Claudette murmured.

This quietly confident statement created a curious impression upon her listeners. Colonel Stayton laid his reading glasses on his desk.

“Possibly I misunderstood you, Miss Duquesne. You say that a woman who had you abducted, a woman who has abducted numberless victims; a woman who has committed murder... really!”

Words failed the Assistant Commissioner. But Claudette maintained her point.

“Those she abducted were not her victims, Colonel Stayton. If they failed to see her point of view, no coercion was used—no physical coercion—”

But Donovan’s adoration could no longer silence his plain common sense.

“What about the *mental* coercion?” he demanded. “Why, that woman just plays on human emotions like someone playing on a harp!”

“Even if we pass that point, Claudette,” came support from Maitland, “we can hardly condone the murders of Miles Tristram and Ian Forrester!”

Claudette shook her head.

“I don’t condone them. I understand that it may be better for a few to die—however innocent—than that a great cause should be ruined. If, as *she* believes, the world can be brought to outlaw war, and greed, and all ugliness, nothing should be allowed to stand in the way of such a crusade.”

Donovan cast an embarrassed glance at Maitland. Ives glared uncomprehendingly.

“H’m!” Colonel Stayton, elbows resting on the desk, pressed the tips of his

fingers together. “Er—I begin to realise the extraordinary influence which this woman wields. To pass on:—How did the Baroness contrive to deceive everyone in her social contacts?”

He addressed Claudette.

“She had few social contacts. She lived a retired life. She was represented, to the outside world, by a secretary—a very beautiful woman—Mrs. Chezzington-Hay.”

“This is new to me!” Maitland exclaimed. “Who is Mrs. Chezzington-Hay?”

“You know her as Sumuru!”

Ives stood up suddenly.

“What do you say? What do you say?... Pardon me, sir!”

“Certainly, Chief Inspector.” Colonel Stayton glanced aside at him. “I share your amazement. Are you telling me, Miss Duquesne, that this woman posed as her own secretary?”

Claudette nodded.

“Yes. She went everywhere for St. Erik’s—all over the world, I believe—and, naturally, had full authority from the president.”

“Naturally!” Maitland laughed. “Good God! How many other identities has Sumuru? She is not, by chance, a popular film star, or a well-known woman novelist, for instance?”

But the forced gaiety in his voice awoke no echoes amongst his audience. Claudette, alone, smiled, a little sadly.

“I don’t know, Dr. Maitland. You could hardly expect her to allow me to find out anything she didn’t want me to tell you.”

From the Assistant Commissioner’s desk came a subdued buzzing.

“Yes?” He bent to the instrument—“speaking... Very well... An urgent call for

you, Dr. Maitland—”

Maitland stood up, and crossed.

“Thank you... Hullo! Steel Maitland here... Merciful heaven!”

His whole expression changed. Amazement had all but overpowered him...

“Have I surprised you, Dr. Maitland?” a musical voice inquired.

He turned to Colonel Stayton, signalling to him to listen in, and at the same time with his lips he silently framed the name: Sumuru.

“Good God!” cried Donovan.

But Claudette no more than whispered the words:

“Ah! no, no!”

Colonel Stayton, intent upon the message, said aside to Ives, in a low voice:

“Hold this call, Chief Inspector.”

Ives left the office. Donovan, Claudette, and Superintendent Mason stood studying the faces of Colonel Stayton and Steel Maitland as they listened...

“Please tell Claudette not to be frightened. She is safe in Scotland Yard. And tell Mr. Donovan, who is with you, that the little one is my parting gift to him. You might add that the beauty of woman is a double-edged sword. Let the scabbard be strong. I shall watch over their future, and hope to attend the wedding. I am giving up my presidency of St. Erik’s. The corps has served my purpose. It is now entirely free of my personal influence. Its present members are ignorant of the private use which I made of its facilities. See that they are not molested. Give my regards to Colonel Stayton. His wife is an old friend of mine. Au revoir, Dr. Maitland...”

Before Maitland, who stood nearest, could stir a hand, Colonel Stayton slumped back in his chair, his florid colour tinged with grey. Superintendent Mason sprang to his side. “What is it, sir? What is it? Are you unwell?” But the Colonel forced a smile and waved a hand reassuringly.

“Forgive me—this weakness ... It will pass—”

“But, Colonel—” Maitland began solicitously. “My wife left me—disappeared—six years ago! ... I had given her up for dead.”

“Colonel Stayton! You have my deepest sympathy.” The Assistant Commissioner was rapidly regaining grip of himself.

“She went—she must have gone—to *that woman!*... And I searched the world for her!” He stood up, steadily. Much of his normal colour returned.

“Superintendent—trace that call ... If this she-devil’s in England, we’ll get her!”

2

Chief Inspector Ives was in luck in the matter of the phone call. From Scotland Yard’s private switchboard where the incoming line had been held, Whitehall Exchange traced the origin of the call. Their investigations showed it-to have come via Tandem. From this centre, inquiries were directed yet further afield, and, a few minutes later, a Hertford operator reported that it was made from a call-box on the Great North Road.

All police cars in the district and all police cyclists were interrogated. It was a cyclist who provided the first clue...

Sumuru had actually been in the call box when he passed. The man was still in sight when she came out. Philo, wearing a blue livery, awaited her beside an inconspicuous American car which, in fact, was super-engined.

Sumuru wore a smart tweed suit beneath a mink cape. Few people acquainted with My Lady—or with Baroness Rikter—would have recognised this dark-browed, open-air woman who looked as though she spent much of her time in the saddle.

“My Lady!” Philo was agitated. “A police cyclist passed while you were talking!... We must hurry.”

My Lady settled herself in the front seat beside her dangerous-looking chauffeur. Philo moved off at a speed which betrayed the secret engine.

“You would rob me of my sport, Philo. I love to give the hounds a run! Now,

already, they will be in full cry. My wits against Scotland Yard—and the Secret Service. How easily I could have vanished—like a mirage, and left no trace. How undramatic to do so! We shall be reported back to London from every town through which we pass—”

“And sooner or later—stopped,” Philo added.

Sumuru laughed gaily. Her laughter resembled a peal of fairy bells.

“We should be, if we ran straight, Philo. But here is an old and wary fox. We shall confuse the hounds... Ah! this is life!”

3

Many lines vibrated with urgent voices...

“Superintendent Dimes, speaking from Hertford... Yes, sir... the call was undoubtedly made from a call-box on the Great North Road.... All cars are being stopped and examined, sir.... Yes, one of my men reports passing a stationary car near a box at that time.... Very good, sir...”

“All drivers being interrogated entering St. Albans from the south, sir. All available cars and cycle patrols are spread out to intercept “

“The car is almost certainly a Buick, sir. Chauffeur driven. One lady passenger. It is reported as having passed through Hatfield ten minutes ago...

“Looks as though they are doubling, sir. I have just had a report from Lower Porlock. A car answering to description—one woman passenger—went through the village at racing speed. A constable signalled the driver to stop, but was ignored, nearly run down...”

Chapter Twenty

1

“NOTHING more come through, Thomson, since the report from Porlock?”

“No, sir. Radio’s dead.”

The police car began to slow down.

“This *is* Lower Porlock ahead, now,” said Ives.

“And mist is rapidly developing into fog, Ives?” Maitland added ruefully—“Ah! there’s a patrol! Stop, Thomson!”

With a ghoulisn shrieking of brakes, the car was pulled up almost beside a police cyclist...

“Hullo, Sergeant! What news?”

“Very little, sir, I’m afraid,” the man reported. “The Buick seems to have melted into thin air.”

“What in hell are you talking about?” Ives asked harshly. “Which way was the car coming when it was sighted?”

The police sergeant flushed confusedly.

“From the direction of Hatfield, sir. It’s quite clear they have been doubling around the district to escape us. But I was on the main road leading out of Lower Porlock, and there’s a trap at the crossroad at the other end.”

Maitland quietly took up the interrogation.

“You mean that the car came *into* the village, but didn’t go out?”

“Well—it looks like it!”

“That should simplify matters. Evidently, they have turned into a private drive

somewhere. How many men have you within call?”

The sergeant considered this.

“Well—I could get one from the police car at the crossroads, and—”

“Get him. How many drives open on the stretch of road between your post and the crossroads?”

Again the local man paused.

“Er... One—two... There are three, sir.”

“Including the one which I can see from here?”

“Yes, sir. That’s Porlock Park, the residence of Lady Carradale.”

“Is Lady Carradale at home?” growled Ives.

“Away, I am told, sir,” was the answer. “A housekeeper in charge.”

“Right.” Ives stepped out. “Thomson, relieve the sergeant. Stand by with the car. Stop *everybody*. You, Sergeant, get the other man and examine the two places you mentioned—”

“And *we*,” said Maitland, “will call on Lady Carradale’s housekeeper.”

“Very good, sir “

The sergeant kicked his engine into sputtering life and went racing away.

2

Moisture dripped mournfully from the leaves of great elms which guarded a winding, gravelled drive. Visibility grew steadily worse.

“*This* is the house we want, Ives!” Maitland’s voice held a note of controlled excitement. “You may recall that we have come across Lady Carradale before? She played a mysterious part in the death of poor Ian Forrester. You remember?”

“I remember well enough!” Ives was in a particularly black mood. “But all our

inquiries led us nowhere.”

He tramped on stolidly through drenching mist.

“All the same, you must have found out something about her.”

“We did. But nothing of any interest. She’s the widow of Lord Carradale—”

“Widow?”

“*Widow*,” Ives repeated with emphasis. “Oh! I see your point! But Sumuru can’t have married all these men!”

He pulled up, to stare at Maitland.

“Well—they are all dead!” Maitland commented dryly. “Was Carradale a wealthy man?”

As they resumed their tramp along the drive:

“Very wealthy,” Ives assured him. “He was killed in an air crash, early in the war. Why, at that time, she would have been married to Baron Rikter!”

Maitland permitted himself a chuckle.

“Sumuru has never considered trifles of that kind, or allowed them to stand in her way, Inspector! ... At the time that I interviewed Lady Carradale—very briefly and in a poor light—I had not entirely appreciated Sumuru’s astonishing powers as a mimic. By gad! I believe I’m right! It was *her* silhouette, against the stage lights!”

“What? I don’t know what you mean—”

“Forgive me. I was thinking aloud. But my thoughts amount to this: Sumuru is not only the reputed widow of the Marquis of that name. She is, we know for a fact, also the widow of Baron Rikter. And, damn it! I believe she’s the widow of Lord Carradale into the bargain!”

A pillared porch, grey and forbidding, with an iron-scrolled door hiding in its shadows, came into view.

“If that’s true,” said Ives, “it’s time I resigned. This life is getting too complex for a simple man.”

“Never mind, Ives Try the bell.”

As Ives pressed a bell set in the masonry beside the iron-scrolled door:

“No sign of a car,” Maitland commented. “But you will note that the drive swings on right around the house... Hullo!”

A white-haired butler, sad of expression, had opened the door.

“Is Lady Carradale at home?” ‘Maitland asked.

The butler looked at him intently for a moment.

“I will inquire, sir. What is the name?”

“Dr. Steel Maitland... Oh, and by the way, whose car was that—do you know—which drove up a while ago?”

The butler’s sad expression remained undisturbed. I was unaware that a car had been driven up, sir. Her ladyship has had no callers. Perhaps you would wait for a moment in the lobby “

The lobby of Porlock Park was bleak, sad as the butler. But the armchairs were comfortable. When they found themselves alone:

“A shot in the dark, Ives!” Maitland murmured.

“But it hit nothing, Doctor!”

Maitland shook his head. He was rapidly losing confidence.

“No. The devil of it is, we dare not *trust* anyone in this business. He seems like a respectable old fashioned family servant, for instance. But *is* he?”

“H’m!” coughed Ives.

The butler had returned.

“Her ladyship has apparently gone out, sir. Possibly only into the grounds. But I have been unable to find her. Would you care to leave a card, sir? Or could you call back later?”

Maitland stood up.

“Thanks. I’ll call later, if possible.”

“But.” Ives began in a low voice—

“No—we haven’t time, now. Come on.”

Maitland steered him tactfully towards the door, which the butler opened.

“Good day, sir.”

“Good day.”

As they crossed the porch and their feet began to crunch on wet gravel, Ives stopped, turned to Maitland.

“Listen, Doctor! Your methods are your own—but mine are mine! This case has been assigned to me by the Assistant Commissioner in person. It’s a murder case, and purely C.I.D. business. Now—”

Maitland flashed a tired smile—the ghost of his real one.

“Sorry, Ives! I should hate you to think I’m being uppish. But it’s far bigger than a mere murder case—”

“A *mere* murder case!”

Ives’s indignation was unassumed.

“Yes. This woman represents a greater menace to world peace than the men of the Kremlin. We *dare* not make any mistakes... Tell me, what is the extent of this property —Porlock Park?”

But Ives, glaring, was not to be mollified.

“I don’t know—”

A motor cyclist was roaring around the bends of the drive.

“What’s this?” Maitland muttered.

The cyclist swept into view.

“One of the local patrols,” said Ives.

Ives was thinking hard. He glanced aside at Maitland, beginning to regret his outburst.

The cyclist stopped, rested one foot on the gravel, and saluted. He had a red face and round, blue, ingenious eyes.

“Well, Constable?” said Ives.

“No car has entered either of those drives, sir—”

“I see.” Ives glanced again at Maitland. “Well, tell me something. What’s the size of Lady Carradale’s property?”

“I don’t know the acreage, but it’s one of the biggest properties this side of St. Albans,” the man replied promptly, his eyes becoming even rounder. “But—”

“Is it! Must extend to several high roads!”

“It does, sir. But I have an urgent report from Sergeant Thomson.”

Ives almost jumped.

“Why didn’t you say so?” he snapped. “What is it?”

“The wanted car has been found, sir—”

Now, it was Maitland’s turn to light up.

“What’s that? What do you say?”

“Two miles away, sir—on the other side of Porlock Park—abandoned in a lane!”

“Abandoned!” Ives shouted.

“Yes, sir. It’s lowlying down there, and getting foggy. One of our chaps nearly ran into it.”

“Damnation!” Ives growled—and began to run towards the gate lodge.

3

In a damp and misty lane which formed the north-east boundary of Porlock Park, visibility did not extend to more than ten paces. Out of the mist came, faintly, the sound of a queerly modulated whistle.

“This way, Philo...”

An interval, and then—the whistle was repeated, nearer.

“Bear more to your left. The gate is here...”

My Lady stood by the gate in question, peering into the mist. Out of it, presently, silent as a jungle creature, came the forbidding figure of Philo.

“My Lady!” His deep voice was husky. “It was a close thing. I had not left the car for more than a minute when a police cyclist rode up and found it!”

My Lady nodded.

“No matter. A minute was long enough. But, now, we must act quickly. I went into the house by the side door, but I was seen by old Haley, the butler, as I crossed the dining room—”

“Then it’s too late! We are finished!”

“Be silent.” The glorious voice was calm, but imperious. “He is accustomed to my unannounced comings and goings. But—”

“If anyone inquires at Porlock Park—”

“Haley will go to look for me—naturally. And someone *will* inquire. The police have been busy in this neighbourhood. Moreover, there are only three places into which we could have disappeared. Yes—we must act swiftly.”

“But this fog—this accursed fog, Madonna!”

“It may help rather than retard. Come. This is the way. Use your flashlamp.”

She moved away.

“The light will be seen.”

“It cannot be seen far in the mist. We must find the stile.... Your flashlamp, fool.”

4

“This car’s no Buick,” growled Ives. “It’s got a Rolls engine. It’s a proper gangster’s outfit, built for a quick getaway.”

“A getaway it is, Ives,” Maitland agreed. “She’s burning her boats. It’s more than possible that she had another car waiting here, and has transferred to it.”

But there was no hope of tyre marks on that drenched and gravelly surface.

“I’d bet a pound to a penny,” said Ives, “that the masked Rolls was driven right across Porlock Park and out by some gate near here. We’ve lost her! Damn this fog!”

Out of the fog so anathematised came a faint hail:

“Hi!”

Maitland and Ives stood still, listening. A sound of running footsteps became audible. And presently the round-eyed constable manifested out of mist.

“There’s a stile back there, sir,” he reported—“and I’ve found a fragment of some kind of fur stuck to a splinter on the rail!”

Maitland grabbed the man’s arm.

“Show me! Lead the way!”

A short sprint brought them to the stile.

“I haven’t moved it. There it is, right under my light.”

Maitland stooped.

“*Mink!* It’s mink... And Sumuru often wore mink!”

Ives pressed forward.

“Let me look!”

As the two peered down at this alien fragment adhering to ancient timber:

“You see?” Maitland said rapidly. “Few women possess mink coats in these parts, I assume. Fewer still would climb a stile wearing one! Come on! Over we go! Along this footpath!” And, as they all scrambled over: “Where does this path lead, Constable?”

“So far as I know, sir, to Jenkins’s Farm and then out into Spinney Lane.”

“Where does Spinney Lane lead to?” Ives demanded breathlessly.

“East, to a secondary road between Hatfield and Lower Porlock; west—main road to London.”

On they went.

“She had another car waiting, Ives!” Maitland said. “That’s it! She’s slipping away!”

“She won’t slip far unless this fog lifts!” was Ives’s reply. “And the chief is flat out for her now! That discovery about his wife set him on fire. Whatever road she takes will be patrolled by this time—but I wish we could get the news through, all the same... Listen!”

All three halted, listening.

A discordant choir of farm creatures, familiar to and beloved by country dwellers, gave voice in unrhythmic music. A dog—a large dog—was the soloist.

“Someone passing through the farmyard!” Maitland muttered. “Double up, Ives! Perhaps we’re not too late!”

They blundered along an ill-defined path—to be confronted by an angry

Alsatian. The animal appeared to be there on business, and an awkward situation was averted by the local constable.

“All right, Tiger! You know me, old boy!”

Fortunately, the dog acknowledged the acquaintance, and they proceeded amongst misty outlines of farm buildings.

“Hi!” Maitland shouted. “Is there anyone about?”

The Alsatian seconded his efforts, and presently a woman came out, middle-aged and stout, wiping her hands on her apron.

“What is it?” She peered from face to face... “Oh, Constable Sims—is that you?”

“It’s me right enough, Mrs. Jenkins, and—”

But Ives broke in impatiently.

“Excuse me—but did a lady pass through here a few minutes ago?”

Mrs. Jenkins was flustered.

“I don’t rightly know, sir. I was in my kitchen. But Tiger set up a fearful row, so it’s likely somebody did walk through.”

“Thank you,” said Maitland. “Come on, Ives.”

They doubled off, leaving the woman standing by the farm door, bewildered.

“Is anything the matter?” she called after them.

“Nothing to worry *you*, ma’am,” Constable Sims shouted back.

“Here’s the other stile.”

Ives was breathing hard. Mist was no longer the word to define atmospheric conditions, Maitland thought as he scrambled over. This was real fog.

“Now the question is,” Ives panted—“which way?”

They stood there, as in a wet blanket. Farm sounds grew dim behind them.

“We’re hot on her heels, Ives!” Maitland declared.

“We mustn’t make a mistake... Listen!”

They stood alert, listening...

“Not a sound in the lane... Do we turn east, or west?”

5

“They are right behind us!” came a hoarse whisper.

“Which means that we are still in front, Philo ... Be silent. We must listen. They will divide into two parties, one searching east, and the other west. When they set out, we can move ... Listen!”

My Lady rested a gloved hand upon a ladder propped against the buttressed, ancient brick wall. A second ladder, which had enabled them to scale the wall from the lane, now lay at the foot of a fig tree. Philo had drawn it up after him.

And, as they stood there, Inspector Ives’s voice reached them from the lane beyond ...

“There’s a high wall for half a mile, so she must have gone along the road... Constable! You and Dr. Maitland try east. I’ll go west...”

“I said so!” Sumuru murmured. “If Dr. Maitland had been going *alone*, we might have balanced our accounts, even now—”

“My Lady!”

“S’sh! Be silent. It was but a passing thought...”

“If you find anything,” Ives’s voice grew faint as he moved off—“blow your whistle, Constable.”

“Right, sir.”

Sumuru laughed softly.

“The possibility of our having ladders placed for our convenience has never occurred to any of them!” She stepped out on to the path and crossed it to a plantation of fruit bushes. “Now, Philo, through here. They have gone too far to hear our movements. But step softly.”

“In this fog, My Lady, it will be impossible—”

“The impossible is the refuge of cowards, Philo. I have never admitted its existence. It was glorious! Other impossibilities lie before us.”

Her golden tones were joyous, but still imperious.

“I meant, Madonna, that Silvestre—”

“Silvestre has my orders. When I join him, he will obey them—”

“But the fog—”

“So will you.”

6

The flat note of a police whistle seemed to be beaten down, absorbed, by the mist.

“Will the Inspector hear it through this fog, Constable?” Maitland asked anxiously.

“He’ll answer if he does, sir. I’ll blow again.”

The whistle was repeated... came a breathless interval ... and a distant reply.

“He’s heard it!” said Constable Sims. “I didn’t expect to find this door open. There’s a big orchard inside.”

“To whom does it belong?”

“To Lady Carradale...”

And whilst Maitland was considering the significance of this fact, Ives came running up.

“What is it?” he demanded.

“There’s a heavy door in the wall here,” Maitland explained, “—and it’s open! Constable Sims tells me that it’s usually bolted. She probably went in here... The orchard belongs to Lady Carradale!”

“In that case, come on!”

“It’s a poor chance. She has a good start, now.”

But they ran along a muddy, wheel-rutted track beyond the gate, lost it by a row of wooden sheds and paused where a footpath carried on in roughly the same direction.

“Which way now?” said Ives, desperately.

“And where the devil can she be going?”

“We have to suppose, across the orchard,” Maitland replied. “See, here’s a path of sorts. It heads straight ahead ...” He paused; stood staring. “Am I imagining it, or is there a dim light coming through the fog?”

It was Constable Sims who answered the question.

“May be the light of Carda Airfield, sir. We’re headed that way.”

“Carda Airfield?” snapped Ives. “Never heard of it.”

“It’s a testing ground, sir. We’ve got two men on special duty there today. They were to try out the new Super-Hornet. But the weather will have stopped ‘em. Fastest jet plane in the world, they say.”

Whereupon, revelation burst, a great white light, upon Ives’s mind...

“By heavens!” he shouted—“I see it all! I’ve been blind! To think that I said, ‘where the devil can she be going!’ ... But we’ve got her! We’ve got her!”

“I don’t follow at all.” Maitland confessed.

Ives had begun to run, stumblingly, through the trees...

“The Super-Hornet is made by Carradale’s! Carda Airfield must belong to the firm!”

“It does, sir,” the Constable panted.

“And Lady Carradale is the biggest shareholder! Nothing but this fog, which we’ve been cursing, has prevented her getting away! Oh! I’ve been deaf, dumb and blind! But we’ve got her! We’ve got her!”

Maitland, too, now tingled with excitement. The bits of the puzzle began to fit themselves together at last. Why Sumuru —unless in a mood of bravado—had betrayed her route out of London, he could not imagine. But, resting upon his theory that Sumuru was known as Lady Carradale, only one conclusion could be drawn.

She had planned a getaway by plane... the fog had trapped her!...

And during this time he and his fellow hunters had blundered through a neglected orchard, being tripped by thorny undergrowth and delayed by low branches.

Constable Sims was leading them to the nearest entrance to the airfield. He led, once clear of the orchard, along a bridle-path and out on to a secondary road. A final spurt Drought them to a wide drive over which extended a metal sign bearing the words:—

Carradale Ltd...

“Look at... all the lights,” Ives panted, “... on the runway... Here ... we are—”

A man stepped out from a box and interrupted the breathless three.

“Just a minute! Just a minute! Your passes?”

But Ives was in no mood for interruption. He hurled the man aside.

“Police business... Detective Inspector Ives of Scotland Yard... My assistants... Out of the way! Don’t argue!”

They ran on towards those distant rays piercing smokily through the fog. Behind

them, the doorkeeper was shouting—and they heard a muffled bell.

In sight of a batlike shape outlined by powerful lights and surrounded by moving figures, Maitland stopped dead, clutching Ives's arm.

"My God! Look! Look!"

Heralded by a shattering crash followed instantly by a fiendish howling which resembled that of massed sirens, the great bat rose from the ground, dipped, rose again, and climbing like a rocket, shot up into the pall of fog, and was gone!

Its eerie shriek died in remote distance. A hush of consternation claimed all...

The doorkeeper had caught up with them. Another man accompanied him—a burly man of authoritative bearing.

"It's suicide," Maitland groaned—"deliberate suicide!" He turned, as the new arrival touched him on the shoulder. "You, sir! I am from the Foreign Office. Be good enough to tell me—for God's sake what has happened? My name is Dr. Steel Maitland... Chief Inspector Ives of Scotland Yard, here."

The burly man hesitated for a moment—but the presence of a constable in uniform evidently convinced him.

"I can't imagine what has brought you to Carda field, gentlemen. My name is Colonel Elton ... As to what has happened, that's tragically simple. The top-secret Carradale Super-Hornet was to be tested today and stood ready on the runway. One of our best pilots, a Frenchman—Squadron-Leader Silvestre—was standing by with a ground crew. I was compelled, however, to order the flight to be cancelled, and we were only awaiting the arrival of Lady Carradale, who had arranged to inspect the craft before the take-off. A few minutes ago she came in—delayed by the fog—with her chauffeur. Both stepped into the Super-Hornet —"

"*Both?* Yes, yes! But—"

"Before anyone knew what had happened, Silvestre gave the order. Sheer madness... Temporary insanity, beyond doubt... The men obeyed... and the Hornet was airborne—with Lady Carradale on board! God help them all.... We shall never see one of them again!" Steel Maitland glanced at Ives's grim face. "I

wonder!” he said.