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SAX ROHMER

Creator of DR. FU MANCHU



RETURN OF SUMURU

Every woman was her disciple and every man her slave

GODDESS FOR SALE!

It challenged Cartaret's reason, this weird pagan scene, and to his last hour he would never forget it.

Through the latticework he saw what must have once been a harem room, where women had performed bizarre dances for male travelers.

Now there were six people present, and an auction was in progress—a thing that belonged to the Dark Ages, a terrible, barbaric rite.

The merchandise offered, standing on the dais beside the vulture-faced Arab auctioneer, was one of the loveliest girls Cartaret had ever seen. She was dark, her warm ivory skin gleaming in the lamplight, her full lips set in a contemptuous smile, a silk robe lying at her feet.

For she was nude as a classic statue, which in her perfect symmetry she resembled. . . .

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NUDE IN MINK

THE FIRE GODDESS

SUMURU

SINISTER MADONNA

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RETURN OF SUMURU

An Original Gold Medal Novel by

Sax Rohmer



GOLD MEDAL BOOKS

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Chapter One

THE FOG GREW THICKER.

Dick Cartaret began to doubt the wisdom, indeed the possibility, of driving on. He was moving only a few yards at a time and then stopping to listen, to stare ahead. But the foul vapor that had dropped so swiftly on London blanketed sound, and now began to reduce visibility to zero.

Evening was drawing in, and if, as he believed, he was on Chelsea Embankment, then the turning he wanted couldn't be far ahead. But the only chance of finding a lamp was to drive into one.

The breeze had died away entirely, giving the fog a strange hold.

He ventured to push on a little farther. His headlights showed nothing but slow-stirring yellow vapor. He had certainly got across Battersea Bridge, for at that time the bridge lamps were still dimly visible, and he remembered making the turn. He checked again, leaned out of the window, listening.

Not a sound. River traffic, like road traffic, had been brought to a standstill.

But he stayed a while, craning out. He had a vague impression of muffled cries, of running footsteps. Then, making him start so that he banged his head, came the hoarse bellow of a tugboat whistle, apparently right beside him.

Undoubtedly he was on the Embankment—and on the wrong side of the road!

A faint breeze disturbed his hair as he drew his head in. He prayed that the breeze would develop. He was about to try a further gentle advance, pulling slightly over to the left, when he made a staggering discovery.

He was no longer alone. Someone was seated beside him.

In the faint illumination from the panel and from the headlights cast back by the fog curtain, he could make out the figure to be that of a woman. There was something so ghostly in her sudden appearance that he felt a momentary chill.

He switched on the inside lights.

"Don't! Please don't! Put the light out!"

Dick stared, more than half frightened, into imploring, deep-blue eyes. He saw wavy mahogany-colored hair and trembling but exciting lips, and hazily grasped the facts that his companion wore no topcoat, although the evening was icily cold, only a smart pearl-gray suit, that she was in a state of panic, and that she was a distractingly pretty girl.

He switched the light off.

"Oh!" It was a tremulous sigh. "Go ahead as fast as you dare, away from here—so they can't follow me. If they do, for God's sake, don't let them get me!"

Dick, his brain a carrousel of crazy conjectures, stepped on the accelerator impulsively, and found his front wheel mounting a curb. He slowed, straightened out. He must keep his wits about him.

They crept forward about fifty yards without hitting anything. The fog was beginning to swirl in front of the headlights. He could feel a breeze on his face from the open window. He spoke without once removing his eyes from the yellow curtain ahead.

"Where do you want to go?"

"I want to get to Sloane Street."

"On my way." (It wasn't.) "Which end?"

"Knightsbridge end."

They crept ahead. The fog seemed slightly less dense now.

"My name's Dick Cartaret. I'm a writer. Books and plays. What's all this about?"

There was a queer interval before the reply came:

"It's *my* problem. I don't want to drag you into it."

Dick considered this. His passenger might be a danger-

ous crook. Her problem could very well be the police. But all the same, he wanted to be dragged into it.

He stopped the car, offered her a cigarette.

"No, thank you."

Dick lighted one, glancing aside for a moment. She had settled in her corner, crossing slim legs. And around the ankle nearer to him, in the momentary flame of his lighter, he detected a curious mark, like a faint tattoo, under a gossamer stocking.

One other thing he had learned: Her accent was American.

"You're from the States. I left there only a fortnight ago myself."

There was another awkward interval, and then:

"Do you live there?" the girl asked tonelessly.

"Some of the time. Been trying to get a play done on Broadway."

Visibility was improving. A moving light showed ahead.

"Oh!" the girl gasped.

A policeman slowly materialized as Dick pulled up. He walked back, looked in at the open window.

"Where are you making for, sir?"

"Sloane Street."

"Lucky if you get there. This is the corner of Oakley Street. Turn in. Carry straight on to the Town Hall, then turn right into King's Road. That'll take you to Sloane Square. Follow my light."

Dick followed, turned into Oakley Street, and called out, "Thanks, Officer!"

"Good night, sir. Good luck."

Dick crept ahead with slightly more confidence.

"We'll make it after all," he predicted, glancing aside to address his passenger.

But she wasn't there.

He was alone again.

He stopped and leaned out of the window, looking back. The friendly light was already invisible, but he thought he could hear the purr of a car engine, a sound of excited voices. Then, dimly audible, came the tones of an imperious voice:

"I am Dr. Ralston of Harley Street. The lady is a mental patient of mine. I tell you she is in the car just ahead of us."

Dick drew his head in and started off as fast as he

dared. So his bewitching companion was an escaped lunatic! The fog was perceptibly clearing. Already Dick could see twelve, fifteen yards ahead. This was good from one point of view, bad from another.

He could hear what sounded like a powerful car overtaking him.

Almost certainly the man called Dr. Ralston was in it—and evidently Dr. Ralston suspected that he, Dick Cartaret, had picked up his escaping patient. At the corner of Oakley Street the doctor had asked the constable on duty there which way the car ahead had gone. Clear enough, so far.

But had the girl with the glorious hair and those appealing deep-blue eyes slipped away before the officer had looked in at the window, or had she still been seated beside him?

He had to make up his mind, for the pursuers, driving what turned out to be a Rolls, were already passing—at reckless speed in the circumstances. Just ahead the Rolls stopped and a man leaped out with an apelike agility. He wore a chauffeur's uniform. He had tremendous shoulders, the stocky build of a wrestler, and abnormally long arms.

Hands raised, he stood right in Dick's path.

Dick stopped. Something in the voice of Dr. Ralston and something in the look of the chauffeur had led him to revise his too hasty conclusions. He heard again, like an echo, that pleading voice: "For God's sake, don't let them get me!"

The chauffeur was already at the window. A tall man, wearing a fur-collared topcoat and a black Homburg hat, ran to join him. At close quarters, the chauffeur presented a truly formidable figure. His features, with deep-set little simian eyes, his herculean shoulders, and the great hairy hand resting on the lowered window were danger signals that couldn't be ignored.

In a tone of voice resembling a growl, the man spoke. "Where is she?"

He had a barbarous accent that Dick couldn't place.

"What are you talking about?"

Dick surveyed fog-cloaked Oakley Street. Not a moving figure in sight. The chauffeur jerked the door open, switched on a big flashlight.

"Get out and I'll tell you."

The tall man arrived. He was dark, with fine, commanding eyes and the manner of one accustomed to being respected.

"Stand back, Philo. Leave this to me."

He pulled the gorilla figure aside and smiled at Dick.

"I am Dr. Ralston, of Harley Street—what is vulgarly known as a brain specialist."

Dick stared but said nothing. He didn't like Dr. Ralston.

"One of my patients, whom I was interviewing at a clinic in Chelsea, where she had been in my care, ran out and got into your car—evidently by appointment. I should be glad to know where you left her."

"Is that so?" Dick met the doctor's imperious stare with a stare at least equally offensive. "I'm afraid you've been misinformed. Now if you'll get out of the way . . ."

Dr. Ralston retained his smile, but it was an effort. "Come, sir! You are trying to brush off what is in fact a serious offense."

"Listen." Dick had one eye on the formidable creature addressed as Philo, who was opening and closing his enormous hands in a way that made Dick uneasy. "I don't know you, and I don't know your patient. I had no appointment with her or with anyone else. No one is in my car. If you doubt my word, let's go back and consult the constable on the corner. He directed me."

"Really, sir, it's childish trying to deny established facts. I *know* the facts, and I am entitled to ask you again: What have you done with my patient?"

Dick was fast finding the man's arrogance unendurable. He became furious—and fury made his brain icily calm; that may have been one of the reasons he had distinguished himself in boxing.

"Let me make a suggestion. We'll have the constable call Scotland Yard. They are the people who should be told you have lost your patient. They'll know your name and reputation and put good men on the job. *I* can't help you. What do you say?"

Dr. Ralston grabbed Philo just in time to check a rush. Dr. Ralston's smile had vanished.

"For the last time, sir, a simple question: Where is she?"

Dick glanced ahead. He could feel the freshening breeze. Visibility had expanded to fifty yards. There were stray pedestrians. He saw a taxi.

"Good night, and go to hell!" he said.

He urged his veteran automobile to take a high jump. She responded like a greyhound unleashed. He banged the door shut so violently that Dr. Ralston was forced to spring clear.

His speed up Oakley Street to the Town Hall was highly dangerous. But he had a good start, and the better-lighted King's Road helped him to hold it. But he was still faced with the problem of reaching George Haddon's studio on Tite Street—his temporary home—without leading the enemy to his camp.

Release of long pent-up traffic had worked in his favor, and halts had helped him. But he knew that the big Rolls wasn't far behind. He knew how to handle himself, but short of wonderful luck he knew he couldn't stand up to the herculean Philo.

It seemed obvious to him that the girl who had slipped into his car on the Embankment—and slipped out again—was as sane as he was. She had fallen into the hands of gangsters represented by the man who called himself Dr. Ralston and the gorilla Philo. Heaven alone knew where she had run to, but he was going to get busy the moment he reached George's phone.

But how to cover his tracks? Where to hide the car? (George's car, by the way.)

And now he wished that George were home. For suddenly, in that misty hour, he felt miserably lonely.

Chapter Two

AN ODD-LOOKING MAN crossed the inner courtyard of an Arab house. The walls on one side of the court and the projecting windows of bleached latticework gleamed whitely in the fierce Egyptian sun. Those opposite lay in deep shadow.

The man was slightly built. His movements were slow and graceful, and he wore characteristic Arab dress, a black robe, a skullcap, and red slippers. His face, though, of the hue of old ivory, suggested a smiling mask from the studio of a Japanese craftsman.

Passing a cluster of rosebushes that grew in the center of the court, the man came to a sun-blached door, and he opened it and went in. His leisurely footsteps took him upstairs, and he stopped for a moment before another doorway in which a pink silk curtain was draped and

then drew the curtain aside, causing a musical tinkling like the sound of fairy bells.

He found himself in a lofty room, lighted by a glass dome in the middle of its painted ceiling. Part of the floor was paved with colored marble; a fountain played in a marble pool inhabited by large goldfish. On a raised platform at the far end of the room a big divan was set in the recess formed by a *mushrabîyeh* window that overhung the courtyard. It was covered with mink skins on top of which were piled gay silk cushions.

And sunk luxuriously in this perfumed nest a woman lay.

She wore indoor native dress, with a sort of embroidered tunic and a small, close turban. Every line of her body and the sheen of her skin were revealed through the lilac-colored silk gauze. Her pose, like her dress, was that of an instinctive exhibitionist.

The man saluted respectfully and stood before her, smiling always.

"Madonna?"

Wonderful eyes were raised to meet his glance, and when the woman spoke, her voice, which a young French poet had once described as "a nocturne for harps and strings," made strange music in that harem apartment.

"Tell me, Caspar, has the London report come in?"

"Three minutes ago, Madonna."

"Sister Coralie has remembered her vows?"

Caspar slightly shook his head.

"I fear not, My Lady. She has escaped from Ariosto's charge, aided by an unknown man."

As if electrified, the woman sat suddenly upright. Her eyes gleamed like jewels through lowered lashes.

"The fool has failed me again! One of the loveliest girls in the Order. I wonder—I wonder—would he dare? 'An unknown man!'" Her voice sank to a whisper. "An American agent employed by her family. Blunders, blunders! Always blunders!"

"In accordance with My Lady's orders, Ariosto was given full discretion," Caspar pointed out.

"She will be found. Ariosto is a fool, but Philo has the instincts of a bloodhound. I anticipate early news of Sister Coralie and of the disposal of the American detective. Deal with it."

"I have done so. I trust this news may come soon."

Caspar's monotonous voice suggested that of a man talking in his sleep. There was no reply, and he raised sleepy lids to meet an intolerant stare from the beautiful and now widely opened eyes.

"Continue, Caspar," My Lady urged. "I have noted of late a growing disposition to question the wisdom of my decisions."

Caspar's smile remained undisturbed. He extended slender ivory hands.

"Dear My Lady, have you ever found cause to criticize my performance of Madonna's decisions?"

The woman's mobile features changed magically. Her hard expression melted into a smile like a caress.

"In your more subtle way, Caspar, you are nearly as impudent as Ariosto. You never challenge my policy; you tacitly imply that an explanation would be welcome—and I, like a fool, humor you. Very well. Scotland Yard is already aware of the fact that the Order has a large establishment in Egypt. It is reasonable to suppose, since I cannot be found in Europe or America, that I may be in Africa. You are thinking that if this American agent fails, as I predict, and is instructed to consult Scotland Yard, the result may be a visit from the British police? What does it matter? It amuses me to provoke Scotland Yard—for, while Marûk Pasha holds his present office, certainly Scotland Yard has no chance of getting me to Whitehall. Any questions, Caspar?"

Caspar's expression remained unchanged. His smile was seemingly permanent.

"Only one, Madonna—if My Lady will absolve me from the sin of impudence."

"You are absolved. What is it?"

"My Lady is not seriously contemplating marriage with His Excellency Marûk Pasha?"

My Lady laughed, and her laughter, according to the unhappy poet Romain Ravillac, was like the sound of many nightingales envious of the music of a rippling brook.

"How deliciously absurd you can be, Caspar! Arrange emergency reports, via Nice and Port Said."

"I have already done so, Madonna."

Dick Cartaret, unaware that he had stumbled into the complex machinery of one of the most remarkable organizations in criminal history and been marked down by its bril-

liant controller, swung the car across foggy King's Road and into Flood Street.

Urgency had stimulated memory. He recalled that George Haddon sometimes parked (free of charge) in a yard adjoining the premises of a jobbing builder with whom he'd struck up a friendship in the bar of the Six Bells.

Dick groped his way there in the misty darkness of the narrow street, and by sheer luck found the gate of the builder's yard. If the builder was out on a job, the gate would be unlocked. If he had gone home, it would be padlocked. He got out and stood for a moment, listening.

Another driver was turning in from King's Road.

Not daring to attract unnecessary attention by using a flashlight, Dick stumbled over to the gate.

It was open!

He had managed to drive in and partly close the gate before advancing headlights illuminated the fog that a freshening breeze was resolving from the opacity of pea soup to the comparative transparency of dirty ditch water.

Peering through the gap between the two wings of the gate, he saw the evil, granite face of Philo, glimpsed his great hands on the wheel.

The Rolls-Royce passed.

He didn't wait to discover if George's builder friend was in the shop. He buttoned up his topcoat and set out for Tite Street, making for a turning nearly opposite. He couldn't remember its name, but Tite Street crossed it, and the studio was just along on the right. He would have liked to run, but the fog hung densely here. However, he walked as fast as he dared.

Halfway along the totally deserted street, his heart gave an unpleasant leap. For one tense moment he paused, listening to what he thought might be an echo created by the fog.

But it wasn't.

Soft, padding footsteps. Someone was following him.

He ran, ran blindly through the choking mist.

When a dim light glimmered through yellow darkness, he turned into it without hesitation and began to mount the stone stairs that led to George's studio, two at a time. The fog inside the house was wispy compared with its dense mass on the streets, and there were landing lights.

As Dick fumblingly put the studio key into the lock, he heard those eerie padding footsteps below, heard them

come bounding up behind him. But he dared not glance aside. He hadn't time.

He pushed the door open, lurched drunkenly in, then turned and shot the bolt home.

As he stood there in the dark, he heard the footsteps approach the door and stop.

Breathless, his heart beating fast, Dick listened.

Not a sound.

Had Philo mounted guard outside, or had he stolen away, noiselessly as a great cat?

Dick switched the light on, assuring himself that the bolt was fast, and crossed to a cabinet where the whisky was kept. He mixed himself a stiff one, took a long drink, and then, uttering a sigh of relief, looked around the lofty, bleak, untidy studio. Paintings framed and unframed, finished and unfinished, littered the place: some hanging, others tacked up, on easels, stacked against the wall.

The phone was in an adjoining bedroom, and Dick crossed to the curtained door.

He had nearly reached it when he stopped dead, held his breath.

Faint sounds had reached his ears. They came from the skylight above him. They were dragging sounds, and a moment later they were explained.

The shade was partly drawn across the skylight. Now, peering over its edge, staring down through dirty glass, he saw the bright, sunken eyes of Philo.

Evidently the creature (for he found it hard to regard him as a normal human) had crept up the short stairway that led to the roof and crawled out over the frame of the skylight. His exact purpose wasn't clear, but beyond doubt it wasn't friendly.

Dick sprang back to the switch. The studio became dark.

This intensive pursuit was beginning to take toll of his nerves. What the devil did it mean? Who was the girl who had appealed to him for help? And who was Dr. Ralston? For certainly these men were desperate.

As he stood by the door, his heart thumping, he heard other footsteps, just outside. Then came a voice, the voice of Dr. Ralston.

"Philo! Philo! Where are you! What are you doing?"

The dragging sound came again from above. Philo was crawling back.

"Philo!"

"I am coming," Dick heard faintly.

Dr. Ralston's footsteps suggested now that he had seen the stairway to the roof and had hurried to meet the descending Philo. There followed a subdued but angry conversation, then the assured steps returned. Philo's were inaudible.

The doorbell rang.

Dick stood listening.

The bell rang again.

No word was spoken outside. After a time Dick heard Dr. Ralston's footsteps going away.

Had Philo gone with him?

He pressed his ear to the door. He couldn't detect a sound. He began stealthily to move toward the bedroom and the phone.

There was a heavy stool in the way, which, in complete darkness, he had forgotten. He was reminded of its position when he fell over it, crashed forward, feet in the air, and hit something with his chin.

He had just time to swear before he blacked out. . . .

Some six or seven hours before, William Stendal Denvers, president of Denvers Rubber Consolidated, stepped out of the elevator on the twenty-second floor of a building on Lexington Avenue in New York. A large, masterful, gray-haired figure, he was still, at sixty, a handsome man.

He glanced at the floor directory and then turned right, walking along a corridor nearly to the end and stopping at a door on which the number 2212 appeared. Below was the name Drake Roscoe, but no particulars concerning the business of Mr. Roscoe.

William Denvers went in and gave his name to a receptionist who looked like several thousand other young women similarly employed in Manhattan.

A minute later he was seated in Drake Roscoe's office, sizing up the man he had come to consult. William Denvers' judgment of men had helped to make him the powerful and wealthy president of one of the richest corporations in the country.

He looked across a large desk that nevertheless was hardly large enough to accommodate a mass of documents and works of reference neatly lined up on it. He took in these details at a glance, but his interest was focused on the man who faced him across this orderly battlefield of a desk.

He saw one whom he judged to be of no more than medium height, but so lean that he might have been in hard

training. He had gray eyes, and there were streaks of gray in his hair. It was an arresting face, too, with lines that suggested that Drake Roscoe had tried nearly everything at least once; a man of vast experience who had passed through acid tests, which had burned but not destroyed his fighting spirit.

"I hope I can serve you, Mr. Denvers. I'm indebted to your friend—my old chief—for recommending me."

William Denvers' penetrating blue eyes watched Roscoe unwaveringly.

"I think you can, Mr. Roscoe, if anyone can. It's no business of mine why you resigned from the federal service and went into practice as a private agent. I know your reason was an honorable one, or I shouldn't be here. I can't call on official sources. The affair is too delicate."

Drake Roscoe took up a cigar that smoldered in a tray and pushed a newly opened box across the desk. But William Denvers declined, with a smile.

"I shall be honored by your confidence, sir. I may add that I must have your complete confidence if I am to be of any use to you."

William Denvers nodded. His expression grew troubled. "I know. And it's going to hurt to spill domestic secrets to a stranger. But that's what I'm here to do. So let's face it. My daughter, Coral, has disappeared."

"Disappeared?" Drake Roscoe raised his eyebrows. "It's common knowledge that she broke her engagement with the Honorable Peter Lorminster only a few weeks before their wedding. But—disappeared?"

"That's what I said, sir!"

"Had they quarreled?"

"Not to my knowledge—nor to his."

"Was she in love with him?"

William Denvers, evidently forgetting how recently he had declined, automatically took a cigar from the box, snipped the end off, and lighted it. When he replied, his deep voice was pitched in an even lower register.

"That brings me to the awkward part. I don't believe, truly, that Corry ever cared for Peter—in that way. He had many qualities most girls find attractive. Good looks, all the social assets, and he'll inherit a peerage. Corry would have become Lady Villars. I can't disguise from you, Mr. Roscoe, that this prospect intrigued my wife."

"And also your daughter?"

"No, sir!" William Stendel Denvers was an incorrigibly

honest man. "No, sir! Lucille—Mrs. Denvers—claims aristocratic British descent, and titles mean something to her that they don't mean to me. But Corry doesn't share her mother's views. Never did."

"You are suggesting that your daughter was influenced by her mother in this engagement?"

"Suggesting?" William Denvers almost barked. "I'm telling you so!"

"There was someone else?"

"There was no one else. That I can swear to. Wherever she's gone, it isn't to another man."

A strange expression crossed Drake Roscoe's face, and was gone in a flash.

"Tell me, Mr. Denvers, before we go into details: Have you had no word from your daughter?"

"Yes, sir. She slipped out of our apartment sometime on the afternoon of the fourteenth of this month, taking only one suitcase—as we discovered. She left a note for her mother."

"You have it?"

"Here in my brief case. It says, as you can read"—he opened the case—"that she finds it impossible to go on with the wedding, and she'll explain everything when she comes back, and that she's very unhappy about causing so much trouble. Here's the letter."

Drake Roscoe took it and laid it, unread, on his blotting pad. "You are satisfied, Mr. Denvers, that your daughter's flight was voluntary?"

William Denvers softly beat the desk with a clenched fist. "At first I believed so. Except it wasn't like Corry to do a thing like that. But as time went on, I began to change my mind. What I'd put down as a mad caprice—she's a girl not easy to control—began to look like something else. We contacted all of her friends we knew. No news."

"You didn't notify the police?"

"Although the suspense was wearing Mrs. Denvers to a shadow, she kept on hoping we'd have news. She hated the idea of such a story in the newspapers. But I almost had her persuaded when, sure enough, a letter came from Corry. Here it is."

Drake Roscoe looked at the postmark on the plain envelope.

"Greenwich, Connecticut," he muttered. "Mailed four days ago. Valuable time wasted, Mr. Denvers!" He took the letter from the envelope and read:

Moms, darling,

Please, please don't worry. I'm perfectly well, but very, very sorry to cause you and Dad so much anxiety. I haven't run away with anybody and I haven't been kidnaped. It may be some time before I get back, but please don't try to have me followed or do anything to make a scandal. I'm quite well and will write again soon. All my love, darling—

CORRY

Roscoe glanced at the other note on his desk, comparing the handwriting.

"You're satisfied, Mr. Denvers, that both these letters were written by your daughter?"

"Perfectly satisfied."

"Has your daughter friends in Greenwich?"

"Not to our knowledge. But she sometimes visited at the Finelander home, which isn't far from there."

"The Finelander home!"

Roscoe's expression changed again as it had changed once before. But this time the new expression stayed. It was one almost of fear.

"Yes, sir. Corry was always a welcome guest of Rosa Finelander—a worthy daughter of her great father."

"As you say." Drake Roscoe spoke in a vacant way. "Tell me, Mr. Denvers: Is Coral a studious type? I mean does she hold unusual political views—particularly of a feminist order?"

William Denvers' somber eyes lighted up. "You've hit it, sir! I was told you were a smart man, and it's true. The whole trouble has something to do with Corry's crazy ideas. Though how you guessed it I can't figure out."

"I didn't guess it," Drake Roscoe told him wearily. "I deducted it from the clues you gave me. She is almost certainly a member of a pseudo-intellectual society with high political ambitions. Did you suspect this?"

"No, I didn't. But my wife did, a long while back, and it scared her. She thought Corry had got into the hands of the wrong people. She found a book in Corry's room that she told me—she wouldn't show it to me—advocated an utterly detestable form of feminine philosophy."

"Called, I believe, 'Tears of Our Lady'?"

William Denvers grasped the arms of his chair, half stood up. "How—how can you know that?"

Drake Roscoe snuffed out his cigar in the tray. His features had resumed their usual lack of expression.

"Because I know now why you were sent to me. I know where your daughter has gone. I know her reason for breaking her engagement. Her absence isn't voluntary."

"You mean she's been abducted? I thought so! I thought so! I'll be held up for a six-figure ransom?"

Drake Roscoe shook his head, selected a fresh cigar. "No, sir. No ransom will get her back. No ransom will be demanded. The woman your daughter has gone to join could buy up Denvers Rubber Consolidated tomorrow if she wanted it. I deeply regret to tell you, Mr. Denvers, that we're dealing with Sumuru."

William Denvers stared blankly.

"You alarm me, Mr. Roscoe, but the name Sumuru means nothing to me. Who is Sumuru?"

Roscoe regretted what he had said. The words had been hastily spoken. He mustn't frighten this unhappy man.

"She is one of the most remarkable women alive today, Mr. Denvers. She is the founder and director of a feminist organization known as the Order of Our Lady. Many prominent women—and men, too—here, in Europe, in Asia, and in Africa regard her as the new savior of human society. She has the strange gift, also possessed by the late Adolf Hitler, of inspiring fanatical devotion."

"She must be a dangerous hag!"

"Dangerous, yes; but not a hag. She is probably the most beautiful woman in the world. . . ."

In the Chelsea studio, Dick Cartaret was aroused by persistent ringing of the phone. He found himself lying face downward in darkness. His jaw and the back of his neck ached abominably; so did his head. He had no idea where he was or what had happened to him.

Slowly, memory returned.

He remembered seeing Philo upon the glass roof, remembered switching out the lights; and now, little by little, he remembered all that had followed. How long ago these things had occurred he had no means of knowing. But his boxing experience told him at once why he had collapsed.

As he had tripped over the stool and fallen forward, he had managed (a thousand-to-one-chance) to hit something hard with the point of his chin. He had knocked himself out!

He quickly made sure that no serious damage had been done. His aching head and jaw were symptoms he had met with before. And his teeth remained intact.

Very cautiously he got up. He felt slightly dazed, but otherwise none the worse.

He turned slowly, found the switch just behind him, and lighted the studio lamps. His first glance was upward. But there was no one looking from the skylight. He identified the object on which he had given himself a K.O.—a heavy bronze figure of a laughing Buddha. It must have been Buddha's upraised fist that had floored him.

The phone went on ringing.

He crossed, picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Is that Mr. George Haddon?"

He knew the voice. It was the voice of Dr. Ralston.

Dick hung up without replying.

What was afoot now?

He wondered if the sinister Philo still stood on guard on the landing. It seemed highly probable. The name George Haddon was painted on the studio door, and evidently Dr. Ralston had gone somewhere and looked up George's number. Almost certainly he had posted his gorilla to make sure that no one left.

Dick looked at his watch. He had been out for five minutes.

He dialed Whitehall 1212. The instrument sounded lifeless. He waited a while, hung up, and then dialed the operator, with the same result.

At last he knew what had happened. It was an old trick, but an effective one. Dr. Ralston, having heard his voice, had not replaced the receiver of whatever phone he was using.

The line was dead.

The mysterious enemy had isolated him. An attack was coming. Dr. Ralston believed that he knew something of vital importance; either something he didn't know himself, or something that Dick must be prevented, at all costs, from passing on to others. Dr. Ralston's choice of methods, like his choice of chauffeurs, was peculiar. If there happened to be a physician of that name in Harley Street, Dick felt quite sure he hadn't had the pleasure of meeting him.

Philo unarmed was a tough enough proposition, but it seemed safer to assume now that he had a gun.

Dick recalled an occasion when he and George Haddon had returned from a late party to discover that George had left his key inside the studio. This slight accident, however, had in no way disturbed George. They had returned to the street and gone along a passage to the rear of the building next door, a boarded-up war-damaged warehouse long marked for demolition. Entrance from this point was easy enough, the stairs more or less survived. Upper floors had housed offices, and the top one, a large loft, had a trap door communicating with a flat leaded roof. The window of George's bedroom overlooked this roof. It was usually kept open, and as George had pointed out at the time, it offered a useful means of escape in possible emergencies.

Such an emergency had now arisen.

Dick applied one ear to the keyhole of the studio door, pressing his finger into the other ear and holding his breath. Several times he had to pause, inhaling deeply, before continuing.

He was rewarded at last. He heard a faint shuffling sound. Someone was outside.

He was about to move when he heard something else. Footsteps mounting the stone stairs. A whispered call: "Philo!"

Curiosity urged him to wait and hear more, but prudence said no. The building had few tenants, and probably none was at home. He was unarmed, and these desperate men would either break the door down or smash a way through the skylight. If he was to be of any use to the girl who had appealed to him for help, now was the time to go.

After a moment's reflection, he decided to leave the studio lights burning. He crossed to the bedroom and dropped quietly from the window onto the roof. The trap door he found open. It had probably remained so since George and he had passed that way.

There was quite a breeze on the roof, and he saw that the fog was rapidly dispersing. Not until his feet had found the ladder below the trap did he switch on his pocket flashlight. Light would surely be necessary on the broken stairs.

To urge him to greater speed, just as he started down the ladder he heard a tremendous crash of glass from above and beyond. They had broken the skylight. In all probability, Philo had dropped into the studio.

When presently he came to the end of the narrow passage and looked out cautiously into deserted Tite Street, he saw Dr. Ralston's Rolls parked before the nearby door.

Chapter Three

A FULL MOON, the moon of Isis, queen of a dark, jewel-studded sky, magically turned the muddy Nile into a stream of quicksilver. The court of stars ranked respectfully behind her lunar majesty twinkled in mockery of little lamps set in the crowns of palms around a beautiful garden on the riverbank.

The new Cairo socialites were adopting the deplorable customs of the old. A fancy-dress ball was taking place in the palatial villa of Marûk Pasha, prominent member of the Egyptian cabinet.

In a great salon of the villa facing the gardens and the river, a native orchestra played Arab music. White-turbaned waiters presided at a buffet overstocked for a banquet. Champagne of good vintage was there to delight nonbelievers and to tempt True Believers. The hospitality of Marûk Pasha rose above religious scruples.

As one of the three wealthiest men in Egypt he could afford to be eccentric.

Later in the evening the native players would be replaced by a celebrated dance band imported from Monte Carlo at extravagant cost for this one occasion. The dethroned king himself couldn't have done the thing better.

Among the early arrivals was a Veiled Prophet of Khurasan. He had not come in a Cadillac or in a Rolls: He had swum from a nearby point on the island, carrying his costume in a waterproof bag, had landed unobtrusively at the foot of the garden, dried himself in the flowering shrubbery, and put on his grotesque disguise.

At the moment he was sampling a Scotch and soda, and standing in a shadowy corner of the gilded salon.

He noted that the Egyptian women favored Western costumes. Most of the gauzily clad dancing girls and Cleopatras were European. A number of celebrities, military and diplomatic, arrived and were duly noted. But the

Veiled Prophet's attention seemed to be particularly focused upon their female companions.

The room was getting crowded, and the host, Marûk Pasha, massive, running to fat, and resembling a worn-out stud bull, began to register cramp of the right arm due to shaking hands, when a dramatic interruption occurred.

Distant voices came: "Princess Astar! Princess Astar!"

Marûk Pasha dropped the hand of an elderly lady whom he was greeting. His dull eyes lighted up; he almost ran out into the garden.

There was a general movement in that direction. The Veiled Prophet joined it.

He was in time to see an extraordinary boat, invisibly and silently propelled, approaching on the moon-silvered river. This astonishing craft, which seemed to be transparent and mysteriously illuminated, looked like a magnified lotus. It had creamy petals and a warm pink heart. It reminded the Prophet of a Lalique ornament greatly enlarged. And it floated down on the stream soundlessly, gracefully, like a stray lily blossom.

It touched the landing stage, and as if materializing from the great bloom, an unreal figure stepped out—the spirit of lotus.

She wore a fairy robe, a thing of pink and faint yellow and green, a cloud rather than a dress, so that her slender, graceful body seemed to be enveloped in the mist of an Egyptian morning. A gaze from dark-fringed eyes became fixed upon Marûk Pasha; white arms were stretched out in greeting.

The lotus boat floated silently away.

And Marûk Pasha dropped on one knee in welcome, extending large, pudgy hands.

"Astar! My Astar!"

The interested throng dispersed regretfully, leaving their host alone with his guest of honor, the mysterious Princess Astar, said to be the widow of a Russian nobleman and owner of extensive property in the Egyptian Fayyûm. It was common knowledge that the princess would soon become Madame Marûk.

One of the last to leave the scene was the Veiled Prophet. He appeared to be absorbing every visible detail of the beautiful Princess Astar. The landing stage was flood-lighted from the crests of two royal palms, against one of which he was leaning. He threw his veil back and began

to light a cigarette with an odd-looking lighter. It took him some time.

Barbaric strains from the Arab orchestra were stealing over the Nile when he left the party. He threaded his way through chauffeur-driven cars, and presently found a humble *arabîyeh*, in which he was driven to an equally modest pension in Shâria el-Magrâbi.

Shedding his costume, he got into pajamas and sat down at the small table in his room.

He began to write a report starting with the words:

"Detective Sergeant Farrel to Chief Inspector Gilligan, C.I.D., New Scotland Yard.

"Re the woman known as Sumuru . . ."

It happened that Inspector Gilligan was rereading a number of similar reports in his office at Scotland Yard when his desk phone rang and the Superintendent spoke.

"Oh, Gilligan, the A.C. has passed an inquiry to me, and I'd like you to deal with it. A man called Richard Cartaret came tearing into the Chelsea station a while ago and asked for police protection."

"Did he get it?"

"Yes. They sent a party to investigate his statement, and they're sending Cartaret along here."

"Why?"

"I don't know. But it's a queer business, from all I can make out. He seems to have been attacked by mysterious thugs up Chelsea way. And he claims that some girl has been kidnaped. Can you see him?"

"Yes. All right. Tell them to send him along to me."

Hanging up, Gilligan sighed regretfully. He wasn't strictly on duty, and had, in fact, been preparing to go home. Well, the Super had gone home, instead.

He opened a bulging portfolio from which had come the reports lying on his desk, and began to replace them in their proper order. It seemed moderately certain to the Inspector that the phenomenal woman whose dossier was filed under the name Sumuru had succeeded in getting away to Egypt. He was still replacing documents when there came a rap on his office door.

"Yes?"

A constable in uniform stepped in. "Mr. Cartaret to see you, sir."

"Show him in."

Gilligan swept the remaining documents into the portfolio and dropped it on the floor beside his chair.

Dick Cararet came in and the constable went out, quietly closing the door.

"Good evening," Dick said.

Inspector Gilligan was a highly efficient detective officer. A clever woman once had said of him that, although unimaginative, he was dangerously competent. Now, automatically, he was sizing up his visitor. One swift, keen glance gave him a fairly complete picture:

A good-looking man in his early thirties, with dark brown hair that, although cropped short, obstinately retained a wave on top. Height, five-ten or so. Build good. Weight, about 155. Frank, darkish gray-blue eyes. Good chin. Health and constitution, sound. Public school, university. Brain, shade above average.

"Good evening. Please sit down, Mr. Cartaret. What can I do for you?"

Dick sat down facing Inspector Gilligan across a black desk on which he could see nothing but a blotting pad, a pewter inkwell, a pen, and a telephone. The Inspector, wearing a well-cut tweed suit, looked like a retired Army officer.

"I don't know," Dick admitted. "The Chelsea police sent a car off to George Haddon's studio to check up, and sent me along here. I must apologize for taking up your time, but let me try to tell you what happened."

He gave Gilligan a succinct account of the events of the evening. The Inspector decided that Cartaret was a man accustomed to assembling words.

"Remarkable clear statement, Mr. Cartaret," he said. "Are you a public speaker or a writer?"

Dick stared hard. This man of few words was interesting.

"I'm a playwright."

"Ah. Presume no London address, as you're staying at a friend's studio?"

"Quite right, Inspector. My folks live in Hampshire. I have business with my London agent to settle before I can go home. Then I have to return to New York."

"Clear enough. Didn't interrupt, but I have a dossier of the man you call Dr. Ralston and also of Philo. I'd welcome a detailed description of the girl with the mark on her ankle." Inspector Gilligan pulled out from a

drawer a stenographer's notebook and a pencil. "Please speak at dictation speed."

But Dick sprang up excitedly. "You mean these men are known criminals?"

"Known—and dangerous. Now, the girl. How tall was she?"

Inspector Gilligan's coldly businesslike manner had a calming effect, and Dick sat down again. He gave a close description of the girl in the car, and when he came to the curious mark on her ankle, Gilligan asked, "Any idea what it represented?"

"Yes. I should say it represented a snake."

"Correct. It did." He closed the notebook. "Ever hear of a woman known as Sumuru?"

Dick shook his head. "I don't believe so."

"Hope you never meet her. Satan's twin sister. Sumuru is only one of her names. Has at least five others. May now have a new one." Gilligan pointed to the bulging portfolio on the floor beside him. "There's reason to believe she's in Egypt. One of our fellows has been sent out there to check up on rumors."

"But what has this woman, whom you say may be in Egypt, to do with whatever happened in Chelsea tonight?"

"Everything. Yet, even now, my colleagues here think I'm cranky. You see, I've *met* Sumuru, talked to her. I *know*. They don't. New kind of menace. Kind we haven't had to face up to before. Where Hitler collected tough men—Nazi youth and all that—Sumuru collects beautiful women. Trains girls from childhood to use their beauty to conquer the world."

The Inspector turned to his phone, lifted the receiver. "Get me Chelsea." He waited, glancing at Dick. "Sure the girl was American?"

"Certain."

"H'm. . . . Hello!" He spoke into the receiver. "Inspector Gilligan here. I have Mr. Cartaret with me. Any result from studio? . . . Ah! They'd been in! Skylight—yes . . . Oh! No other damage? Fingerprints? . . . Good. Rush them to me. I have a whole pile to compare. Good-by." He hung up, turned to Dick. "I must ask you to hang around for a day or so. Usual routine inquiries start tonight. Special attention to Knightsbridge end of Sloane Street. But I doubt results."

Chapter Four

THE ATMOSPHERE of Drake Roscoe's office must have registered 50 per cent cigar smoke. The job he was doing, although mechanical and wearisome, was one that nobody could do for him. A tastefully bound little book lay on the desk. It was the property of Coral Denvers and contained names and neatly written phone numbers of her many friends. He had called them in rotation and had put leading questions to those who had answered—so far without the slightest success.

Now, having worked his way through to the M's, he was staring at the only entry under that letter: "Madderley, Lisa." He dialed the number and waited patiently until he heard a crisp feminine voice say, "Finelander Institute."

Roscoe's weary eyes lighted up; his whole expression changed. "Could I speak to Lisa Madderley?"

"Miss Madderley's on vacation." The voice had a note of complete finality.

"How unfortunate. Could you give me her forwarding address?"

"What name?"

Although he knew that the bulk of the Finelander staff had no connection with or knowledge of the Sumuru organization, Drake Roscoe decided to take no chances.

"Horace Mitford."

"She left no address with us, Mr. Mitford—at least, I don't think so, and the librarian has gone. But it's just possible that Stephanie Lawrence, who shares her apartment, may know."

"Thanks a lot. Is Miss Lawrence listed in the phone book?"

"Yes, under Stephanie. She's an interior decorator."

The crisp-voiced lady hung up; so did Drake Roscoe, smiling grimly. He had found a link at last.

Rosa Finelander, eccentric spinster daughter of the great philanthropist and his sole heiress, was a fanatical disciple of Sumuru.

Knowing as much as he knew about the Order of Our Lady, he recognized the fact that Stephanie Lawrence might suspect nothing whatever about Lisa Madderley's affiliation to the Order (assuming that Lisa *was* a member), or, on the other hand, might also be a member herself. The first point to be established was the present whereabouts of Lisa Madderley.

He looked up Stephanie, against whose entry the one word "decor" appeared, and dialed her number. (Stephanie, he learned, lived on East Seventy-fourth Street.)

There was a prompt reply. A cheery voice said, "Stephanie."

"May I speak with Miss Lawrence?"

"Speaking."

"Oh, good. I think you may be able to help me in a difficulty. My name is Drake Roscoe. Could you spare me a few minutes if I called shortly?"

There was an instant's hesitation.

"What's your difficulty, Mr. Roscoe?"

"It concerns Lisa Madderley. I can't find out where she's gone."

"Oh!" The exclamation rung with eagerness. "I can't, either! It's very mysterious. If you're a friend of hers, please do come along."

Twenty minutes later, Drake Roscoe halted his car before a converted brownstone building between Lexington and Third Avenues. It was dusk, and the basement apartment was lighted up, so that he could read the words "Stephanie, Decor" on a window with a blue-painted frame. There were boxes of flowers in the sunken rectangle before the window. The boxes were blue, like the window. And in the window, and beyond, he could see queer vases, odd pieces of furniture, specimens of upholstery artistically arranged.

Stephanie opened the door.

She was a slim, dark-haired girl who, without her spectacles in their enormous ornamental rims, might have been pretty. Roscoe followed her through to a comfortable room behind the showroom. She had coffee ready.

"Please have some coffee, Mr. Roscoe," she said. "Because coffee stimulates the brain, I find, and I have never met a detective before."

"Detective?" Drake Roscoe stared. He had walked flat-footed into a trap. This girl was one of Sumuru's! He

shouldn't have given her his real name. She was watching him eagerly.

"Of course, I know. Mr. Denvers called me the other day. The Finelander Foundation had referred him to me. All I could tell him was that Lisa had gone on vacation. I didn't know then that Coral Denvers had disappeared. But everybody knows it now and I was sure a detective would call."

"That certainly simplifies matters," Roscoe admitted. "I'm acting for Mr. Denvers."

Stephanie smiled happily. "No need for either of us to pretend." She took off her spectacles. "These are plain glass, Mr. Roscoe, but I never had a single order before I started to wear them. Drake Roscoe is your real name, isn't it?"

Roscoe grinned appreciatively. A girl as attractive as Stephanie and with a sense of humor was worth knowing. But he remained uncertain.

"Yes. It's my real name. Our Lady knows it well."

Stephanie's steady hazel eyes never wavered. "Our Lady? Who is Our Lady?"

"Lisa knows her. Don't you?"

Stephanie began to look bewildered. "I don't even know what you're talking about. Lisa works in the Finelander library and has a number of friends there I never met. Coral Denvers is another friend of hers I didn't know."

"She never came here?"

Stephanie shook her head. "Never. But Lisa sometimes spoke of her."

"Had Lisa been invited to the wedding?"

"She didn't say so. But I know they were close friends. One evening Lisa started to pack in a furious hurry. She said that someone has offered her a free trip to England. She left the same night."

"What was the date?"

"January twenty-third."

This was the date, as Roscoe remembered, on the last letter received from Coral Denvers, mailed from Greenwich, Connecticut.

"While Lisa was packing," Stephanie went on excitedly, "there was a call for her, and I heard her say the name Coral several times. In fact, it was plain they were meeting somewhere later. The news of Coral's disappearance broke soon afterward, and I felt maybe I should call Mr. Den-

vers." Stephanie shrugged her shoulders, poured out more coffee. "I knew she was alive, all right, and I figured it was just the old story—another man. Why butt in? There's one queer thing, though."

"What's that?"

"Lisa left without her passport. So I don't know how she's going to get to Europe."

"Sure?"

"It's in her dresser drawer."

"That's surely very queer."

And it really made him think hard. He glanced at a framed photograph on a side table.

"Is that Lisa?"

"Yes. She's lovely, isn't she?"

"Looks like a pretty girl." He spoke lightly. "You have nothing to worry about in that direction yourself."

"I'm not worrying," Stephanie assured him. "I'm just biding my time."

Drake Roscoe left shortly afterward and drove back to his office. The streets of Manhattan had changed in the last few hours. Towering buildings, lights twinkling far above, no longer seemed to augur friendly fellow workers. They had become enemy fortresses. Any one of those lights might be a danger signal.

Sumuru was at work again.

Sumuru might even be here, in New York!

His secretary had gone, so that he had the small office to himself. What had he learned? What could he, conscientiously, report to William Denvers?

He opened a new bottle of Scotch, lighted a cigar, and sat down at his desk. He made these notes:

- (a) Coral Denvers is a member of the Order of Our Lady.
- (b) Lisa Madderley is also a member, and may be in charge of the Manhattan branch.
- (c) Stephanie Lawrence is not a member.
- (d) Lisa may have deliberately misled Stephanie in saying she was going to England.
- (e) But Rosa Finelander maintains a private airfield on her Connecticut estate and enjoys special privileges. Lisa and Coral may have left from there and landed at some point in England without passing through customs.

His phone buzzed. He glanced at a desk clock. Nobody would call a business office at this hour!

Roscoe picked up the receiver. "Yes? Who is it?"

"This is Stephanie Lawrence, Mr. Roscoe. I didn't expect to find you there, but I'm glad I did."

"I'm glad too, Stephanie. What's the big news?"

"I just got a radiogram from Lisa. Dated London. It says: 'Register my passport in dresser drawer to me at Eastern Telegraph Company Shâria es Sultan Husein Port Said Egypt Love Lisa.' What do you make of that?"

"A whole lot, Stephanie. You are a treasure above price. You must lunch with me tomorrow, for I'll be leaving next day for Europe."

In the great court of an ancient Egyptian temple, surrounded by a peristyle of thirty-two columns like that at Edfû, a ceremony of some sort was about to take place.

Bronze gates closed the entrance to the vast, lofty court, at the other end of which a gold-embroidered violet curtain draped the door to some inner court or sanctuary. Invisible lighting created an impression of sunshine, giving life to brightly colored wall paintings behind the pillars and glistening on the black marble floor so that its polished slabs shone like a lake of ink.

There was a dais before the violet curtain, and a chair of carved sandalwood stood upon it. The dais was covered with silver-mink rugs, and Our Lady was seated in the chair. She wore a white Grecian robe. Her small feet, encased in sandals, rested on a footstool, and her toes peeped out between the straps like pink lotus buds. A golden net in which small amethysts glittered covered her hair.

Behind the sandalwood chair two attendants were standing: one, the ivory-skinned Caspar, eternally smiling; the other, a beautiful, dark-eyed girl.

The high note of a silver bell echoed around the pillared hall, and, accompanied by a muffled rumbling resembling distant thunder, the bronze gates rolled back. Marching in single file came a row of girls just entering their teens, dressed in white. There were blondes, brunettes, and redheads. In addition to their simple white robes there was another common factor.

All were beauties.

They had grace of movement, shapely bodies, and

charming young faces. Their bright eyes and fresh complexions spoke of perfect health. The bronze gates closed thunderously behind the last to enter. One by one they approached the dais, curtsied gracefully, and bowed their heads low. And each of them Our Lady addressed by name, her soft, lovely voice sweet as the music of harps.

"Greetings, Chloe." (Or Daphne or Cecile.) "I am glad to see you again."

The response was always the same:

"Madonna, I am very happy to be here."

As each girl rose and passed on, she went to make one of a line formed on the left of the dais, and when all had saluted Our Lady and stood waiting, Our Lady addressed them collectively.

"Some of my neophytes enjoy the present additional happiness of having their mothers with them. As you know, I do my best to arrange for each of you to see her mother once or twice during the year. To everyone whose mother is now visiting the college I would give this advice: Take advantage of all she can teach you."

"Yes, Madonna," came a concerted response.

"You are all senior neophytes, and will soon be entering the college as junior novitiates. You are very fortunate in this ugly age to have been born into the Order of Our Lady. For when you leave this Egyptian garden to go out into the world and lead others into the way of life we know here, you will find the world a very ugly place, inhabited by very ugly people. Your mothers have known this world of ugliness and can prepare you for what you must face. They can tell you much to help you to understand what you are being prepared to study in the college. We are all members of a wise and happy family, and if anyone has any problem, she can always bring it to me. Bless you all."

The silver bell rang. The bronze gates rolled open. And the charming, white-robed group curtsied with the simultaneous ease of a trained *corps de ballet*, raised their arms and their shining eyes.

"Our Lady!"

An hour later Our Lady (whom Detective Sergeant Farrel would instantly have identified as Princess Astar), now wearing a white linen dress that had no sleeves and no back but that was nevertheless an exclusive model by

the most expensive *couturier* in Paris, walked slowly along the shady paths of a subtropical garden.

Apricots, figs, and grapes draped the walls or climbed over trellises. On an expanse of rising ground, really an extensive mound, olive trees were silhouetted against the Egyptian sky. Our Lady wore a wide-brimmed sun hat that shaded her face and her satin shoulders. She paused to pluck a rose from a bush before the sanded path.

Her only companion, a very pretty fair-haired young woman wearing shorts that displayed perfectly modeled legs, paused too, watching her eagerly.

And when the Princess gave the flower to her, saying, "For you, Sister Marina, for you remind me of a rose," the girl raised the rose to her lips and gazed at the giver with eyes wet with adoration.

"Madonna!" she whispered.

"Don't worship me, child," the golden voice advised. "I'm only a woman, like you." She walked on. "You are the mother of a lovely girl, I am the mother of a lovely dream. Like most dreams, it has its ugly moments. Your little Sylvia is beautiful, Sister Marina."

"Oh, My Lady! She is far, far more beautiful than I ever could be!"

My Lady's laughter was the music of many tiny bells.

"You confuse beauty with youth, child. Youth itself is beautiful. Look at a rosebud." She stretched out a white hand and touched one. "It is delicious, provocative, a promise. But will its promise be fulfilled?"

Marina made no reply, but walked on silently beside Sumuru.

"The most perfect blooms in the garden, the choicest birds and animals, are products of guided evolution. Our order seeks to guide the evolution of humanity—to evolve a perfect race. We date back to Pythagoras, and the task was taken up and the system improved by Plato. I myself am such a product, without one blemish in the selection—for even a long line of beauty and intelligence can be destroyed by a single misalliance."

By a small white cottage, one of many such guest houses dotted about the vast gardens, they stopped.

"Sylvia will be waiting for you, Marina. I know she will miss you when you leave. But discipline is a plant that has to be sown in early spring if it is to yield its fruit throughout the years to come."

Sumuru passed on, taking a path that led to the olive groves. She was on her way to visit the junior boys' school, where male children of the Order were trained to become worthy mates for the female disciples. Each boy was studied individually, in order to learn his particular aptitude; for Plato taught that every human being has within him or her the ability to excel at something. . . .

Chapter Five

WHEN DICK CARTARET left Scotland Yard, the phenomenal fog had temporarily been more than half dispersed. A fresh westerly breeze was blowing, and London returned almost to normal. But a yellow blanket hung over the city and might at any time fall on it again. From the Embankment he could see lights across the river on the Surrey side.

Taking advantage of a gap in the traffic, he was crossing in search of an empty taxi when a car swept down upon him so swiftly that he had just seconds in which to spring back and clutch the base of a lamp standard.

Sudden peril had keyed up every sense, so that as the car flashed by in the glare of the street lamp, a sharp image, not only of the vehicle, but of its occupants, became etched on his brain.

It was Dr. Ralston's Rolls!

Philo drove and the doctor sat in the back. But the doctor was not alone. His escaped "patient" sat beside him—or rather lay against him, for he seemed to be supporting her. The blue eyes were closed, the beautiful face was pathetically white.

There was another woman in the car, but she sat on the near side; her features remained in shadow.

And the Rolls wasn't headed toward Chelsea, but in the opposite direction.

Dick changed his plan.

Turning, he doubled back to Scotland Yard. The same police sergeant was still on duty. Dick spoke breathlessly.

"I left Inspector Gilligan's office less than ten minutes ago. Something frightfully important has happened—

something he must know *at once*. My name is Cartaret, if you don't remember."

"Yes, Mr. Cartaret. I'll find out if he's gone."

The sergeant picked up the phone, and three minutes later Dick was back in the same chair, looking across the bleak desk at the Inspector, and talking excitedly. He was still talking when Gilligan spoke into the phone. Dick paused and listened.

The Inspector gave a clear description of the Rolls, of its apelike chauffeur, and of Dr. Ralston. He gave the approximate time at which it passed Scotland Yard and its direction. He stated that there were two women passengers, one unidentified. Finally, without consulting his notes, he described the other.

"Abduction case. Relay to all cars. Advise all stations north and east of Westminster Bridge. Report to me."

Then he turned again to Dick.

"Pity you missed the license number. Not that it would have helped much. Lucky to find me still here. This cable detained me." He took up a yellow form from the desk. "Identifies the girl."

"What?"

"She's Coral Denvers, daughter of William Denvers of New York. Disappeared from her home on Park Avenue nearly two weeks back. A man employed by her parents is flying over. Good man. Drake Roscoe. Know him. Like to wait here for reports?"

"Of course I would, Inspector! Very kind of you."

A cold fury consumed Dick. It had sprung up at the moment when he saw that lovely, pale face laid helplessly on Dr. Ralston's shoulder. He would gladly have risked the fortunes of his new play to be alone with Dr. Ralston for five minutes.

It seemed that a torrent of reports began almost at once to pour into some department where they were tabulated and charted. Summaries were relaid over the intercom to Inspector Gilligan.

"Suspects reported passing Mansion House. . . ."

"Reports Eastcheap. . . ."

"All cars and stations alerted. . . ."

There was a maddeningly long silent interval next, during which Gilligan filled and lighted his pipe; then at last:

"No news from Leman Street."

The Inspector growled.

"Must have smelled a rat. Made a detour up into the wilds of Whitechapel—or down into Wapping. Seem to be headed for the docks."

"Challenged in Shadwell High Street," came the monotonous voice. "Man on beat unable to follow."

"Shadwell High Street," Gilligan muttered. "Headed for Limehouse." He took up the phone. "Get me K Division." He waited. A subdued buzzing came over the intercom, but no further report. Then: "Hello, Limehouse," Gilligan said. "Chief Inspector Gilligan here. Suspects approaching your division. Turn out every available motorcycle and patrolman. Cover all approaches to docks or wharves."

Dick Cartaret was fidgeting restlessly. Coral Denvers had appealed to him for help. Now she was back in the hands of agents of the woman Sumuru. He looked up, and saw Inspector Gilligan smiling at him.

"Don't know what your plays are about," he remarked, "but whenever Our Lady Sumuru breaks into the picture she makes most dramas seem dull."

"It's simply appalling. Coral Denvers is a lovely girl."

"Know it."

"Have you met her, then?"

Gilligan shook his head. "Just happen to know. Explain some other time."

Dick clenched his fists involuntarily. "I simply can't understand how such a female ogre as Sumuru remains at large! Why isn't she arrested?"

Inspector Gilligan puffed at his pipe. "She's wanted by us for nearly every crime in the catalogue, including murder. The French police want her, and so do the Americans. None of us can lay hands on her."

"But why?"

"Money, influence—and genius. She has some of the qualities of a chameleon. No two observers agree even about the color of her eyes. No official photograph here, at the Boulevard du Palais in Paris, or at Centre Street in New York. No fingerprints. And she's covered by some of the most influential families in England, France, the United States, and elsewhere."

"But do these people know the *truth* about this woman?"

Gilligan nodded shortly. "Yes. People knew the truth about Hitler."

"It's incomprehensible. How do you account for it?"

"Magnetism. The thing that accounts for all successful dictators. Napoleon had it. . . . Listen!"

The intercom came to life again.

"Rolls-Royce black sedan found in yard of Narrow Street."

Dick sprang up. The monotonous voice continued:

"No evidence in car, which was found empty. Ownership not yet established."

Inspector Gilligan picked up his pipe.

"Narrow Street is right beside the river," he stated. "I'm going down there to take charge. Care to come?"

It was at about this time that Celie Mayo, London correspondent of the New York Cable Record, wriggled free of the last of several ingenious knots that confined her ankles and burst out of a wardrobe closet in which she had been imprisoned for an incalculable period. It seemed to her to have been hours.

A muscular young athlete imbued with the spirit of fighting forebears, she could still taste the bath sponge that had been thrust between her teeth and secured there with one of her best silk scarves. Her wrists bled where she had painfully extracted them from the cords by which they had been tied together.

Celie shortsightedly staggered into the entrance hall of her apartment. All lights were on. She found her glasses, which had fallen off in the struggle, placed beside the telephone. She adjusted them and dialed O.

"Operator," a voice said.

"This is Cecilia Mayo, Flat Seventy-four, Berkeley Court, Sloane Street. A gang of thugs just broke in here. They drugged one of my friends and took her away with them, and they tied me up and gagged me and put me in a closet. I just managed to get out. I'm collapsing. Please call the police. Tell them to come *at once*."

Celie hung up and "collapsed" on the settee in her living room—but not until she had mixed herself a stiff Scotch and soda.

In a commendably short time, a police sergeant and a constable arrived, accompanied by the chief hall porter, Hawkins. When Celie cautiously opened her door, Hawkins looked really concerned.

"Whatever has happened, Miss Mayo?"

"My name is Sergeant White, miss," the police officer announced. "My car was in Sloane Street when the radio call came through."

"Please step right in. You, too, Hawkins."

When they were all settled in the living room, Celie said, "I never thought a thing like this could happen to a person in a high-class residential area like Sloane Street. Let me tell you. I'd been expecting a visit from my old friend Coral, who was coming from New York. We were at Vassar together. She arrived this evening. She was in a panic. Almost hysterical, I guess. No fur coat on a night like this, no hat. And Corry's one of the smartest girls—"

"One moment, Miss Mayo," Sergeant White interrupted. "This lady is—"

"Leave that till later. This is the story, and it's my business to know how to tell it. I was trying to cool Corry off and get some sense out of her when the doorbell rang. I moved to open the door, and she grabbed me.

"'Celie! Celie!' she said to me. 'Don't let anyone in! Don't open the door!'

"I figured it was a lovers' quarrel, because I knew Corry had broken off her engagement. The old story. So I broke away and opened the door. There was a girl outside. She was quite something to look at, but not so much as Corry. She said, 'Quick! Is Corry here?'

"I told her yes, and let her in. Corry gave a glad whoop and just fell into her arms. By this time I was getting slightly out of focus. Those two peach blossoms were babbling about someone they call Our Lady. Corry was asking the new one—whose name seemed to be Lisa—how she traced her, and Lisa was trying to persuade Corry to do what Our Lady said. None of it made sense."

"Miss Mayo," Sergeant White broke in again, "can you tell me—"

"Questions later, Sergeant. Let me tell my story as it comes. As I got it, what had happened was this: Corry had run out of some place in Chelsea where a man was trying to induce her to go to some other place where Our Lady expected her. Corry bucked and ran out. This man, who had a name like Adosto or Orosto or something like that, went after her. He lost her in the fog and went back to wherever he started from. Lisa was there, and Lisa knew that Corry meant to see me while she was in London, and she knew my address, so she whizzed along here. In the middle of which comes another ring on my door—

bell. Corry says, 'Oh, don't open the door,' and Lisa says, 'What's the use, Corry?' Well, I opened the door."

Miss Mayo paused for a deep breath and a drink of whisky. No one attempted to take this opportunity to interrupt her.

"Outside is an ape man—a missing link—and behind him is a proposition of a different color; a real good-looker wearing a fur-lined coat, who bows and asks if Miss Denvers is here."

As Celie spoke the name Denvers, Sergeant White sprang up. Celie glared at him.

"Where's your phone, Miss Mayo?"

Celie raised an imperative hand. "Wait! I'm nearly finished. Corry screamed, 'Don't let him in!' and then the free-for-all started. The men brushed aside and then the jungle man hung on to Lisa, and the other one took out a syringe from a case. Both the girls were yelling bloody murder. Well, I sailed in. I'm pretty good at judo. I had the good-looking one on the mat when the gorilla kind of threw Lisa away and picked *me* up.

"After that, it's all hazy. I was half strangled; they put a towel or something over my head. I felt a sponge being jammed into my mouth and tied there. Before it was in, I buried my teeth in somebody's fingers. Then I was trussed up, and I mean *trussed*. It's taken me ever since to get loose. What a story! The Cable carries it tomorrow if I have to spend the night at Western Union. Now—any questions?"

It was a still night, for the westerly breeze had dropped, and the fog, undefeated, still kept its clammy fingers upon Limehouse Reach. Shipping was at a standstill. The Thames police launch made slow headway. Few other craft could have made any at all; but Sergeant Wickham, who knew every bend and inlet of the winding river from the Upper Pool to Woolwich Arsenal as well as he knew his way home, stood in the bow directing navigation.

From time to time they lay to and listened.

Deepening shadows gave warning of an anchored barge. Faint lights, high up in the mist, betrayed the presence of a fogbound ship.

They used their light sparingly. It would have betrayed their identity.

Dick Cartaret turned up the collar of his topcoat and shivered. He felt as lonely amid the feverish night activ-

ity of the Port of London as if they floated on the upper reaches of the Amazon.

Suddenly the Inspector sang out, "Sergeant Wickham!" "Sir?"

"Sure we've passed no place where they might have turned in?"

"Certain, Inspector."

"And sure they hadn't a longer start than you supposed?"

"Couldn't have. Port! Stop her! Light!" Their searchlight split the fog curtain. They had narrowly missed a hulk lying on their course. "Starboard, easy. . . . Dead slow. . . . Port. . . . Hold it. Light off. Let her go." He spoke again to Inspector Gilligan. "It was the end of my patrol. I was making for the depot when your radio message reached us. Just at that moment this strange craft—seemed to be painted white—streaked past on my starboard. I cut out and hailed 'em. No reply. They carried on downstream. I put about, then lay to and listened. Not a sound. They were lying doggo. So I ran in and picked you up. Work it out for yourself, sir."

"No," Gilligan agreed, "they haven't a long start. Where are we, approximately?"

"Lower end of Isle of Dogs, below Millwall Docks. . . . Stop her!" The motor was silenced. "*I thought I heard 'em! Listen, Inspector!*"

Everyone listened.

The purr of some kind of motor craft, just ahead in the fog, became clearly audible.

A moment later, except for now familiar muted river noises, silence fell.

"Caught 'em!" Wickham shouted exultantly. "Light! Full speed ahead!"

The police launch leaped to life. A white beam plunged into the fog, became yellow, and was lost.

There was nothing in sight.

"Slow down. Stop her."

The launch made way for some time under her own impetus, but in silence, except for a whisper of oily water cut by her bow.

Out of the gloom ahead came a mocking roar from the fugitives' motor.

"By God!" Sergeant Wickham raised a clenched fist. "They're trying to race us! Must have shipped a Thames pilot. Let her go!"

She went.

Almost certain destruction hung like a vulture over the head of every man on board. A sudden obstacle would have spelled disaster. But Wickham's blood was up. His professional reputation was at stake. A celebrated senior officer of the C.I.D. relied upon his skill. Their searchlight swept the darkness ahead, and presently they sighted their quarry.

Even Chief Inspector Gilligan betrayed symptoms of excitement. He joined Dick as he crept forward.

A white motor launch with a streak of foam like a yellow tail behind her raced through the fog. A hatless man, his head buried in the upturned collar of a heavy topcoat, crouched in the stern, looking back.

"It's Dr. Ralston!" Dick cried out.

As he shouted, something gleamed in Dr. Ralston's hand. There was no sound of a report, only a kind of *ping* and a faint impact on his hat.

Wickham raised a megaphone. "'Hoy, launch! Heave to. Police!"

Then he dropped the megaphone and clutched at the hand that had held it.

"What's wrong?" Gilligan asked.

"Something stung me."

"*Stung* you?"

"Felt like it." He stooped to recover the megaphone, stumbled, and fell forward on the deck. "What's wrong with me? Pins and needles running right up my arm!"

Dick Cartaret dropped on his knees beside Wickham, and an object or a creature that sounded like a large insect in flight whizzed past close to his ear. At the same moment Gilligan's gun cracked sharply, and the man in the stern of the launch ahead ducked out of sight.

"You damned murderous bastard!" The Inspector was in a white fury. "Come for'ard, somebody, and help carry Sergeant Wickham aft. He's ill. Slow down. Drop the chase." As a man came running, the Inspector rapped, "Nearest hospital?"

"Greenwich. Seamen's Hospital, sir."

Speed was reduced. The white launch ahead became swallowed up in mist.

"Head for Greenwich. Signal them to have an ambulance alongside, and a doctor, if possible." Gilligan bent over Wickham. "Sergeant! Sergeant Wickham!"

But there was no reply. Wickham lay as one dead.

"My God! What happened to him?" Dick asked.

"What was meant to happen to *you*. That swine carries some kind of air pistol."

"But what does he fire from it?"

"Things like the one stuck in your hat!"

Dick snatched his hat off. There, stuck in front, mercifully near the top, was something that looked like a small blue feather. He hesitated to touch it, until he recognized it for what it was—a dart.

"Pull it out. But keep clear of the point. You know now what to expect from Our Lady."

"What kind of woman . . ." Dick spoke between clenched teeth. "What kind of woman . . ."

Chapter Six

IN THE FORMER HAMMAM of the harem, constructed when Our Lady's house in the Fayyûm had belonged to a Turkish pasha who built it for his favorite concubine (long before Thomas Cook and Son ruled Egypt), Our Lady was amusing herself.

Her amusement was ages old, and had probably been enjoyed by the Turk's girl friend. It was the swing.

In the pasha's days a plunge bath, or swimming pool, was rarely met with in a hammam, public or private. They were sometimes to be found in such places as the seraglio palace at Stamboul. For there were sultans who took pleasure in watching Circassian or Georgian slave girls, many of whom were adept swimmers, disporting themselves in the pool. Possibly, Abdûl Pasha, whose name was perpetuated in this villa in the Fayyûm, still known as "Abdûl's House," had shared their tastes.

The more usual features of an Arab bath adjoined the large marble pool: steam rooms, rooms for massage, and the rest; but the deep, cool pool was Our Lady's joy.

It was of marble from the ancient quarries of Syenê, polished so highly that it resembled black onyx. Crystal-clear water pumped from a well in the garden served it, creating an illusion of shallowness, whereas in fact the bath was of considerable depth. The roof was the blue sky of Egypt, but there were woven screens that could be drawn

so as to prevent direct rays of the sun from penetrating to the pool below.

The swing, suspended from a beam high above, resembled a trapeze, except that the bar was padded with silk. It hung over the center of the rectangular black bath, half-way between two platforms, or diving boards, which faced one another across the length of the pool.

Our Lady Sumuru stood upon a platform, her bare wet body gleaming, her arms outstretched.

"The swing to me, Dolores!"

The beautiful brunette who had been stationed behind Sumuru's chair during the reception in the temple, and who now stood on the opposite platform, swung the bar across the water. Sumuru caught it deftly. Watched by Dolores, by a statuesque Nubian girl holding a fleecy robe, and by a shapely little Arab with skin the color of *café au lait*, both of whom waited by the steps of the bath, Sumuru skimmed across the water like a white swallow in flight—once, twice. She hung by her hands; a graceful, effortless movement, and she was seated on the bar. The motion of the swing accelerated. Sumuru released her hold on the ropes and dropped back, so that bent knees alone supported her. Up she swung until her head nearly touched the other platform; then back again, down. Straightening her legs, she released the swing and dived.

It was perfectly timed, beautifully executed. The crystal water seemed to receive her in an almost silent embrace. Rings spread out from the spot where the diver had entered, and then the surface became again like an unclouded mirror.

The little Arab girl, laughing ecstatically, stood right on the edge, looking down. And there, an ivory statuette in a black sarcophagus, was Our Lady, rising up slowly to the surface.

Sumuru's head in its gilded swimming cap rose above the water. She looked up with sparkling, childish eyes to the Nubian girl.

"Was that better, Bella?" she called breathlessly.

White teeth gleamed as Bella replied, "Perfect, My Lady."

But Sumuru, paddling happily about, shook her head. "I have watched you dive from the great dam at Aswân, Bella. I have yet much to learn." She raised her head to the platform. "Join me, Dolores. The water is gloriously cool."

"Very well, Madonna."

The dark girl dived with easy grace. Her creamy skin had a warm Southern glow, in contrast to which Sumuru's body resembled mother-of-pearl in its perfect whiteness.

When at last they came up the black marble steps, Bella draped Sumuru in the fleecy robe and the Arab girl placed a scarlet wrap around Dolores.

"Shall I join you when I am dressed, Madonna?" Dolores asked.

"I will send for you, child."

Sumuru retired to another room of the hammam, the floor and walls tiled in black and white. There were a number of niches containing flasks of oils, perfumes, and other refinements of the bath. An ancient Egyptian couch, modeled to represent a crouching leopard, stood in the recess of a lattice window.

Sumuru removed her bathing cap and shook out her gleaming hair, in which a hundred jeweled sparks danced, while Bella dried her delicate skin with fleecy towels; and then, as Sumuru threw herself languidly down on the couch, Bella selected a number of phials and flasks and placed them on a low table. Sumuru watched her under lowered lashes.

"Thou art black but thou art comely," she murmured softly. "The Hebrew poet, whoever he was, who wrote that line must have been thinking about such a one as you, Bella. Possibly the Queen of Sheba, but I doubt it. It made me happy, Bella, to find the boy from your own village whom you had always loved."

"My Lady!"

Bella's ebony breasts rose and fell tumultuously.

"You told me he had great beauty, and it was true. He is a perfect man. And he enjoys his work in the orchards, and so is a good worker. I gave you the permission of our order to love him, Bella, which is our form of marriage. Does he make you happy?"

Bella rolled up her eyes, so that only the whites were, startlingly, visible.

"Oh, My Lady!" She dropped to her knees. "I bless you, My Lady, for such happiness."

"Thank you, Bella. A union of two physically perfect human beings should give the Order a beautiful child. Rub me all over with the spirit of spikenard and then brush my hair."

Inspector Gilligan met Drake Roscoe at the air terminal. They drove straight to Scotland Yard. Gilligan stared at the lean, clean-cut profile of the man beside him. Except for the fact that he had lost some of the tan that the Inspector remembered, Roscoe hadn't changed much since they had been together in the West Indies.

"Know what you're up against?" Gilligan asked bluntly.

Roscoe nodded. "You're thinking of the moth and the flame? Well, it isn't like that. I didn't look for this job. It was wished onto me. Being one of the few men at liberty who know the workings of Sumuru's organization, I couldn't very well turn it down. I'll never get Coral Denver away from Sumuru. No woman who wears the snake anklet ever escapes. But I may be able to reassure William Denver, convince him she's in no danger—bodily danger, anyway."

"I have conclusive evidence Sumuru's in Egypt."

Roscoe started, turned. "So have I! And if Coral Denver isn't here, that's where I'll have to look for her."

Inspector Gilligan began to fill his pipe. "Reason to believe she *was* here. Got photographs?"

"Several."

"Good. Celie Mayo or Dick Cartaret can identify her. She was forcibly removed from Miss Mayo's flat in Sloane Street last Monday night. The chase led to the dock area, then downriver. Lost 'em in the fog. Swine answering the description of Ariosto in our Sumuru dossier murdered our Sergeant Wickham."

"How?" Roscoe spoke quietly.

"Some kind of air pistol. Dart tipped with preparation of curare. Had to break off the chase. Rushed poor Wickham to Seamen's Hospital. Too late to save him."

"Ariosto is indebted to me for the loss of two teeth," Roscoe said grimly. "God grant he may be indebted to me one day for the loss of his dirty life. You think they got Coral Denver away by sea?"

"Think so. The car they used—and discarded in Limehouse—has been traced to the Honorable Mrs. Patterley. She stated it was stolen from outside her flat in Mount Street, Mayfair. Sounded improbable, but I couldn't shake her story."

"Order of Our Lady," Roscoe murmured tonelessly. "Almost certainly a member. Find them in every layer of society."

"Agreed. Records prove it. No doubt in my mind Coral Denvers was smuggled onto the launch tied up waiting off Limehouse. No big shipping cleared the Port of London after dark. Dense fog. But it's hard to check the small stuff. Could have been put aboard any vessel anchored between Limehouse Reach and the Nore."

When they were seated in Inspector Gilligan's bleak office, Drake Roscoe opened his brief case and took out a number of papers.

"I have clear evidence that Coral Denvers is in the company of a girl called Lisa Madderley, that both belong to the Order, and that their immediate destination is Port Said!"

"Take a look at this." Gilligan opened a large portfolio and selected a photograph from a mass of material there. It was a slightly fogged but recognizable picture of Princess Astar, enlarged from the tiny negative in Sergeant Farrel's cigarette-lighter camera. From a drawer he took out a powerful glass and handed both across the desk to Roscoe.

Roscoe bent over the picture, glass in hand. His face remained expressionless. But he was studying the Princess's left ear, which was just visible, as she had her head turned slightly toward Marûk Pasha.

He smiled grimly, laid down the lens.

"That settles it. Sumuru has a double, whom I met only once. As I believe you know"—he pointed to the big portfolio—"there's only one visible difference between them. Sumuru has no lobes to her ears. This is a photograph of Sumuru."

Gilligan knocked ashes from his pipe. "According to Farrel—man who took the picture—she's known in Cairo as Princess Astar, shortly to be married to the man in the photograph. He is Marûk Pasha, some kind of minister, reputed very wealthy."

"Astar is one of her names," Roscoe told him. "It may even be her real one. Although she must be richer than the Rockefellers, nearly as rich as the Church of Rome, she can still use Marûk's money. She's a glutton for dollars." A faraway look crept into his eyes. "God knows where her adventures began—or when. But the earliest record we have of her marriages starts with a Japanese, the Marquis Sumuru. He committed hara-kiri, and she came into a great fortune. Next recorded, Baron Rikter, Swedish millionaire. Another fortune from him."

"Then," Gilligan broke in, "comes Lord Carradale.

Sumuru inherited the controlling interest in Carradale Aircraft. The last I have here is the late Duc de Séverac."

Drake Roscoe lighted a cigar. "She's a financial genius," he declared. "These vast legacies were distributed among members of the Order before suspicion arose, in each case, that Baroness Rikter, Lady Carradale, and the rest were one and the same—Sumuru!"

"Isn't much," Gilligan said slowly, "about Sumuru you don't know. Mystery to me why you're still alive!"

Roscoe smiled. But it wasn't a happy smile. "She doesn't care enough to bother. She doesn't give a damn. She knows—so do you—that when I had her life in my hands, I was powerless at the last moment to smash her. Also, she loves danger. She plays against the gallows the way some gamblers play against the roulette wheel. Anyway, if you're acquainted with the present Egyptian police service, I don't have to tell you that we'd never get her out of the country."

Gilligan nodded gloomily. "Different story if our fellows were in charge again. According to your report, which, you recall, came into my hands in Jamaica, this Egyptian college seems to be her base out there. Have you actually *seen* it?"

"Some of it. Scores of children are taught there—all born to members of the Order."

"But how's the thing conducted?" Gilligan wanted to know. "You can't *hide* a big school like that!"

"The *school* isn't hidden. Anyone can see it, or even visit it, if he has a permit. The place isn't many miles from Medina, but it's on a desert road, hopeless for cars. It's on the site of an ancient Christian monastery. It's called the Convent of Our Lady."

"Supposed to be Roman Catholic?"

"No, sir. It's nonsectarian—so the sister who receives visitors (very rare) tells them. The convent is surrounded by acres of orchards and gardens, which fascinate the visitors. They are shown the dormitories, the classrooms, the refectory, and so on. Even allowed to talk to some of the girls—charming little creatures of every nationality under the sun, all beautiful and with perfect manners. But there are never any openings for new, outside pupils. The Convent of Our Lady is always full up."

"And does Sumuru live there?"

Roscoe shook his head. "She lives in a big Arab villa called Abdûl's House right on the fringe of the convent property. The mother superior is Dolores d'Eze, one of

the most perfect brunettes any man ever set eyes on. But there's a junior mother who takes charge when Dolores is away—which is often."

"What happens to male children?" Gilligan asked curiously.

"A man known simply as Caspar supervises their training. At quite an early age they are sent somewhere else. I never found out where."

"Hm. What becomes of *ugly* children? Can't all turn out little cherubs?"

"No one knows, outside the initiates in the Order. The College of Initiates is *not* open to visitors. The supposed site of the famous Labyrinth, referred to by ancient travelers, was surveyed by Flinders Petrie. But Sumuru has forgotten more about the Labyrinth than any Egyptologist ever knew. There were no less than *fifteen hundred* underground apartments—and that's where the College of Initiates is located!"

Sumuru, wearing her favorite Arab indoor dress, lay stretched on the *mink-covered*⁴ divan. Beside her, on an ivory table, there was a bowl half filled with rubies of varied size, color, and luster. Our Lady examined them one by one. Caspar stood watching her.

"Either Cassim grows careless," she said, "or he has lost his cunning." She dropped the gem she held in her fingers back into the jade bowl. "There is none here I would keep. They are of poor quality and badly cut. Sell them—if you can."

Caspar extended eloquent palms. "The mines are probably worked out, Madonna. They are very old. Conditions there are most unwholesome. It would be no loss, I believe, to close them."

Sumuru shook her head. She smiled, watching him through lowered lashes. "It would be a severe loss, Caspar. The ruby mines are my Siberia. I have only to suggest to any of our people that a visit to the ruby mines might enable them to adjust their perspective in order to reduce them to abject humility. You know it well."

She laughed—the musical, bubbling laughter of a care-free child. Caspar, eyes lowered, continued to watch her.

"I observe, Caspar," the golden voice went on, "that you are cultivating the custom of the Indian yogi who contemplates his navel. You, however, are even more original.

You contemplate mine. Might I ask if you find this exercise rewarding?"

Unmoved, smiling serenely, Caspar shrugged his slight shoulders. "The Arab philosophers, My Lady, with whose works you are more familiar than I am, and who recognized desire, as Madonna does, for the lever that moves the world, have told us that the navel is one of the seven steps to seduction."

"Am I to infer, Caspar, that you suspect me of attempting to seduce you?"

"My Lady jests. The beauty of a woman's shape first deserts her at the waistline, and I was reflecting that Madonna has the body of a young girl."

Sumuru raised her beautiful eyes to study the ivory mask that was Caspar's face. "Since I know you to be incapable of inane compliments, to what profound thought does this reflection lead us?"

"To the thought, Madonna, that you are *not* a young girl, but a phenomenon such as the world has rarely seen; to the further thought that your strange gods have favored you for many moons."

Sumuru displayed no emotion. The lovely features remained tranquil. "Let me follow these thoughts, Caspar. You, an old dealer in human merchandise, are a connoisseur of women, and of men. You are eternally looking for, and fearing to find, evidence of the passing years on my features, on my body. Let me reassure you, old friend. You never will!"

And Sumuru began to laugh again, that glorious, joyously pagan laughter which had haunted many a man to the hour of his destruction.

She ceased to laugh suddenly. It was as though a door had been shut, damming up the music of a distant orchestra.

The note of a bell, three times repeated, stole sweetly around the harem apartment. Sumuru sat upright, tensed.

"The London report, Caspar! Bring it to me. Hurry, hurry!"

Caspar saluted her, calmly and ceremoniously, and walked out of the room. When he returned, carrying a sheaf of notes, Sumuru remained as he had left her, upright, chin raised imperiously, like a queen of Egypt on her throne.

"Sit there before me on the stool, Caspar, and read."

Chapter Seven

"THERE'S NO DOUBT in my mind," Drake Roscoe stated, "that Coral Denvers is on board some unidentified craft bound for Port Said." He glanced across Inspector Gilligan's office. "You, Mr. Cartaret, have recognized the photograph I showed you as that of the girl who appealed to you for help on Chelsea Embankment. How she came to be in the Rolls later the same night we know from Miss Celie Mayo, from whose flat she was abducted. Miss Mayo has further identified the girl who joined her. She is Lisa Madderley, and, like Coral Denvers, a member of Sumuru's secret order."

"What steps have you taken?" Dick wanted to know. Gilligan removed his pipe from his mouth. "I've asked the Egyptian port authorities to watch all female passengers landing in Port Said, and to detain Lisa Madderley if she appears at the Eastern Telegraph Office to claim a registered letter containing her passport."

"How can she get ashore without it?" Dick wanted to know.

Gilligan replaced his pipe. "You don't know the Egyptian port authorities," he remarked. "I have warrants for the arrest of the man known as Ariosto and the man known as Philo. But Port Said is no longer under British jurisdiction."

"If ever I get my hands on Ariosto," Drake Roscoe declared savagely, "I'll undertake to balance all outstanding accounts. I have unlimited funds, and with luck I should make Port Said by air, even now, ahead of any ship that left London as late as last Monday."

The Inspector's expression wasn't optimistic. "If you miss 'em there, do you know your way to Sumuru's base?"

"Yes." Drake Roscoe looked very grim. "I'll have to sneak up on it along the caravan roads after dark. I was in Egypt for a year and a half during the war, and I know some Arabic. But I'll have to look out for a reliable man who knows the lingo better than I do."

"No need to look further!" Dick Cartaret broke in. "I was studying for a colonial appointment—Egyptian school-

master—when I joined the RAF. Got my wings and was posted out to Heliopolis. Had a bad crash, and active service was impossible for a long time, so the top brass gave me a staff job in Cairo. I speak Arabic nearly as well as I speak English.”

“But—”

“My time is my own, for a month ahead, anyway. And I’d like to see Egypt again.”

“And then, there’s Coral Denver,” Gilligan interpolated dryly.

“Don’t let *that* motive drive you!” Drake Roscoe rapped out the words like a challenge. “I’ve seen others go that way. Sumuru’s women are like marsh lights. Follow them, and you’re lost. You’re just another fly lured into Sumuru’s web. They’re trained to trap men.” He spoke bitterly. “I’ve seen them at work.”

“Coral Denver was no decoy!” Dick flared. “I never saw a girl more frightened in my life. She may belong to this damned order, but she’s sorry she does!”

“Not the first one,” Roscoe told him. “Come if you like. I’ll be glad to have you along. You’re the very man I’m looking for. Get a visa from the Egyptian Consulate, and prepare to lose yourself.”

In a well-equipped office, with up-to-date bookcases, filing cabinets, and other time-saving devices of modern business, Sumuru sat at a desk commodious enough for the president of a large corporation (which, in a sense, she was). She wore a white linen frock, a striped silk scarf tied over her hair.

The dark-eyed Dolores sat at a smaller desk on the other side of the office. She was checking accounts.

Presently Our Lady, having read through a closely typed page that lay before her, looked up, watched Dolores at work for a while, and then said, “Tell me something.”

Dolores, startled, glanced across. “Yes, Madonna?”

Their conversation was in French.

“You no longer love Ariosto?”

“No, Madonna.”

“You are quite sure?”

Dolores’ charming features remained calm. “Madonna knows that no member of our order can ever be in doubt upon such a point.”

As Sumuru’s disconcerting gaze remained fixed upon her, Dolores dropped her long lashes.

"You would feel no resentment if I sent Ariosto to the ruby mines?"

Dolores bit her lip, but looked up, her eyes steady. "None, My Lady. He is clever, but his character I despise."

"Yes," Sumuru mused, "Ariosto is very clever, as a scientist. As a man, he is both a scoundrel and a fool. Indeed, to be a scoundrel is to be a fool. He must be taught a lesson. Your beauty, of body, of mind, of heart, mark you as the most desirable of all those fair women with whom I have surrounded myself. Ariosto is not satisfied. He takes outrageous liberties with your happiness. But, when he disobeys an order of mine, he takes one liberty too many. He imperils the safety of us all."

The golden voice grew softer as Sumuru's words grew more harsh.

"In London, where he was charged with meeting Sister Coralie, whom I had summoned from New York for a personal conference, as you know, he allowed his admiration of her beauty to conquer his discretion. The consequences threaten all of us with disaster. What I had regarded as a passing mischance now appears as a major problem. A woman in London, a school friend of Coralie's, a journalist to whom she ran in her distress, has told such a story in a New York newspaper, that a plain trail has been laid to our very doors."

"I know, Madonna. It is truly alarming."

"And"—Sumuru's voice was little more than a whisper—"we owe it to Ariosto! A detective from Scotland Yard took my photograph in Marûk Pasha's garden in Cairo. At the time, what did I care? I made no attempt to have the picture intercepted. But now matters are different. For, to crown all his follies, Ariosto has killed an English police officer in London!" She paused, staring unseeingly before her, the beautiful features set.

"One may assassinate princes, politicians, poets, painters; but to assassinate a policeman is the signal for a world-wide man hunt. Scotland Yard no longer has authority at Port Said, and Marûk Pasha will clear the Fleur-de-Lis, with Coralie aboard, through the Canal. I have decided to use the Red Sea route, for safety, and she will be put ashore in the inlet by the dhow, and travel overland at night to the Nile. You have come this way yourself, Dolores."

"More than once, Madonna," Dolores murmured. "Twice with My Lady."

"I am telling you this, Dolores, because I wish you to meet her and to give final instructions to Captain Montez and to Sister Lisa, who will be returning immediately to America. Ariosto leaves the yacht at Port Said."

"Very well, Madonna. When do you wish me to start?"

"When the Fleur-de-Lis enters the Canal."

"We're here!" Drake Roscoe stepped out of a taxi before the Eastern Exchange Hotel, and turned to Dick Cartaret, who followed. "Remember this: Think of yourself as a secret agent in any enemy country. This is Port Said. Figure Sumuru's spies as buzzing around you like wasps. I've fixed accommodations here for Donald Ross—that's me—and secretary, Richard Carter—that's you. Two rooms with bath. Come on."

Dick held back. "But won't we have to show our passports?"

"Passports here!" Roscoe took them out of his pocket. "Inspector Gilligan is tied hand and foot by official red tape, but what he doesn't know about the game nobody can teach him. I borrowed one of the photographs you had made for the Egyptian Consulate in London. I imitated your handwriting when I signed it Richard Carter."

"But—"

"There was no time to discuss details with you then. We had a plane to catch. One of Gilligan's staff introduced me to London's star passport faker. His office is in St. Paul's Churchyard! Come on, Carter."

And in the room allotted to Roscoe:

"Listen," he said. "I'm going right to the Eastern Telegraph Office. Something warns me that the engine trouble at the take-off has blown our chances. But if I'm not too late, when Miss Lisa Madderley calls for her registered letter, I shall be waiting for her. Don't move out of this hotel until I come back. If I'm detained I'll call you. But stay here."

On his way out, Drake Roscoe had almost reached the street door when he pulled up sharply, turned. Dusk was still far off, and a slanting sunbeam shining through a window had seemed to cast a grotesque moving shadow that he glimpsed out of the corner of his eye.

The window was set in a recess, where he saw several

coffee tables. There were cushioned seats around the three walls.

But there was no one there to account for the moving shadow.

He concluded that his imagination had played a trick with him and hurried out onto Shâria Fuâd. He had only two blocks to go to the Eastern Telegraph Office, and although the heat of Port Said was overpowering at that hour, he reached it in a few minutes.

An impassive Egyptian clerk received him. Roscoe laid on the desk the radiogram that he had picked up from Stephanie Lawrence before leaving New York.

"Miss Madderley has asked me to collect her letter," he said casually. "I have her authority here, and also my passport. I do all her business."

The "authority" was another masterpiece by the talented artist of St. Paul's Churchyard.

The clerk shook his head. "So sorry. Miss Madderley called for her letter this morning."

Drake Roscoe's heart sank. There was no implication in the intoned words, no hint of suspicion.

"Stupid of her not to have told me," Roscoe muttered. "Did she leave any message?"

"No, sir."

The clerk had resumed his entries in some sort of ledger; he didn't even look up.

"Do you know where she's staying?"

"No, sir."

Roscoe walked out into blazing sunshine. His premonition had been correct. He was too late.

Had the unidentified ship in which Coral Denvers, and presumably Lisa Madderley, had left London sailed already? Was the mystery vessel somewhere down the Canal? Or was she still tied up in Port Said?

He was on the water front. And he was feeling desperate. At least he could look over the shipping in sight, even if he didn't know what ship he was looking for.

Or dared he hope for any information from the custom-house? It was worth trying.

The shed was empty. No ship had docked recently, it seemed. He was making his way to the office when he saw coming toward him an unmistakable Englishman.

Drake Roscoe stopped him. "Excuse me, sir. I'm an American newspaperman. I've been advised that some

people I want to interview arrived today from England, but, I don't know in what ship. You look as though you might know something about the Canal. I wonder if you could help me. My name is Donald Ross."

"Certainly I know something about the Canal. Twenty-five years with the company. Thirstiest job on earth. Wilkinson's my name."

Mr. Wilkinson's laughing but slightly bleary eyes suggested that he had struggled hard to deal with this thirst.

"Glad to have met you. What ships from London have come in today?"

"London?" Mr. Wilkinson gazed blankly. "Don't get much from London, you know. Not passenger ships. Had a Bibby liner in early, out of Southampton."

"But nothing from London?"

Mr. Wilkinson stroked his short, graying military mustache. "American tanker went through about noon. She came from London. Carried no passengers. Then there's that showpiece tied up out there beyond the pontoons. Motor yacht, *Fleur-de-Lis*. Nobody's been ashore, so far as I know, except the captain, to pay the Canal dues. She left the Thames last Monday."

Roscoe stared out to where a graceful vessel lay, painted white with a gilded load line, her brasswork winking at the sun.

"Who owns her?"

"Well, she was in a shipyard somewhere down the Thames since the death of the late Lord Carradale, who had her built, until Marûk Pasha bought her."

"Marûk Pasha?" Roscoe's gray eyes lighted up.

"Yes. Big shot in Cairo. I'm told he had her completely refitted and sailed out here."

"Is there a party on board?"

"No passengers invoiced, but a pretty big crew."

"I'd like to make sure. Think they'd allow me on board?"

Mr. Wilkinson stared at him as an ornithologist might stare at a three-headed swan. "My good fellow, really! I don't know where you've come from, unless by parachute out of a space ship. Have you any idea how many permits you must get to go aboard a craft lying here? Let me tell you: Five! Egypt doesn't belong to *us* any more, you know. It's a totalitarian state." Mr. Wilkinson had some slight difficulty with "totalitarian," but he won on points.

"Sounds that way," Roscoe agreed.

"Anyhow, there's a pilot just going off to her. Of course, you can radio; but if you take my advice, you'll come along to the club and have a quick one with me."

Chapter Eight

SUMURU, WRAPPED in a fleecy white gown, lay back in a chair, her eyes closed, while Bella, her Nubian maid, brushed her hair. She had just returned from the hammam, having had a steam bath followed by a plunge in the cool water of the pool. On a table beside her were an Arab coffeepot and a tiny porcelain cup. She was smoking a yellow-wrapped cigarette in an onyx holder.

"Your touch is soothing, Bella," she murmured sleepily, "and today I need to be soothed. Our fate may rest upon a wise decision."

There was a musical tinkling sound. It came from a gauzy curtain hung in the entrance to the room, to which a number of tiny bells were attached.

Caspar came in, almost noiselessly, and stood beside Our Lady. "Madonna, your plans are arranged down to the smallest detail."

"Summarize them, Caspar." Sumuru spoke drowsily. "I am tired, and I know your work is never faulty. And, Bella, your touch becomes rough. If Caspar is studying your naval, his interest is purely impersonal. Continue, Caspar."

"I hear and obey, Madonna. But, first, surprising and disturbing news has just come to hand. Ariosto reports that Richard Cartaret, the man who attempted to abduct Sister Coralie from his keeping, is in Port Said!"

Caspar paused. Sumuru made no comment. The onyx cigarette holder dropped from listless fingers. He hesitated, watching her lowered lashes. The lashes were suddenly raised. Brilliant eyes regarded him.

"Well, my friend? He is in Port Said. What else?"

"He is not alone, Madonna. Drake Roscoe is with him."

"Really?" Sumuru murmured. "This is not surprising. Sister Lisa's bungling in New York made it highly probable. Ariosto's insanity in London completed the good

work. Instruct Sister Zara to learn more about this man."

"I have already done so, Madonna."

"Fortunate that our enemies are so few, and our friends so many in Egypt. On one point we may be easy in mind. The Fleur-de-Lis will be permitted to pass through the Canal into the Red Sea. From the moment Sister Coralie lands, the utmost secrecy must be observed."

"From that point, Madonna, I believe we have provided for every conceivable emergency."

"You have, of course, transmitted my order to Ariosto and Philo to report to me here at noon tomorrow?"

"It is done."

"You have arranged with Achmed for the usual escort to the coast and back to Dêr Byâd?"

"His Arabs will cover both journeys, Madonna."

"You never fail me, Caspar. Please refill my coffee cup before you go. I should avoid coffee. It is ruinous for the complexion. But there are times when nothing else can take its place."

Dick Cartaret watched Drake Roscoe striding away down Shâria Fuâd, then went into the bar and ordered a drink.

This was a slack time, and there were no other customers in the bar. He spoke to the native bartender in fluent Arabic.

"How is business these days?"

"Not so many customers like yourself, effendi. Now, it is different. But—*ma'lêsh!* We get along."

Dick, who knew all the facts of the case that were known to Roscoe, thought he would make a few personal inquiries.

"I suppose you don't see much here of the wealthy Cairo crowd—Marûk Pasha and the others?"

"Very rarely, effendi, although Marûk has much property in Port Said. It is said, though, that his latest mistress is ruining him."

Encouraged by this, Dick ordered another drink and asked the man to join him. He accepted with gratitude and mixed himself an appalling concoction that appeared to consist chiefly of grenadine.

"Who is the lady?" Dick asked, although he suspected what the answer would be.

"She is called Princess Astar, and I am told she is very beautiful. But I am told also that she squeezes gold from Marûk like milk from a goat."

"Where does she live? In Cairo?"

"Sometimes, I think. But my brother, who has a shop in Beni Suêf, tells me that she has a wonderful house in the Fayyûm, where she is much loved and respected. She is very charitable, and is also *patronne* of a large convent school in that neighborhood."

Everything Dick heard tended to confirm Roscoe's assertion that this extraordinary woman never attempted to hide herself. On the contrary, assuming a variety of personalities, she lived more nearly the life of a Hollywood screen star than that of a badly wanted criminal.

When he came out of the bar and walked along the lobby toward the entrance, he noticed a girl talking to the desk clerk. Although she was smartly dressed in European fashion, he could see that she was an Egyptian, and that she appeared to be extraordinarily pretty.

Just as he passed, the clerk pointed in his direction, and the girl turned, then came over.

"Please excuse me." Her great, dark eyes were raised to him. "But you are Mr. Cartaret, yes?"

"Yes." The admission of his identity was out before he could check the word.

"Miss Denvers is passing the hotel when you arrive, and she asks me to hurry back here and try to find you."

"Miss Denvers!" Dick was so taken aback that he could think of nothing else to say. He was surprised to find how rapidly his heart had begun to beat.

"She escapes this morning from the house where she is locked up. I help her. But there is no time for this now. We are driving on our way to a place where she can hide when she sees you. She has no friend here—no one to protect her. She dare not be seen. And they will search. She cannot hide from them for long."

Dick had recovered from the shock. He had made a fool of himself about his name, but what a triumph, when Drake Roscoe got back, to be able to say, "Your job's completed. Here is Coral Denvers!" He looked into the dark eyes watching him, and read anxiety, doubt.

"Have we far to go?" he asked eagerly.

"No, no. Five minute. I have my"—she hesitated for half a beat—"guardian's car outside."

Dick noted the slight pause and wondered if this Egyptian beauty might be the prized treasure of some rich man's collection. The car was a new Cadillac, and the driver

wore a smart uniform. He was an Arab, and as he held the door open the girl said softly, "*Kâwâm*."

As this meant "hurry," it was, perhaps, a natural order to give to the chauffeur; but there was something in the lowered voice and the exchange of glances that rang a sudden note of warning.

Dick glanced aside at his attractive companion. "You haven't told me your own name yet."

She turned fully to him, white teeth gleaming between parted lips. "Zara—Zara el-Kahmal."

The Arab intonation prompted him to reply in Arabic, but again some inner warning stopped him. It might be wiser to leave Zara ignorant of the fact that he understood that language.

He was unfamiliar with Port Said, but he had noted that the car, speeding up Shâria Eugénie, was now turning left into what was clearly the native quarter.

"You seem to have picked a queer district, Zara." He spoke casually, trying to conquer growing uneasiness.

The streets had become narrow and far from clean. All Western traces had disappeared.

Zara laughed gaily. There was a note of excitement in her laughter. "My guardian is a wealthy merchant. He has a warehouse near here, where there is an office."

"And is that where Miss Denvers is hiding?"

"Yes. I could think of no place more safe. My guardian much respected. See how the people make way."

It was an undeniable fact that the people made way. The Arab chauffeur was driving like fury through the narrow streets. Pedestrians sprang left and right for their lives. Their expressions registered anything but respect.

With a shrieking of brakes, the big car was pulled up before a dingy building that appeared to be uninhabited. Shuttered windows faced the street; beside them was a large, heavy door, over which, in faded blue paint and partly indecipherable, appeared some name that ended in IDES. Above, where there seemed to be some kind of living quarters, the windows also were shuttered. And all the shutters were bleached and dilapidated.

"Quick. We must hurry. They may have followed us."

The chauffeur sprang from the car, crossed to the door, and opened it. Dick jumped out and turned to assist Zara.

There came a swift padding sound behind him—a dreadfully familiar sound—and a great hand was clapped over

his mouth. A herculean arm swept him from his feet and carried him through the open doorway.

His head was dragged sideways and up so that he could see nothing but sky, and his arms were wrapped in that bearlike grip, but he kicked back viciously with both heels and registered several hits.

"Don't hurt him, Philo!" It was Zara's voice, speaking Arabic. "This is an order."

Philo answered with a wild-animal snarl. The street door slammed, and they were in darkness.

Then came another voice: "Hold him still."

This voice spoke English. It was the voice of Dr. Ralston.

Sensitive fingers touched his neck. There came an acute stinging sensation. Dick knew that a hypodermic needle had been plunged home.

"Hold him. He will soon stop struggling."

A sensation of numbness began to creep over him.

Drake Roscoe returned for the fifth or sixth time to the hotel. He had done everything that had occurred to him, everything it lay in his power to do, to trace the Cadillac in which Dick Cartaret had been driven away. The doorman on duty when he came back from his visit to the Eastern Telegraph Office had described the car and its occupants. He had never seen either the girl or the chauffeur before.

It had been clear from the first that Cartaret had swum into Sumuru's net. Heaven only knew what story the glamorous Egyptian had told, but, as he knew she must be a graduate of Sumuru's college, it was easy to understand how such a character as Dick Cartaret had fallen for the bait. Many more experienced men had fallen that way before.

Roscoe ordered another double Scotch, trying to ignore the fact that he had had too many already. The hotel had come to life. Somewhere a dance band was playing. Wishing above all things to avoid company, he carried his drink along to a quiet, dimly lighted alcove, and sat down to think.

He was tired, and some time elapsed before he began to find something familiar about this alcove. Then, in a flash, it all came back: his experience that afternoon; the distorted shadow across his path; the unaccountable absence of the person who had cast that shadow.

Although he had dismissed the incident at the time, later developments suggested that one of Sumuru's dangerous

servants had been lurking there and had seen him go out.

A swift examination of the alcove solved the mystery of the spy's sudden disappearance. There was a door partly concealed behind the draperies in the arched entrance. He opened it and found a closet containing a vacuum cleaner, mops, buckets, and other domestic implements. There was ample room for a man inside.

Why, Roscoe asked himself, had the man hidden?

Obviously, because he knew he would be recognized if Roscoe saw him.

And as he stood there, peering into the dark recess, he saw a piece of crumpled paper lying on the floor. He picked it up and reclosed the closet door; then he sat down again and smoothed the paper out. On it was scribbled:

TIMONIDES

Shâria Abû el-Hassan and Shâria Ibrahim.

He rolled it into a ball and tossed it on a tray. He found his cigar case was empty and pushed a bell nearby on the wall. A boy came along, and Roscoe ordered cigarettes and coffee, then called the boy back and made it another Scotch.

A mood of desperation was stealing over him. His precautions had been wasted. Sumuru was aware of his arrival in Port Said, and Sumuru had trapped Cartaret; therefore she would know all that Cartaret knew of his plans. (He was all too well acquainted with her method of obtaining such information.)

When the boy came back with cigarettes and the drink, Roscoe settled back to think.

It was a hundred to one chance, but still a possibility, that the scribbled address had been dropped by the man hiding in the closet. Roscoe picked it out of the tray, which, fortunately, the boy hadn't emptied, and smoothed it out again. On careful inspection he saw that at some time it had been folded, like a note. He turned it over.

Just decipherable, penciled on the other side in small, neat writing, he read one word: "Philo."

Probably the nameless Egyptian beauty had met Philo here for the purpose of giving him this slip of paper. . . .

From the silent void where he lay, helpless but oddly content, Dick Cartaret heard someone speaking. The voice was in some way familiar, but he couldn't make out in what language it spoke.

"And so," the voice said, "acting on a sudden impulse, I came along. I don't know if I'm in love with her. She is tremendously attractive. Yes, I often think about her. . . . Well, it could be that, too. Anyone who's a writer would want to meet a fabulous creature like Sumuru, if he had the chance."

The words sounded like one side of a conversation, in which the other side was inaudible. The audible speaker seemed strangely familiar, yet Dick couldn't identify him, nor could he—the queerest thing of all—make up his mind in what language he spoke.

"Yes, he's going out to some place in the Fayyûm. . . . I don't know. He hasn't told me. . . . I say I don't know. I can't tell you what I don't know!"

A note of irritation, of anger, had crept into the voice. And at the same time, he felt an urge to throw off the lethargy that held him inert, to identify this voice, to leave this silent place in which he lay. The sense of contentment deserted him. He must make an effort. . . .

"He is reviving. Keep him under."

This was another voice—a voice he knew and hated: the voice of Dr. Ralston.

He tried to cry out, clenched his fists. But a cloud swept down upon him, and he drifted away again into remote space.

His return was painful. He no longer experienced that languorous content; his head throbbed, his limbs ached. But he listened, for the voice was speaking again:

"No one will search for me. No one who might be interested knows where I've gone. . . . Yes, my mother and father are living. . . . No, there's no other woman. . . ."

The pain in his head became unendurable. Just before oblivion, he identified the voice.

It was his own!

Chapter Nine

SUMURU LAY on the divan in her favorite room, where a fountain tinkled in its marble basin, and there lingered the perfume of a past in which some favored odalisque had called this love nest her own. Perhaps it pleased her im-

perious spirit to reign alone where none but a man's concubines had reigned before her.

A black lacquer cabinet stood on the ivory table. A blue light gleamed in one of its panels. A soft voice was speaking, in Arabic.

"He is harmless, My Lady, this man. He is not an agent, as we believed. He is a writer of books and plays. It was an accident that brought him into this affair. A romantic imagination led him here, for he loves Egypt, where he lived for a time toward the end of the war and after. He speaks a pure Arabic. Indeed, Madonna, he was drawn here by a great desire to see My Lady."

My Lady laughed—that lovely, musical laughter.

"His desire shall be gratified, Zara! Tell me, first, is he infatuated with Sister Coralie?"

"I believe he is, My Lady. He admits she is very beautiful, but he seems to be trying to forget her. He said, over and over again, that he was with her for only ten minutes, so how could he love her?"

Sumuru laughed softly again. "Is there another woman?"

"No, My Lady."

"Is he personable?"

"He is, My Lady. His features are somewhat rugged, but he has the body of an athlete. He is fit and strong, and has great courage."

"Have you found favor in his eyes, Zara?"

"I think I could have won him, My Lady, at least for a time, if he had not distrusted me. Now—never."

"He is, then, no weakling?"

"No, My Lady. He is foolish, but not weak."

"Have any of his books been published, any of his plays staged?"

"Ariosto says that seven of his books are published, and two plays have been staged in London."

"How long did Ariosto's interrogation last?"

"Two hours, My Lady."

"An hour too long. Ariosto is a sadist."

"What are My Lady's orders?"

"That he be released. Instruct Ariosto. He must find a way. Let Cartaret rejoin his friend Drake Roscoe, and a warm welcome awaits them both here."

Shâria Abû el-Hassan by night was not an inviting thoroughfare, and the streets crossing it were even less attractive. The air was filled with strange, unsavory odors.

Drake Roscoe had managed to find out that Shâria Ibrahim ran parallel to Shâria Abû, but that some other street, which seemed to be nameless, lay between them. Whether the address written on the paper meant that Timonides had two premises, or that he was to be found at some point between, he had to guess.

As he entered Shâria Abû and studied the names over the shops, the size of the job he had undertaken began to drawn upon him.

Why—except that most of the Greeks in Port Said were shopkeepers—had he jumped to the conclusion that Timonides kept a shop? He saw boards beside some of the doors of the low buildings carrying as many as twelve names.

The *bowwâb*, or doorman, at the hotel had never heard of Timonides, but he told him that in Shâria Abû a somewhat dubious character called Mahmûd Abd el-Horêb had a café, and Mahmûd knew all there was to know about the native quarter.

On the corner of the next cross street Roscoe came to, he found a dark and forbidding café. Two native workmen who looked like dock laborers were seated together outside. In the dim interior he could see nothing but emptiness. The sign above the café was in Arabic. This looked like the place described by the *bowwâb*.

He walked in, clapped his hands. The premises reeked of coffee and rancid oil.

From impenetrable shadows a figure materialized. It was that of a bent, wrinkled, white-bearded Egyptian. From beneath bushy white eyebrows his jet eyes glittered.

"You speak English?"

The old man extended lean palms. "But of course, my gentleman. I am dragoman of Cook's for many years. I speak also French. I am called Mahmûd."

"Then I think"—Roscoe pulled out a wad of notes—"you may be able to help me, Mahmûd."

"But of course, my gentleman. Pray sit down while I bring coffee—for although man, who is superior to the other animals, can walk upright, even the Prophet (may God be good to him) was forced to squat on his hams or to lie flat sometimes. This divan is comfortable."

Roscoe took the proffered seat. Mahmûd the dragoman disappeared into darkness. Roscoe thought that the aged guide hadn't invested his savings too well, to judge by the absence of customers. Presently Mahmûd returned,

carrying a brass tray upon which were a pot of thick Arab coffee, two small china cups, and a box of Egyptian cigarettes.

"Business is very dull tonight, Mahmûd," he remarked.

Mahmûd poured coffee, offered the cigarettes, and shrugged his shoulders. "You must understand, my gentleman, that I do not rely upon the custom of passers-by. A great poet has said, 'If one path be closed, seek another.' No. Mahmûd is a guide to secret places, and an organizer. Pray tell me, sir, who sent you to me?"

Roscoe took a sip of the hot, sticky coffee. He needed a clear, cool brain here. He regretted that last Scotch. In order to avail himself of the services of this garrulous old scoundrel he must do nothing to arouse Mahmûd's suspicion.

"Hassan, the *bowwâb* at the Eastern Exchange," he told him.

"Ah!" Mahmûd rubbed his lean palms together so that they almost crackled. "Indeed, he is a good friend of mine, my gentleman. Pray tell me, sir, is it for tonight you wish entertainment—and how large is the party?"

"I'm not looking for entertainment, Mahmûd. I'm looking for a man called Timonides, and if I can find him I will pay you well."

Mahmûd's beard seemed to bristle. His eyes glittered like hot coals. "Excuse me for one moment." He stood up. "Those men outside are going and they have not paid for what they had."

He shuffled out to the street. Roscoe saw him talking to the two men. They went away immediately. Then Mahmûd came back and sat down facing him again.

"This is a strange mission of which you tell me, my gentleman. Timonides was one dear to my heart, but, alas, he sups tonight in the Paradise of Good Greeks (may God be kind to him)."

"You mean he is dead?"

"He joined his fathers many moons ago."

"But his business?"

"His great stock of *objets d'art* remains in his *magasin*, for I am told that there is much dispute among the heirs."

"For whom, then, do I inquire at this *magasin*? And where is it?"

Mahmûd waved a vague hand. "It is a considerable distance from here, sir. And most assuredly no one would be there at this hour."

"All the same, Mahmûd"—Roscoe took out the roll of crackling money—"I want you to show me this *magasin*. Then, if I have to return in the morning, I shall know the way."

A great struggle seemed to be taking place in the breast of Mahmûd Abd el-Horêb. His twinkling eyes were fixed hypnotically upon the money, but something appeared to be holding him back.

"It is written that night was meant for repose. If you will return in the morning, my gentleman—"

"I want to go now, Mahmûd."

Mahmûd's tongue darted rapidly between his dry lips. "I must get my grandson, Aziz, to mind my *kahwa* while I am gone." He stood up. "I beg you will wait, sir."

"Hurry!" Roscoe snapped, as Mahmûd shuffled out.

Alone in the dingy, ill-lighted place, he wondered if his tactics had failed, wondered if the old hypocrite had gone to warn someone. He might very well be in the employ of Sumuru, might know what had happened to Cartaret.

There were few passers-by, and no one came into the café. Yet, somewhere not far away, there was active night life. He stood in the open doorway, listening to vague pipe music and women's voices. Then he saw old Mahmûd coming, accompanied by a younger Egyptian.

After a rapid conversation in Arabic, Mahmûd left Aziz in the shop and set out with thinly veiled reluctance.

Moving at surprising speed for one of his years, he led Roscoe to the end of the cross street and then turned right. Few windows were lighted, but once or twice he glimpsed women on balconies above. This was an unpleasantly furtive district.

They had walked for some distance when Roscoe saw a native cart, drawn by a donkey, coming toward them. A large packing case was on the cart, which was in charge of two men, one leading the donkey, the other walking beside the cart. Something about the pair seemed familiar.

As they passed he asked sharply, "Weren't those the men who sat outside your *kahwa*, Mahmûd?" he asked.

"It could be so, my gentleman. My eyes are not strong, and certainly those two sons of mules would never salute me."

Roscoe, recognizing that he might be mistaken, thought he detected a note of relief in Mahmûd's voice. Certainly he quickened his pace. There were turnings and twistings

in the course of which Roscoe lost his bearings before they pulled up before a pathetic-looking building with shuttered windows and an air of general dry rot. Above a door that might have been that of a warehouse he managed to make out a name ending in IDES.

"This, my gentleman, is the *magasin* of Timonides. As I told you, sir, it is closed."

"So I see." Roscoe tried the only visible door. It was securely fastened. "At what hour does the staff leave?"

Mahmûd spread expressive palms. "There is no staff, sir. Perhaps someone comes during the day to see that all is well. I don't know. But no business is done."

"I'd hazard a guess most of the stuff has been looted."

"Looted!" Mahmûd spoke in a shocked tone. "Oh, no, my gentleman. Timonides was greatly respected. No one in Port Said would lay a hand upon his possessions." But he flashed suspicious glances at Roscoe. "You would not mislead an honest man, sir? You are not by chance from the insurance company?"

Roscoe suppressed a laugh. The situation at the *magasin* of the late Timonides became clear to him. Someone—quite possibly the honest Mahmûd himself—was pilfering, piece by piece, everything of value stored there. The two men seated outside his café had been on their way to the *magasin* when he arrived. Mahmûd had warned them, spurred them to hurry, had then detained his unexpected visitor as long as possible to enable them to finish their job. This explained his relief when they passed with the case on the cart.

But the mystery of what Philo had to do with the business remained as great as ever; nor had his visit to Mahmûd Abd el-Horêb yielded any clue to the fate of the missing man.

He paid Mahmûd for his trouble and returned to the hotel.

"Has my friend Mr. Carter come in?" Roscoe asked the *bowwâb*.

"No, sir. But a box arrived for you. I had it put in the baggage room."

Roscoe pulled up short, stared. "Box? What kind of box?"

"A large one, sir. The baggage man will have gone, but this boy will go along to show you."

"I'm expecting no box," Roscoe muttered as he followed a Nubian porter.

He was in a highly irritable condition. He had wasted much time, and was now getting desperately anxious about Cartaret. He had avoided going to the police for two reasons: One, he had no faith in them; two, the nature of his business demanded that he should attract as little official attention as possible. But, knowing Sumuru's methods, he began to have grave fears for Cartaret's safety.

On the paved floor of the badly lighted baggage room he saw a bulky object lying just inside the door. It seemed grotesquely out of place among the shining wardrobe trunks and neatly stacked traveling cases. It was a stout packing case, nailed down and firmly roped, some six feet long and three feet square, in size and shape not unlike an ancient Egyptian sarcophagus.

As this thought crossed his mind it brought a sudden chill to his heart.

The case had an unpleasantly familiar appearance.

Some older label had been carefully scraped off and a new one gummed on. In block letters he read:

**MR. DONALD ROSS
EASTERN EXCHANGE HOTEL**

He turned to the boy who stood beside him.

"Did you help carry this in?"

"Yes, sir. It must weigh a ton, sir!"

"Quick! Get a knife to cut the rope, and a crowbar. I want this thing open."

"Yes, sir. In one minute, sir."

The boy went away, and Roscoe waited tensely. A conviction began to form in his mind that this was the very case on the cart that had passed him in the native quarter.

When at last the boy reappeared, carrying a large knife and a crowbar, Roscoe snatched the knife and cut the lashings in a few strokes of the blade. The top of the crate was not very strongly nailed, and they had it partly raised in a matter of seconds. The Nubian seized the loose end and wrenched it up.

At the same moment he gave a choking cry, turned, and ran from the baggage room.

Roscoe bent over the case, staring in. Then he, too, choked down a cry.

Dick Cartaret lay inside, his eyes closed, his pale face ghastly in the light cast down by a hanging lamp just above.

Chapter Ten

PHILO KNELT on the mink rugs beside Sumuru's divan, hands clasped between his knees, head bowed but eyes raised in doglike devotion to his beautiful mistress. He was dressed in a short-sleeved silk tunic that outlined his enormous torso and left muscular arms bare, and he wore white linen trousers and sandals. Around his waist was a red sash. This, his indoor costume in Egypt, Philo alone was entitled to wear.

Sumuru watched him through the veil of long, lowered lashes. Behind this screen her eyes gleamed when light touched them; sometimes with the yellow flame of topaz, again greenly as emeralds, and then, at certain times, as though the long lashes concealed twin amethysts.

Seen from a short distance, she would have appeared to be nude, for she was sheathed in a cobweb robe of the color of the Egyptian sky at dawn, so that it no more than emphasized the shadowed outlines of her graceful body.

An enameled girdle from the tomb of an ancient Egyptian queen and pale blue sandals completed an ensemble more than slightly arresting.

Over by the fountain an Indian cheetah lay, its paws on the ledge and its savage cat's eyes watching the large golden fish that sometimes disturbed the lily pads on the surface of the pool. Every now and again the long tail banged the floor irritably.

"I have known for many years, Philo, that I have no more faithful servant."

At the sound of that bell-like voice the cheetah turned a small tawny head, ears flattened, and looked across to the divan.

"My Lady!" Philo muttered gratefully.

"I was not calling *you*, Rajah!" Sumuru pointed a finger at the cheetah. "I am talking to Philo. And if you dare to snarl at him again, I shall take you out into the middle of the Libyan desert and leave you there. Also, the golden orf are not for your dinner."

The cheetah made a faint whimpering noise, as if he had understood every word, and dropped his head onto

his paws, but sideways so that the fierce eyes remained fixed upon Sumuru.

"As I understand the matter, Philo, the flight from Connecticut onward was carried out according to plan. Silvestre made a successful night landing at the Patterley estate. You drove Sister Lisa and Sister Coralie to London."

"That is so, My Lady."

"At the house in Chelsea, Ariosto was waiting to instruct them concerning their journey here."

"Yes, My Lady."

"I understand further, Philo, that he made overtures to Sister Coralie?"

"It is true."

"She repulsed him, violently?"

"Very violently, My Lady. When I ran in, Ariosto was extremely angry. He was opening his medical case, and he said, 'We must stop these dangerous outbursts.'"

"And then?"

"And then, My Lady, while Sister Lisa was trying to stop him, and I stood there wondering what was my duty, Sister Coralie ran out of the room. I followed but she had run into the street, and there was a thick fog. I listened, and could just hear her footsteps. I had nearly overtaken her when I saw her jump into a car, which was immediately driven away."

"This tallies exactly with Sister Lisa's report. She tells me that later, when you and Ariosto had returned, she recalled the address of a friend of Sister Coralie's, slipped quietly out of the house, and made her way there."

"It is true, My Lady. But I heard her go, and I overtook her just as she was giving this address to a cabman."

"So Ariosto and you—having already broken into a Chelsea studio—followed, and by your incredible lunacy in this other woman's flat completed a trail laid from New York to this house!"

Sumuru sat suddenly upright, clenched her hands. Her great eyes, fully opened, glared at the kneeling man.

Rajah snarled and rose up, crouched for a spring. Sumuru's glare was transferred to the cheetah.

"Lie down."

The words were spoken quietly, in the tone of one speaking to a pet poodle. But the effect of that beautiful voice upon the fierce creature was like that of a lash.

Rajah dropped to the marble floor and buried his muzzle between his paws in a pose of abject humility.

"Stay there! . . . My anger is not for you, Philo. It is for another. Ariosto crowned these offenses by murdering a police officer in the execution of his duties."

"It was Cartaret he meant to kill, My Lady." Philo spoke in a broken whisper.

"His crime would have been as great. Ariosto was inspired not by the urgency of his mission, not by my orders, but by a ludicrous jealousy of one he believed to be a successful rival for the favors of Sister Coralie. His contemptible motive increases the offense. No man who can stoop so low is fit for the position held by Ariosto in my household."

Philo remained silent. His broad shoulders were shaking. Sumuru's anger—even toward another—cowed him utterly, as it had cowed the cheetah. Such personal magnetism, fortunately, is given to few.

"There were no incidents on board the *Fleur-de-Lis*, Philo?"

"No, My Lady."

"And I know why. Regarding what happened in Port Said last night I shall question Ariosto in person. Send him to me. . . ."

When Ariosto came in, a handsome figure wearing white breeches and a fawn jacket, his bronzed features registering easy confidence, his dark eyes devouring every line of Sumuru's seductive beauty, the cheetah had moved. He lay on the mink rug before the divan. Sumuru watched in silence as Ariosto crossed the room.

One arm hung down; white fingers caressed Rajah.

There were no sounds but those of the tinkling fountain, the periodic bang of Rajah's tail on the rug.

Short of the dais on which the divan rested Ariosto stopped and bowed.

"Your passion, Madonna, for wild animals as pets sometimes makes you difficult to approach."

"Which may explain my passion for wild animals as pets, Ariosto."

"Madonna, what are your wishes?"

"That you come and sit here, where you can hear me," the golden voice directed. "I am a woman, not a sergeant major."

Ariosto moved toward the step.

Rajah shook off the caressing fingers, rose up, and turned wicked eyes upon Ariosto. Exposing his teeth, the cheetah uttered a hissing sound that might have developed into a threatening snarl. His long tail quivered.

"I warned you, Madonna, when Rajah was a tiny cub, that he would be untamable."

Sumuru hooked one finger into a gold collar fastened around the cheetah's neck. She stooped and whispered Hindustani words into a furry ear. Rajah dropped back on the rug, eyes no longer fierce, but raised pitifully to his mistress.

"Yes, Rajah. So far into the desert that even you could never find your way back." The cheetah whimpered. Sumuru removed her hold on his collar and beckoned to Ariosto. "Sit there beside me, on this stool. Rajah dislikes you, but no more than many others do."

Ariosto obeyed. The toes of his riding boots, as he sat, nearly touched the cheetah's outstretched claws.

"I rode in from El-Edwa, Madonna, and came straight across to pay my respects without waiting to change."

"You honor me, Ariosto." Sumuru glanced up at him over a gleaming shoulder. "You have at least brushed your riding boots, upon which I detect no speck of dust. When you say that Rajah is untamable, you mean, no doubt, by the whip, and I agree with you. There are more gentle and more effective methods of coercion."

Rajah continued to watch her pleadingly. She dropped her hand to him for a moment. He licked her fingers, then settled down, contented. He was in favor again.

"Such methods are for you alone, Madonna. Rajah should not dislike me, for he and I are in the same class. He is the more fortunate. He is forgiven."

Sumuru raised her eyes. Ariosto's burning gaze was an embrace, yet he failed to sustain the scrutiny of those brilliant, mysterious eyes.

"Yes, those are my methods, Ariosto." But the music of the beautiful voice failed to calm the fever that consumed Ariosto. "I tie men, women, animals—even reptiles—to me by means of that elusive thing called will. You, Ariosto, are a scientist. Rajah is a cheetah. But you see, I can talk to each of you in a secret language of his own. It is unnecessary to speak with a cat's tongue to Rajah, or to you in the jargon of modern science. I hold Rajah to me not by devotion, but by hunger. I hold you not by an un-

trammelled passion for research, but by hunger for me also."

"Madonna!"

"Your appetite for women is insatiable. It is written in every line of your face, in your ravenous eyes. To you a woman's body is like the body of a gazelle to Rajah. You long to devour it."

Sumuru's voice had sunk to a lovely harplike murmur. It indicated furious anger. As Ariosto stretched out imploring hands to touch her, Rajah's claws became buried in the soft brown leather of his left boot. Rajah hissed.

Sumuru's white hand reached down and seized a small ear. "Behave, Rajah!" Rajah withdrew his claws. "He knows, Ariosto, that I don't wish you to touch me. You know it, too, but appetite overrules wisdom."

"Your exquisite décolleté, Madonna—"

"Is an invitation to caresses, you mean? Yet surely, during the years you have known me—since I rescued you from certain torture—you have learned that what you call love has no meaning for me? All men are not intoxicated by beauty, but when I find one who is—and one of use to me—I bind him to me by that weakness."

"Madonna! I have always adored you!"

"Not because I saved you from a painful death, not because I offered you opportunities of research beyond your wildest dreams, but because I had the most exciting body of any woman you had ever known. This is the silken chain by which I hold you, Ariosto, as I have held others, and this is the reason I give you every opportunity to assure yourself that my beauty remains unimpaired."

"You are a goddess," Ariosto muttered hoarsely.

"Therefore unattainable—unless I choose to stoop. As a goddess, my friend, I am accustomed to exact obedience. You have defied me more than once; and at last, once too often."

"It is possible that Madonna has been misinformed."

Sumuru's implacable gaze bore him down. He lowered his eyes.

"My information is rarely at fault, Ariosto. Your cold-blooded murder of a police officer has alerted Scotland Yard to our continued existence. Your insane handling of the incident at the flat of some newspaperwoman in London spread the story over the entire press of the United States. This was bad enough."

"I had Philo to contend with, Madonna."

"You may mean that Philo had to contend with *you*. It is for your contemptible motive in these things that I condemn you. For you—my adorer—were actuated by your unbridled desire for Sister Coralie. Don't speak!"

Sumuru's voice had sunk to a whisper. Rajah looked up, seeking a sign, but none was given.

"You are a brother of our order. You know that every sister of the Order is sacred, inviolate as a vestal virgin, unless I sanction her right to love. I gave you Dolores, one of the most beautiful girls in our community of beauty, and quite the most intelligent. You were fortunate indeed. She never looked aside. A child of such a union should have marked another step toward perfection. There was no child. This was a grave disappointment. To make it worse, you destroyed Dolores' happiness. If, for all your handsome body, Ariosto, and your unquenchable ardor, you are sterile, I cannot condemn you."

The soft voice paused. The fountain played its gentle melody.

Ariosto, his assurance shattered, his features grown suddenly haggard, dropped to his knees, Rajah forgotten. The cheetah, snarling, drew back to spring. But Sumuru's hand rested lightly on the muscular neck and he sank down, whining.

"Madonna! Dear My Lady! Let me speak."

"It is too late for speech, Ariosto. You have abused every privilege I have given you. A report lies here from Sister Zara, in Port Said. You have my permission to answer this question: In what condition did you return Richard Cartaret to his hotel?"

Ariosto moved uneasily. He made no further attempt to meet Sumuru's glance.

"I used the preparation of hyoscine, Madonna, and sodium amythal during the interrogation. He was still under its influence when I sent him away. It was necessary to get him out of the premises without inviting police attention. Zara had employed old Mahmûd Abd el-Horêb, who has a key of the *Timonides magasin*."

"Henbane is a treacherous drug. If news reaches me that Richard Cartaret has not revived, you will take over from Cassim at the ruby mines until such time as you have completed your experiments with synthetic rubies."

"Madonna! Dear My Lady—"

"You may go now, Ariosto. You are exciting Rajah."

Chapter Eleven

"HE'S BEEN DRUGGED," Dr. Fosdyke declared. "Don't know what with. He didn't swallow it. Probably one of the opium derivatives."

"You mean it was injected?" Roscoe spoke jerkily.

"Have you any other suggestion?" The irritable little English physician, who had been dragged away from a bridge party to attend to Dick Cartaret, glanced at Roscoe.

"An anesthetic *can* be inhaled, Doctor."

"Yes. So can tobacco smoke. But, thank God, I can still smell. No more we can do, Mr. Ross. Carry out my instructions, and if he doesn't revive in two hours, if you can't arouse him by then, or if he shows any signs of distress, call me. You have my number. See you in the morning."

"You don't think he's in danger?"

"No. He's a young man and has a heart like a bull."

When the doctor had returned to his bridge party, Roscoe sat down beside the insensible Cartaret and lighted a cigar. Then he stood up, went to his own room, and came back with a bottle of whisky.

He cursed Dick for a fool. Let a pretty woman come along, and all his advice was washed out, forgotten. His thoughts became introspective. Who was he to condemn in another a folly he himself had succumbed to? A woman had changed the entire course of his life . . . Sumuru.

Laughing the mirthless laugh that corresponds to a woman's tears, he refilled his glass.

She had driven him to this. At first he had drunk to drown his memories, then to drown his self-reproach, to help him to forget his loss of face. If it hadn't done so, at least it had helped him to learn to hate Sumuru.

Yes, he began to gain confidence that the silk shackles were broken at last. She could never enslave him again. But—given the chance—could he hand her over to justice?

He took another drink. Dick Cartaret lay like a dead man. . . .

His careful plans to pass through Port Said unidentified,

Roscoe reflected, had been a sheer waste of time. Someone—Philo or Ariosto—had seen him, or seen Cartaret, and had investigated. There was no other explanation he could think of. To identify them under their assumed names by inquiry at the reception desk had been a simple matter.

This being so, what had he to gain by going on?

It was reasonable to suppose that Coral Denver was already on her way to Sumuru's headquarters. Since Sumuru knew that he and Dick Cartaret were following what chance was left of getting near enough to establish any kind of contact without being trapped by those watching for them?

The best he could hope to do would be to assure himself that Coral Denver was alive and report to her father.

Denver, an influential man, might be able to force international action.

The suite on board the *Fleur-de-Lis* that Coral Denver shared with Lisa Madderley equaled, probably surpassed, the best that any ship afloat had to offer. Its comfort and the perfect service that implemented this luxury were worthy of Our Lady—for whom, in fact, the motor yacht had been reconditioned and restaffed in England.

And Coral was wretchedly unhappy.

On the day that the *Fleur-de-Lis* cleared Port Said, her unhappiness reached a climax. She lay on the coverlet of her bed in a state of mute despair.

"Corry, dear." Lisa stood up from a satinwood desk at which she had been writing. "You're really letting moods run away with you. Scores of girls in your place would be crazily happy to be called by Our Lady to Egypt. It can only mean that Madonna plans to put you on her own staff."

Coral didn't stir.

"Oh, Corry! She gave me charge of New York, and I have worked so hard. But I suppose I'm not worthy of the honor. You were my prize convert. I was so proud of you—and even a little bit jealous, Corry. At the offering up in Connecticut I thought you were almost as beautiful as Our Lady. And you were such an enthusiast—in fact, a fanatic. I don't understand what's changed you."

Coral remained silent. Lisa crossed and sat on the side of the bed.

"I have asked you so often, Corry—were you really in love with Peter? Did you want to marry him?"

Coral at last raised her blue eyes to her friend, stretched out her arm, and threw it around Lisa.

"Lisa, you're just wonderful to me. Your philosophy is so much deeper than mine. You're strong. I suppose I must be weak. But I told you the truth when I said I never wanted to marry Pete Lorminster. I was under Mother's influence. After I became a sister of the Order, Our Lady gave me no guidance. I never saw her again. I began to wonder if I had done a foolish thing. You know how often I used to come to see you at the Finelander library, to try to find courage to go on."

"Our Lady often puts new sisters to such trials, Corry. You never had, and never asked for, Madonna's consent to marry Peter. She was waiting. When at last you decided that the marriage was impossible, she was satisfied that your vows to the Order came before everything."

"But Lisa"—Coral's arm clasped her—"I'm not sure, even now, that I was prompted by my vows to the Order to break it off."

"What do you mean, Corry?"

"I mean that, away from the wonderful influence of Madonna, and under Mother's spell, I might have gone on—sacrificed myself, risked the anger of Our Lady—if I hadn't found out that Peter didn't love me, either; that he had a mistress whose extravagance was ruining him."

"Corry! You! He preferred someone else to *you*?"

Coral sank back on the pillows. "I don't think it was exactly preference, Lisa. He just didn't want to give up this other girl—he would never give up anything that belonged to him. If he could have had both of us, he'd have been delighted to marry me—and my money, of course. And the very day I made up my own mind to break the thing off, I got Our Lady's order to do just that, and to go to London."

Lisa patted the hand that had been withdrawn and now lay limply on the coverlet. "I know it was a wrench, Corry, and I know how you hated to make a social scandal. But tell me—it's very, very important: You never at any time cared for Peter Lorminster?"

"Never. I'd never have got engaged to him at all if it hadn't been for Mother."

There was silence, except for a faint vibration. The Fleur-de-Lis crept on her way to Ismailiya.

"Tell me, Corry." Lisa spoke with a strange authority.

"I've asked you before, but now it's important. If you *had* loved Peter, and Our Lady's order had come, would you have obeyed it?"

Coral, eyes closed, breathing deeply, lay still. At last she said, "Yes. At that time, Lisa, I would."

"What do you mean, dear—at that time?"

Coral didn't reply at once. She lay staring up at the ceiling of the room. But at last she said, "I mean that I thought of Our Lady more as a goddess than as a woman. I believed that everyone, like you and Rosa Finlander, sincerely lived by the code and catechism of the Order. I'd have done anything she asked. Then, in London, I met that detestable creature Ariosto. He behaved like a maniac—and you know what happened."

"Yes, I know, Corry—and I know that you changed right from that moment. But even now I don't know why. You're not trying to tell me that you've lost faith in Our Lady?"

"I don't really know what I'm trying to tell you, Lisa—except perhaps that certain ideals that had inspired me seemed to be shattered by that man. I had a terrible struggle, when I first knew you, with Article Seven of the Code—the one that requires us all to believe that the end justifies the means, that ugliness must be blotted out, ugly lives ended without compunction, that what Our Lady calls the Great Harmony is above all laws of men."

"Well, Corry? You mastered the problem."

"Not until Our Lady came to America, Lisa, and you took me to see her. She explained it all in such a sweet, simple way, she was so lovely, so completely wonderful, that I felt I was devoting my life to a goddess."

Coral sat upright, threw her arm around Lisa again.

"Lisa, darling! Can you understand how I felt when my goddess sent coarse creatures like Ariosto and his hairy muscle man to meet me in London? It was like making a pilgrimage to the shrine of a saint and being met by baboons! How can she tolerate such ugliness near her if Article Seven really means anything?"

At about this time, the two hours mentioned by Dr. Fosdyke having nearly expired, Drake Roscoe forced himself into wakefulness, glanced at his watch, and then stood up. He bent over Dick Cartaret.

There seemed to be a change in the set features, a faint spark of color in the pale cheeks.

He grasped Dick by the shoulders, shook him vigorously. "Wake up, Dick! Wake up!"

There was a slight response, the first he had had. It took the form of a deep sigh.

"Thank God!" Roscoe murmured.

Dick opened his eyes. But they were eyes that saw nothing; their gaze was that of a sleepwalker. He began to speak:

"You must go no further. You must go no further. If you enter the Fayyûm you will never come back. You must go no further. You will never come back. You must go no further. If you enter the Fayyûm . . ."

So it went on, like a dreary record, over and over again.

Roscoe nodded grimly. He had had personal experience of this posthypnotic treatment. He tried to check the flow of muttered words. He shook Dick. He shouted at him. But as soon as he ceased shaking or shouting, it began again: ". . . go no further. If you enter the Fayyûm . . ."

Dick's eyes stared unseeingly before him as he spoke. His lips scarcely moved. It was an uncanny performance. But Roscoe noted the return of some more color to his pale cheeks.

Leaving Dick muttering his perpetual piece, Roscoe went to the bathroom and found a large pitcher in a service closet. He filled it with cold water and came back. He wasn't strictly sober, but he knew what he was doing.

Pulling off the top sheet and coverlet, he emptied the pitcher over Dick Cartaret's head.

The result was satisfactory, but alarming.

Dick shot upright as if propelled by a spring. A glitter came into the formerly hazy eyes, and he began to lash out with his fists in a dangerously efficient way.

"Damn you!" he shouted. "What the hell—"

He sprang out of bed. Roscoe ducked a straight right, dropped the pitcher, and closed with Dick, throwing his arms around him.

"Easy, Dick! This is Roscoe! Slow down, boy, slow down!"

Dick Cartaret broke free, drew off, and, eyes blazing, prepared to loose a vicious left. Then recognition took the place of furious anger. He dropped his hands, stared.

"Drake! Drake Roscoe!"

He ran his fingers through his wet hair, glanced around the room, then slumped back on the bed.

"How did I get here? And where have I been?"

"Thank goodness it's dark at last." Coral looked across at Lisa. "We can go on deck now."

"They had dined alone in the commodious salon of the Fleur-de-Lis, for Captain Montez kept the bridge with the pilot. Captain Montez was a good-looking, charming, and courteous Cuban who invariably asked permission to join the ladies before showing them their table. Sometimes Dr. Ernestine Beckner, the ship's surgeon, would dine with them. Dr. Ernestine, a statuesque, strikingly handsome German woman, looked as though she might once have commanded a Nazi internment camp. But on acquaintance she had proved to be gentle, sympathetic, and an old disciple of Our Lady.

"Madonna calls me from my clinic to come on this cruise, and so here I am."

Coral had realized from the first that Dr. Ernestine was there to keep an eye on her. She had been grateful. Anybody was preferable to Ariosto, for whom she had conceived something more than distaste, something approaching loathing.

She sometimes had glimpses of Ariosto on deck, but he always disappeared as soon as he saw her. He and his apelike companion left the vessel at Port Said.

They had a cosmopolitan crew, and Lisa told her that Captain Montez alone belonged to the Order.

Lisa said now: "The Captain's orders are that we don't show ourselves on deck until we're clear of Suez."

Coral lighted a cigarette, glancing at the tray of liqueurs that had accompanied the coffee at the end of a perfect dinner perfectly served. "It's a kind of slavery, isn't it?" She smiled at Lisa. "But a luxurious kind."

"Everything Our Lady does is done perfectly, Corry. She's the greatest organizer in the world today. You were right to think of her as a goddess; she is something more than a woman."

"When do we get to Suez?"

"Ernestine told me in about another hour."

"I suppose it will be very hot in the Red Sea?"

"I suppose so. I've never been there."

"Have you heard where we're going to land?"

"I'm afraid I am not going to land at all, Corry."

"What?" Coral dropped her cigarette in an ash tray and stared blankly at Lisa. "You don't mean I'm to be landed at some place on the African coast *alone*?"

Lisa shrugged her shoulders, but her eyes were full of

sympathy. "Captain Montez' orders are to take me down to Port Sudan. Accommodations have been reserved for me on a P. and O. branch liner bound for Southampton. I get further instructions in England."

"But Lisa!" Coral jumped up, her voice trembling. "I really feel I'm going mad! I don't believe I can take much more."

"It's not so bad as that, darling. Someone is meeting you."

But Coral, pale-faced, clenched her hands. "I won't go! I belong to a free country and I won't be treated like a slave! I won't go!"

"Corry, dear!" Lisa reached her side, put an arm around her excited friend. "You must really try to calm down. Dolores, who'll come on board—Dolores d'Eze—is a grand girl. I know you'll take to one another on sight. She's no older than we are, but Madonna made her superior of the Convent of Our Lady. Dolores has brains. Oh, Corry, you must be crazy! I've never seen Our Lady's villa in the Fayyûm, but it's been described to me, and I'd walk there barefooted if I had your chance."

Chapter Twelve

IN A ROOM in Beni Suef on the Nile, a scantily furnished room, two men sat side by side on a shabby divan. A table bearing coffee cups stood before them. Through the one latticed window came the only light, and discordant street cries and a strange smell, combining garlic, sandalwood, and a mixture resembling stale cabbage water and fresh manure.

Evidently this room overlooked some quarter of the bazaar where vegetables were sold.

Neither of the pair was attractive. One, who might have been a Syrian Arab, looked like a fierce old bird of prey, and the other, an Egyptian with an uncommonly large nose, could have passed successfully for Fagin. The conversation was in Arabic.

"I say to you, Ali"—the Egyptian spread his palms—"this is a madness that has come upon you. My house in the Fayyûm is an old and respectable house, used by honor-

able travelers. It is true that we are no longer held down by the iron rule of the English. Our ancient trades revive. But we are not entirely free, and I would advise, friend of my heart, that you deal in your kind of merchandise beyond the Red Sea. Egypt is not ready for it—yet.”

Ali stretched out a large, muscular hand and grasped the Egyptian's shoulder.

“Yet you and I have done good business in the past, Abdûl. There are today more rich men in Egypt than in Syria or Arabia, and, if report is true, more choice merchandise. We are not without rivals, for I am told that someone else is already carrying on the trade. His wares are put ashore by dhows at a point below the Gulf and brought overland to Dêr Byâd. I can venture nothing on the road, for this dealer has employed the sheik of the Mâzî to provide and escort. But the escort goes back from Dêr Byâd and the merchandise is smuggled across the Nile.”

Abdûl's expression registered growing alarm, but also growing interest. “You are telling me, Ali, that the old trade is revived, here in Egypt? That slaves are brought, not from Central Africa, as before, to Cairo or across to Arabia, but from Arabia to the Nile?”

Ali's wicked little eyes sparkled angrily. “Did I say anything about Arabia, O brain of mud? I said they were put ashore below the Gulf. How can I know where they came from? All I know is that they are women and that they do not return. And so—there is a market.”

“They are perhaps *ghawâzi*—mere dancing girls from Europe and America, who come here of their own free will.”

“O gnat's egg! Why do I waste breath upon nothing? Would dried lemons such as dancing girls from Europe and America call for an escort of Mâzî horsemen? No, son of a disease, this is more succulent fruit. My scouts, hidden in the rocks below the great monastery, have brought me reports. So have others, farther along the road to whom the news of a convoy has been passed. These are peaches ripe for a sultan's plucking. This is choice merchandise.”

“I fail to understand, Ali, my friend. It is true that there are rich men in Egypt who have returned to the ways of their fathers. Such delicacies may be for the table of one of these, and it would be the end of both our affairs, O Ali, if we interfered.”

Ali stood up, a tall, lean figure. “O spawn of a mule.” He spoke with studied politeness. “It seems I can no longer

count upon you to share in a profitable enterprise. But there are other houses between the Nile and the oasis that will serve my purpose."

Abdûl stood up also. Even his prominent nose seemed to tremble. "Always I would wish to serve an old friend, Ali. But this is truly a perilous business. First the woman must be secured, then, the purchaser found."

"I have two waiting."

"If what you have to offer is approved, but she is reluctant—"

Ali snapped his fingers. "You forget how I sold the daughter of a Mûdir to a wealthy young sugar grower. Abû, my hideous old camel keeper, bid against him. She threatened all of us with certain death. But once the purchaser had carried off his prize, what occurred, O Abdûl?"

"I recall only that the girl's lover, a pasha to whom she was affianced, had the sugar grower hacked to pieces."

"Then you forget that the Mûdir's daughter threw herself into the Nile rather than return to the pasha."

Our Lady came into the house from the rose garden. She wore blue overalls and gloves, and her hair was hidden by a silk scarf. The room was a small library, booklined. Sumuru threw herself down on a couch, dropping her gloves on the parquet floor.

Caspar awaited her. He saluted in his smiling, ceremonious way, touching eyes, lips, and breast and bowing low.

"You wished to see me, Madonna?"

"Yes." Sumuru reached for a cigarette in an ebony box beside the couch. "I am tired, Caspar. The Persian roses are not doing well. Yet I have grown them before in the Fayyûm. Speak to Hamîd."

"I will do so, Madonna."

Caspar lighted her cigarette and then laid an onyx holder on the table. Sumuru fitted the cigarette into the holder and smiled.

"I could never replace you, Caspar. You are part of my life. I am disturbed about Ariosto. If I banish him, who can take up his laboratory work?"

"You, Madonna—if you desire."

"True, Caspar, up to a point. I have all Ariosto's knowledge, but I lack his experience. Also, I have more important tasks. But tell me, Caspar: Do you think Dolores has really ceased to love him?"

"Certainly, Madonna. She was very young and inexpe-

rienced when you gave her to him. I ventured to point this out to My Lady, but my objections were overruled. Ariosto was already an experienced amorist, and he whipped up the passion in Dolores' Spanish blood to white heat. Nothing more. Her brain, I think, Madonna, always despised him; her heart was never touched."

Sumuru raised her eyes, regarding the ivory face. "Your eloquence overpowers me, Caspar. Yet, stripped of their charming rhetoric, your remarks may possibly mean something."

Caspar extended slender palms. "Who am I, Madonna, to preach wisdom to Solomon?"

"You are a very remarkable man, Caspar, but it was not to talk about roses or Ariosto that I called you. For the first time in the many years you and I have known Egypt, I no longer feel secure in this Nile land. We are thrown back to the days of the Turkish bashaws. Even the slave traders, I am told, resume their ancient ways, and some of the loveliest women and children in the world come and go—often across the Eastern Desert—to and from the College."

Caspar shook his head. "It is true, Madonna. The secrecy that has been necessary in order to protect the Convent from undesirable curiosity certainly makes the matter more difficult. For I am certain that no man from Aswân to the Delta, if he knew the truth, would dare to lay hands upon one consecrated to Our Lady."

Sumuru blew a puff of smoke into the still, scented air, and watched a ring forming. "I doubt it, Caspar, even so. The man called Ali of Aleppo, for whom the British offered a reward of five hundred pounds, is still alive and has been seen on this side of the Nile. You knew this, Caspar?"

Caspar bowed. "I knew it, Madonna. On this side of the Nile we have nothing to fear. And I did not wish to disturb My Lady with idle news that could not possibly concern her."

Sumuru raised her eyes and studied the smiling, ivory façade behind which Caspar concealed his thoughts, his feelings (if he had any), and his motives.

"Not possibly concern me, you say?" Her bell-like voice grew soft, almost as though she possessed the art of a ventriloquist and could seem to project it from far away. "He has been seen on the caravan road to the Little Oasis. What is this old Syrian wolf doing so near to the Fayyûm?"

"Plotting mischief, no doubt, Madonna. But I doubt if he has the power any longer to carry it out."

"I am wondering. Now that the English have gone, old trades will revive. And with women-fanciers such as, for instance, Aswâmi Pasha and his friends controlling more money than they can spend, there is a good market."

Caspar shook his head, but continued to smile. "I shall investigate these rumors, Madonna, and report to you. Rest assured that our visitors are well convoyed across the Eastern Desert. I doubt if old Ali would attempt to kidnap any other than some village girl."

"Village girl!" Sumuru laughed. "He would kidnap Satan's mistress if he had someone ready to buy her! The old villain formerly drugged his victims, as a spider stings its prey unto unconsciousness. When they awoke, their surrender was a *fait accompli*. They already belonged to the men who had bought them. Some accepted the situation. Others killed themselves. To Ali this was a matter of indifference. He had had his price."

"My Lady is well informed."

"My Lady has to be, Caspar. She carries grave responsibilities."

"From now on"—Drake Roscoe stared at Dick Cartaret—"we're on our own, living by our wits. Sumuru, who knows we're here and knows we're using false passports, has only to denounce us to the police and we'll be arrested. But before we tear up the pseudo-official identity of Donald Ross and Richard Carter, let's think where we go from here."

Dick Cartaret held his head and groaned. "Don't count on *me!*" he advised. "I'm about as useful as a deep freeze in Iceland. From the moment I found myself in the Cadillac with Zara—can't remember her other name—up to the moment you threw a bucket of cold water over me, I haven't the ghost of a notion what happened."

Drake Roscoe tapped off a cone of cigar ash into a tray. "Don't let it bother you. I've had similar experiences myself. I warned you when we started. Now I'm warning you again. Take the first ship bound for any port in England."

Dick stared dully. "What about you?"

"Me? I'm going up the Nile by road or rail as far as Beni Suêf. Then I'm going to try to disappear. I warned Denvers I didn't expect to get his daughter back, but I

undertook to assure him of her physical safety, and I'm going to do it."

Dick reached across and grabbed Roscoe's hand. "I'm coming with you."

Roscoe returned the grip, but shook his head. "You must try to forgive me for this, Dick. Inspector Gilligan knows, but you don't, that I wrecked my career on Sumuru. I was so sure of my own strength that I thought I could pretend to become her slave and so get a line on the whole damnable organization called the Order of Our Lady."

"You don't have to tell me any more," Dick said. "I can see it hurts."

"So it should! But I *want* to tell you. That woman is something more than human. I was clay in her hands, and she modeled it her own way. My last decent act was my formal resignation from the federal service. It left me free to go to hell my own way. She has strange powers. She uses her extraordinary beauty to mold men to her purpose. And her purpose is the same as Alexander's, as Caesar's, as Napoleon's, as Hitler's—to reshape the world. You're a fine man, and I had no right to drag you into a thing like this. It's dirty. Many—probably most—of the people in it don't know how dirty it is. It's my job. Leave me to it. Go home."

Dick said nothing at once. He lay back, closed his eyes. His drugged brain was clearing. In Drake Roscoe, in spite of his tendency to drink too much, he had recognized a remarkable, if complex, character, and a deep sincerity rare in the world today.

The mere existence of this fabulous woman Sumuru he saw as a challenge to his common sense. If she really existed, it was high time she was in the hands of the law. And then there was the lovely, haunting image of Coral Denvers.

"Thanks for your advice." He opened his eyes. "But I'm coming all the same."

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Chapter Thirteen

CORAL AWOKE from hazy, uneasy dreams to a recognition of the fact that the Fleur-de-Lis was stationary. Dr. Ernestine had given her a sleeping tablet when Lisa, who occu-

pied the adjoining room in the suite, reported that her friend was not only awake, but seemed to be growing hysterical.

It was early morning. Coral drew the port curtain and looked out over a blue, nearly unruffled sea to a ragged coast. Beyond, gray in the morning haze, a range of mountains formed a gloomy background to an unfriendly picture.

A native vessel of some kind, with a huge, triangular patched brown sail, was stealing toward the yacht from the shore, its crew taking every advantage of a slight breeze.

Coral grabbed a robe that lay on the coverlet and threw it around her shoulders. As she did so, the name on the label caught her eye. It was the name of the Fifth Avenue store where she had bought it.

Fifth Avenue! Would she ever see Fifth Avenue again? She stood quite still.

What madness, what restless, despicable discontent had prompted her to join the Order of Our Lady? She had had everything, and had sacrificed everything—for this. A mood of self-contempt swept her up. She had been on the verge of marrying Peter Lorminster, who was a vain wastrel. Why? Because her mother had urged her to do it. She had joined the Order of Our Lady. Why? Because Lisa had taught her to believe that it was a movement to redeem the world from war and all ugliness.

In short, she had no opinion of her own. She was a puppet, motivated by stronger personalities.

She glanced at herself in a mirror, ran her fingers through disheveled hair, and then smiled at her image.

No! Her life was in her own hands. She had been just a spoiled, petulant child. It had taken her too long to grow up.

"Lisa!" She opened the cabin door. "Where are you?"

A sleepy voice came from the next room: "Here, Corry. What is it?"

Coral opened the door, went in. "Wake up, Lisa! I want to talk to you."

Lisa switched on a bedside light. "Do you know what time it is?"

"No. I didn't look."

"Half past five! You didn't go to sleep until nearly two."

Coral sat down on the side of Lisa's bed. "I must have wakened when the engines stopped. You don't need this."

She switched off the lamp. "It's quite light outside. Look." She jerked the curtains back from the port.

Lisa rubbed her eyes. "Yes, it's light. But what am I supposed to look at?"

"Look at that boat with the big sail." Lisa looked, said nothing. "Well, dear, it seems to be headed this way, doesn't it?"

"Yes." Lisa spoke reluctantly. "It's the dhow."

"The dhow? You mean it's expected?"

"Yes."

"You mean it's coming for *me*?"

"They're bringing Dolores out, dear. You'll be going ashore with her sometime this evening."

Two prosperous-looking Oriental businessmen, later that day, sat at a table outside a native café in Beni Suêf. Each wore a white linen suit and a Burgundy-red *tarbûsh*, the color indicating its superior quality. Both affected sun-glasses, a Riviera fashion that had been adopted by some of the Cairo smart set. Their car, a practical unit by Ford, stood at the curb.

"When I, was a guest at Sumuru's villa a year or so ago," the elder of the pair stated, "I had occasion to visit the Little Oasis. There's a reasonably good caravan road, and about fifteen miles south of the Convent of Our Lady there is a walled village called El-Gharak. After that there's nothing but desert until you come to the Oasis."

"We should be pretty conspicuous in a place like that, Roscoe."

"Not as date buyers, Dick, on our way to the Oasis. The date palms grown there produce the finest fruit in Egypt. If our Ford breaks down, we'll have no choice but to stay in some place until spare parts can be brought from Medinet."

"Is there any place to stay?"

"Not in El-Gharak, but a mile or so beyond—heaven knows why—there's a caravansary that probably flourished in the days of the caliphs, when the road from Darfûr was used chiefly by slave caravans. A branch of the road, for slaves to be sold in the Cairo market, passes El-Gharak."

"But if the Ford is supposed to be croaked, how do we do our scouting? We can't walk fifteen miles in and fifteen miles back again."

"Camels or donkeys, whichever are available at the rest-

house. Remember, if the question crops up, we're buying Egyptian dates for the United States market."

"Yes," Dick murmured. "You are Yussûf Barmek, of Persian ancestry, and have lived so long in America that you have nearly forgotten both Arabic and Persian. I am your secretary, Mohammed Tawwab, a student of El-Azhar and graduate of Oxford."

"The more often you repeat it, the less likely you are to forget it," Roscoe reminded him. "Twice on the way here you nearly sold us out. You speak the lingo like a native and you know all the answers, but you haven't had my training in pretending to be somebody else."

"That's true. But I'm doing my best."

Roscoe, glancing around, surreptitiously added a liberal shot of whisky to his coffee from a hip flask.

There was a sad expression in Dick's eyes. Roscoe, looking up, caught it.

"I know what you're thinking." He had a trick of rapid speech, which never deserted him even when he was really drunk. "You're thinking that the nearer we get to Sumuru the more I drink. But you don't know the damnable power of the woman. You only know that I wrecked my life for her, and you count me a man who needs looking after. A Japanese war lord went the same way. And, including the Prussian officer class, there's no more stiff-necked race in the world. Lord Carradale, a Royal Air Force ace, deliberately crashed on a solo flight when he found out the truth about her. There are others. I despise myself no less. But I was so horribly alone."

"Surely you had some friends of sorts?"

"Throughout the whole time I was her door mat, only one person of all those about her showed the slightest human sympathy for me. How blind I must have been!"

"Who was it?"

"Dolores d'Eze, Sumuru's personal secretary and also principal of the Convent of Our Lady. And if you're picturing a spectacled school teacher, change your mind. Dolores is one of the loveliest girls ever discovered by Sumuru. Clever, too—but completely devoted to Our Lady. Crowning irony, she belongs to your friend 'Dr. Ralston.'"

"You mean she's his mistress?"

Drake Roscoe smiled grimly. "Such a relationship isn't permitted in the Order. There's no marriage, as we understand it, but Sumuru's 'consent to love' makes a pair man and wife."

Dick stared hard. "She seems to have handed herself a whole pack of consents to love!"

Roscoe nodded. "But to tie up a delightful girl like Dolores to that swine Ariosto was one of the most evil things she ever did in her evil life."

From along the narrow street came shouts of warning, angry cries, the ceaseless blare of a motor horn. The uproar drew nearer. Passers-by scattered. A big car whirled into sight, driven at furious speed along the street.

It passed close enough to the table at which Roscoe and Dick Carey sat to cover them with a cloud of dust.

"Damned swine!" Roscoe snapped.

But Dick was staring through the sandstorm after the speeding car. He half stood up.

"Roscoe! That's the same Cadillac and the same driver that picked me up at the Eastern Exchange!"

"What! Are you sure?"

"Dead certain." He clapped his hands, and as the proprietor hurried to their table, he asked in Arabic:

"Did you see that madman drive by?"

"Most certainly. I saw him and heard him, effendi. Someday he will kill someone, and then, it may be, we shall demand justice."

"You know him, then?"

"Most certainly I know him, effendi. It is Hassan, Marûk Pasha's driver, and always he is the same."

Dick glanced at Roscoe. "Do you know the fat man he was driving?"

"Most certainly I know him also. It is Yahya, the head of Marûk Pasha's household."

"He often comes this way?"

"Hassan and the big car, yes. Sometimes Marûk Pasha. But very rarely Yahya."

When the man had gone, Roscoe remarked, "The wealthy Egyptians haven't been slow to revive their ancient customs. I got the gist of that chat, anyway. Marûk evidently doesn't confine his devotion to Our Lady. An elderly bachelor, living alone, hasn't much use for a eunuch as head of his household. I wonder if Sumuru knows?"

"What I'm wondering," Dick muttered, "is where he's going."

"Nothing to wonder about." Roscoe reached for his cigar case, smiled wryly, and lighted a cigarette. "Trained to pretend to be somebody else? Like hell I am! I nearly pre-

tended to be an American right here on an enemy street! Yahya has an important message for Sumuru. Gillingan showed you the Scotland Yard photograph. She's Marûk's mistress. She uses his car and his chauffeur, as you have seen."

"Yes. Probably you're right."

"The extravagance of his latest girl friend seems to be a common topic even in Port Said, to judge from your conversation with the bartender. Your memory is O.K. up to that point, Dick. The blank begins after you met someone called Zara and went for a ride in Marûk's Cadillac."

Dick Cartaret nodded. "That's the thing I don't understand. I wasn't doped in the car. Whatever happened came later."

Roscoe leaned forward and laid his hand on Dick's knee. "Later you were drugged and hypnotized, interrogated, and ordered to forget everything that happened. The order was faulty. It should have included Zara. I've had a similar experience myself, so I'm sure. Sumuru is an adept at the game. But the mongrel called Ariosto—your friend Dr. Ralston—knows how to do it, too. Let's get a move on."

The sun was sinking, nearly touching the crest of the low range of mountains that Coral had seen through the early-morning mist, when the dhow came alongside again. As Lisa had predicted, Dolores d'Eze proved to be a beautiful but charmingly unaffected girl. Widely traveled and astonishingly well informed, she spoke English in a way that finally captivated Coral.

"I am better," Dolores told her, with her friendly smile, "with French and Spanish. My English"—she shrugged her shoulders—"not so hot."

A day in Dolores' company had decided Coral to accept the inevitable without making a scene, which, she realized, wouldn't alter matters. The serpent mark was around her ankle. She had accepted it of her own free will, with all that it implied. It was too late for afterthoughts.

All the same, when the time came to board the dhow, to grasp the hands of the savage-looking Arabs who manned her and jump from the highly civilized Fleur-de-Lis onto the deck of this barbaric craft called for all her courage.

She stood on deck waving to Lisa until the white yacht, which immediately resumed her course, was so far away that they could no longer see one another. A dreadful sense

of being cut off from the world, of utter, desolate loneliness, overwhelmed her.

Dolores, however, seemed to be entirely at ease; and the deference shown toward their passengers by the dangerous-looking Arab crew made Coral wonder what power Our Lady had over them. Under normal circumstances, for two attractive girls to venture alone on board such a vessel would have been nothing short of lunacy.

In the small, stuffy cabin of the dhow, which had a most singular smell, Dolores told her, "These people, they do anything for money—even keep their hands off women. Also, if they fail, they know they die."

"Die?"

"But yes. Madonna has them all arrested as hashish smugglers. Marûk Pasha is very strict about this. Worse than than the English used to be. They will be whipped. Also strangled."

"But that's horrible!"

Dolores shrugged. It was a gesture she had acquired from Our Lady, and it made a dimple appear on one bare satin shoulder. "They know it is horrible. This is why we are safe. You notice the smell in the cabin?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"Hashish. They all smoke it."

"But what is hashish?"

"The same you call marijuana in America, but much, much more strong."

When dusk fell, a big, bearded man came into the cabin and lighted a brass lamp that hung from the ceiling. He muttered something to Dolores as he went out.

"What did he say?" Coral wanted to know.

"He say we shall be ready to go ashore in half an hour."

"Do we spend the night there?"

"Oh, no!" Dolores laughed. "It is a very small Arab village. The car I came in waits to take us."

"To take us where, Dolores?"

"As far as the Nile. Four-five hour."

"At night—in the desert?"

"*Ma chérie!* We are safe enough. We have an escort."

But Coral began to recognize a return of the panic that had overcome her that morning. It was impossible to hide from herself the fact that although she had flown to England voluntarily, from that point onward her own inclinations had been ignored. To all intents and purposes she was a prisoner.

When, after a lot of shouting, tacking, and turning, the dhow bumped against some sort of pier and was tied up, the bearded man reappeared and the two girls were led on deck.

Coral saw a small Arab village entirely surrounded by cliffs, and had a glimpse of the winding channel through which the dhow had come. Two other dhows were moored nearby. A more perfect pirate base would have been hard to find or to imagine.

This village climbed a steep slope, enclosed above by a natural wall of rock, so that, except for the houses on the short water front and at the top, every house overlooked the roofs of those beneath it. No light showed in any window. There was no one on the dock except Coral, Dolores, the bearded sailor, and one other. The crew had disappeared. Higher houses were illuminated by the moon; those below lay in blue-black shadow.

A dusty station wagon stood on the dock, a brown-faced chauffeur in a dark uniform waiting beside it. He saluted Dolores, spoke briefly.

"Your luggage, it is put in the car, dear," Dolores explained to Coral. "But Said ask you please check it before we start."

In a waking dream, Coral, who had never traveled so lightly in her life, noted her scanty baggage and nodded. The bearded master of the dhow displayed white wolf teeth in what might have been a smile, gave a casual salaam, and walked away.

"Get in, *chérie*." Dolores took Coral's arm. "The seat behind the driver is supportable. The road is very bumpy—meant for the camel."

By a winding track—it hardly deserved the name of a road—they climbed out of the tiny seaport and through a great, gloomy pass, where the driver used a powerful searchlight fixed to the roof of the car. At last came open country—sheer, flat desert—until somewhere on the moon-drenched skyline a great pinnacle of rock towered ominously.

At the same moment, a company of armed Arab horsemen swept down upon them in a cloud of dust.

"Oh, my God!" Coral moaned.

Dolores laughed, slipped an arm around Coral's shoulders.

"It is our escort, *chérie*! The sheik of the Mâzî is Our Lady's friend. We are safe now."

Chapter Fourteen

THE DESERT JOURNEY from the Red Sea coast, covered by a party of grimly silent Arab horsemen, seemed to Coral like a recurrent nightmare. The lurching and jolting of the car on what was no more than a caravan road at first alarmed her, and then, when she accepted it, lulled her to sleep. From these snatches of repose she would be roused by an exceptionally wild lurch or by a sudden change of direction that would threaten to throw her out of her seat.

In one such waking interval she recognized the fact that they were traveling at the base of that dim pinnacle of rock which she had seen from far away. It's vast moon shadow lay across the desert like a blue-black carpet. She looked up and could find no skyline, but at the same moment a light flickered out of sheer blackness above, and was gone.

Evidently Dolores had seen it too, for she bent forward and spoke hurriedly to the driver.

He slowed up, leaned out, and shouted something to the leader of their escort.

There was a guttural reply, and as the driver accelerated, Coral looked back sleepily over her shoulder and saw a solitary horseman fall out from the party and gallop back.

"What is the trouble, Dolores?" she murmured drowsily.

"Nothing, *chérie*. Go to sleep."

But Dolores, who knew that Dr. Ernestine had mixed a sleeping draught in Coral's last drink, knew also that the flashing light on the rocks below the great monastery of St. Anthony had been a signal of some kind.

They were twenty-five miles from the coast, and still had at least another eighty to go before they reached the Nile.

Coral slept fitfully during the next two or three hours, finally waking up only when the lurching and bumping of the station wagon ceased.

She looked out drowsily, and saw that they had halted at a well. There were a few palms, black silhouettes against the sky like profiles in a stage set. The men of the escort were watering their horses. She could see Dolores talking to

an Arab who had apparently only just rode up. As he swung out of the saddle and led his horse to the spring, Dolores came back to the car. She gave Coral her warm, friendly smile.

"You like to take some fresh air, *chérie*?"

Coral shook her head. "Not with all those wild-looking men around. But I'm parched with thirst. I'd love a glass of water."

Dolores laughed. "I have some in a thermos. The water in the spring it is pure Epsom salts!"

"But—the poor horses!"

"The horses and the men are trained from birth to drink this stuff. It is terrible!"

Coral drank a cup of ice-cold water. "Can you spare another, Dolores? My mouth feels full of sand."

"The captain, he mixes very strong ones, I think, when we leave."

Dolores poured out another cup of water from the thermos, and Coral emptied the cup thirstily.

A few minutes later they were on their way once more, and had not gone far before Coral was fast asleep again. As soon as Dolores was sure of this, she bent forward and opened a small box attached to the back of the driver's seat. She pressed a switch, and a little red light appeared.

"Sister Dolores," she said softly.

A tiny blue light sprang up, and the chantlike tones of Caspar came: "Our Lady is listening. Make your report."

"Madonna"—Dolores lowered her voice and spoke in French—"we are close to the Nile. Sister Coralie is asleep. We made the detour by the monastery and saw a light up on the rocks, which shone very brightly for a few seconds and then disappeared. A man rode back and searched. He overtook us at the well and reported that he could find no trace of anyone there. It is strange, because none of the monks is ever out after dark and there is no path to the top, as My Lady knows."

Sumuru replied, "There is no cause for alarm, Dolores. This light has been reported on two other occasions when visitors to the convent have come by the Red Sea route. I shall get in touch tomorrow with the principal of the monastery and ask him to investigate this matter."

"I dare to hope"—Drake Roscoe didn't sound so hopeful—"that we have really managed to disappear."

The Ford was passing what looked like a medieval

fortress. Dick saw stone walls, watchtowers, and an impressive gateway outlined against a brazen sky.

"I don't know about disappearing, Roscoe. This looks like a showplace to me—although I admit I never heard of it."

"Few have," Roscoe assured him. "Behind the brave façade there's nothing but a desert village. Cairo H.Q. during the war wouldn't know much about this God-forgotten tract. It wasn't on Rommel's route."

Roscoe was unjust to Cairo H.Q., but desert approaches had been outside Dick's field of activities.

"Much farther to go?" he inquired.

"Less than a mile. Just beyond that palm grove."

They drove ahead, presently rounded the bend, and there was the strange desert inn to which Roscoe had referred. It crowned an elevation, partly masked by trees. Clearly at some time the place had been a small town. Fragments of old walls and other ruins indicated this. A few tumble-down native houses were still inhabited. How a commodious caravansary had survived in such a wilderness Dick couldn't imagine. He guessed that a large village, predating the one they had passed, must formerly have surrounded it.

Roscoe, who was driving, stopped abruptly. "Up you go. Ask for a tow in. And take this. It speaks Arab even better than you do!" He tossed over a wade of five-dollar bills.

"This should help," Dick admitted.

He started up the track, which led directly to the gate. The sound of their approach had brought out a few ragged spectators, and when he found himself among them he concentrated on his new identity, and thought in Arabic.

"Our car has broken down," he explained. "We are bound for the Little Oasis. Where do I find someone to haul in the automobile until it can be repaired?"

A chorus answered him: "Abdûl es-Sûk!"

Some of the strangely excited group ran down to where Roscoe could be seen bending over the Ford engine; others led Dick Cartaret to the gate of this survival from the days of Harûn al-Raschîd.

He found himself looking through a wide-open gate into a courtyard that had some features in common with that of an old English inn. This courtyard was entirely enclosed by the caravansary. Below were stables and storerooms for merchandise; the sleeping quarters were above.

An elderly Egyptian whose most memorable feature was his nose came out to meet him.

"*Es-selâm âleykûm*," Dick said. "Peace be with you."

"On you be peace," the Egyptian replied, politely but irritably. "I fear I have no accommodation to offer your excellency, if that is what you look for."

An enthusiastic audience of three stood behind Dick.

"I say to you, Abdûl es-Sûk, that our car has broken down. My master, Yussûf Barmek, is a merchant prince. He is on his way to the Oasis to buy all the dates they have to sell, for export to America. He is liberal and will pay well for all you give him. But here we must stay—for we can go no farther until repairs are made."

Abdûl seemed to be at a loss what to say, what to do. "There are very few rooms fit for use, effendi. And a great personage who is coming this way engages them all for himself."

Dick pulled out the roll of money. "Rooms that are *not* fit for use will do—although a merchant prince is also a great personage. But most certainly we must sleep somewhere tonight. I want three or four men to help push the automobile into a safe place; then, in the evening, two asses or mules to carry us into Medinet for parts to repair the car."

He thrust twenty dollars into Abdûl es-Sûk's hand with the generosity of a man spending someone else's money.

"Effendi!" But Abdûl kept the money.

Dick turned to the three men looking on. "Come with me, to push in the automobile."

Again money worked wonders. The three followed him to where Drake Roscoe pretended to labor over the engine. He looked up.

"It is useless, Barmek Effendi," Dick said in Arabic. "These men and I will push the car into a safe place."

Roscoe nodded resignedly, and the Ford, Roscoe steering, was pushed up to the hotel of Abdûl es-Sûk.

That reluctant host had opened the door of a place that might have been intended either for storing merchandise or for the accommodation of animals. The smell indicated that it had recently been used for camels. But the Ford was pushed inside.

Roscoe took a basket of provisions from the trunk compartment and Dick grabbed their suitcases. This done, Dick signaled to Abdûl to lock the door.

He obeyed.

The lock was a wooden one, and at least a hundred years old; the wooden key was six or seven inches long. Abdûl ceremoniously handed the key to Roscoe. He clapped his hands, and a Negro porter came running. Abdûl pointed to the baggage. The porter put the basket on his head and took up the suitcases. Abdûl saluted Roscoe.

"As I told your secretary, Pasha, I have only poor accommodation to offer your excellency." The fluid Arabic was beyond Roscoe's ability to follow, but he listened in dignified silence. "There are two poor rooms, unfit for your use, but the best I have to offer, if you will do me the honor to follow."

They mounted a stair to the gallery, followed it around two corners, and came to an opened door.

"If you would deign to occupy this room, Pasha."

The room was a mere box, with bare floor and a truckle bed. A piece of matting had been thrown down by the bed. A porous water jar, known as a *kullah*, stood in a brass tray on the ledge of a narrow window.

"This room," Dick stated, "is beneath my master's dignity. But if it is the best you have, leave the basket and the bags here and show me mine."

The room to which Abdûl led him was some distance from the other. It was situated nearly at the end of a dark passage that branched off from the gallery. It was smaller and dirtier than Roscoe's, and its one window, high in the wall above the bed, must have overlooked some inner court, for very little light came through. There stood the inevitable *kullah* on the ledge, and an oil lamp that looked as though it might have belonged to Aladdin hung from the ceiling.

"Very poor indeed." Dick nodded. "I suppose I must put up with it."

When he rejoined Roscoe, and Abdûl was dismissed, Roscoe opened his suitcase and took out two automatics. He handed one to Dick.

"There are things about this place I don't like—apart from too many lizards in the bed. Here's a box of shells. But the gun's fully loaded." He fixed a penetrating stare on Dick. "I wonder if you noticed what I noticed down in the courtyard."

"What did you notice?"

"In front of a storeroom two doors down from the one where we put the car some sort of white stuff, prob-

ably flour, had been dropped and only half swept up. Did you see it?"

"No."

"Then you didn't see what I saw. In the white patch there were tire marks. A large car of some sort is garaged there—and it arrived recently. For the good of our health we have to find out who it belongs to and what he's doing in this dump."

Coral's first sight of the Nile was by moonlight, and the unique, stark beauty of the scene, which exceeded all she had imagined, aroused her from that mysterious stupor in which she had remained throughout the journey. They approached the silver river through a grove of palms. On the opposite bank she saw another grove surrounding a solitary dome that resembled a huge pearl in the rays of the moon.

Said, the driver, and two other men carried their baggage to a long narrow boat with four rowers, which awaited them by a landing stage.

Now that their wild Arab escort had left, Coral began to fear the silence of this ancient, mysterious river. It was broken only by the sighing of reeds moving in a slight breeze. Nothing in her sheltered life had prepared her for this journey. Her previous travels had been in great liners. Her shore visits, on cruises, had been supervised by guides from some trustworthy agency.

Now she was alone in Egypt with Dolores.

She liked Dolores, indeed admired her, had already put her in the bracket of a good friend; but Dolores was only a girl like herself. And now even Said, their Arab driver, was bidding them good-by, and they were out on the Nile with four grinning Egyptian boatmen.

"Dolores!" Coral whispered, and shivered slightly.

Dolores picked up a fur cloak laid over the padded seat of the boat and threw it around Coral's shoulders. "At this time of year, Coralie, it is chilly at night on the Nile." She draped a similar cloak about herself.

Coral mechanically ran her fingers over the silky fur, then glanced at Dolores' cloak. "But Dolores! These are *mink!*"

"I know, *chérie*. Madonna is so thoughtful always. Now that you are to know her better, you will adore her."

Dolores put her arm around Coral and hugged her in friendly fashion. To Coral, so used to jealousy from her

own sex, this comradeship from her lovely, dark-eyed companion, this entire absence of that dreadful awareness of competition, came as something outside the world she had known.

Of course, she had experienced and appreciated a similar noncompetitive friendship from Lisa, who was a very pretty girl, but she had thought Lisa to be unusual.

These definitions of the relationships between sisters of the Order were all to be found in the catechism. Coral just hadn't believed, in her secret heart, that such a stifling of the instincts of rivalry between women could ever be brought about. She had never shared these instincts, but she had suffered from them.

"Dolores dear, when we get to the other side, what happens?"

"There will be another car waiting to take us to the Fayyûm. The Garden of Egypt—and to Madonna!"

"Do you truly believe, Dolores, that Our Lady one day will stamp out ugliness and war and all the horrors that hang over us today? It's a wonderful dream—a world of peace and beauty. But can it ever come true?"

"We're not allowed to doubt it, *chérie*."

Chapter Fifteen

"YOU ARE WARM NOW, CORALIE?" Dolores tucked the rug around Coral. "It is very chilly on the river at night, and Madonna would never forgive me if you catch cold."

"On the contrary—I'm getting too hot. I'm in less danger of pneumonia than of heat stroke!"

"That is better. I, myself, soon get cold."

Coral fingered the rug over her knees. "Dolores, these rugs are mink too!"

Dolores laughed. It was a charming, friendly laugh. "Madonna, she love mink. Everything with her is mink. She has a mink farm. And all the finest skins she keep for herself." Dolores closed her eyes, shrugged her fur-covered shoulders. "She is *incroyable*, Our Lady!"

Coral lay back in her corner and tried to relax. The car was a luxurious Rolls sedan. It had met the ferry. The driver wore his smart uniform in such a way that

Coral supposed he had been a soldier. He was young and good-looking, and had brilliant white teeth that shone in the moonlight under his black mustache.

It was a wonder car. A pullout tray in front of each passenger proved to be fitted with mirror, powder, lipstick, perfume, and most of the other requisites of a woman's toilet. The fawn-colored upholstery was in perfect taste.

"What a lovely car!" Coral murmured.

"It is Madonna's own car, *chérie*. It is in honor of your arrival in Egypt."

"Are we nearly there, Dolores? I'm so tired."

"We make a detour. Your adventures in London, they alarm Our Lady. She thinks perhaps they believe you are kidnaped. The escort from the coast is because of brigands. But here, it is only necessary you are not seen. Some detective, maybe, follows you."

"Dolores—I don't have to meet that revolting creature Ariosto again, do I?"

There was a brief hesitation, and then:

"No, Coralie," Dolores assured her. "Ariosto troubles neither of us any more."

"Neither of us?"

Dolores rested her dark head on Coral's shoulder. "Once, *chérie*, I adore that man."

"Dolores!"

"I am very young. I grow up. I become wise. I see him as he is—a satyr, an eater of women. Almost, this discovery makes me doubt Madonna's wisdom; for she gave me to him. But I think she has a purpose in all she does. It is perhaps just the building of her perfect race—for Ariosto has beauty and much brain. But—*pff!*—it doesn't work. And I am glad. With Ariosto I am through. He is a great brain in a beautiful body. He has no heart."

Coral was trying to think of a reply to this unexpected revelation when the car was braked so suddenly that she was almost thrown against the partition.

In the glare of the headlight she caught a glimpse of the trunk of a palm lying across the road in front of them. She had no time to notice anything else.

The door beside her was wrenched open and she found herself looking into the lined and evil face of an Arab who more closely resembled an old vulture than a man. A scream was stifled in her throat by a canvas bag that the man clapped over her head with great dexterity.

It had a sickly sweet, overpowering smell.

She felt herself being dragged from the car, lifted in wiry arms—and then she felt no more.

In the caravansary of Abdûl es-Sûk, Drake Roscoe and Dick Cartaret walked softly along the gallery outside Roscoe's room. They were looking down into the courtyard. The ponderous gate had been closed at nightfall, but a Sudanese porter sat on a rough wooden seat just inside, as if expecting other visitors.

"While that guy stays there," Dick said softly, "we can't hope to explore."

"No. But he can't see us up here, if we keep quiet."

There came a beating on the gate.

The porter opened a wicket, looked out. Evidently satisfied by what he saw, he went to work to remove the heavy bolts and bars, and presently opened the gate.

The Arab chauffeur, still in uniform, whom Dick remembered vividly, came in, followed by the fat man he had seen driving when the Cadillac speeded through Beni Suêf.

"Whew!"

Roscoe's exclamation was drowned by the noisy closing of the gate.

"We'd better hop!" Dick whispered. "They'll be coming up."

"Wait!" Roscoe clutched his arm. "Listen! We might learn something."

Old Abdûl es-Sûk had appeared from some dark place below. The courtyard, in true medieval fashion, was lighted only by four flaring cressets, which dispersed the gloom on that side not reached by the moon.

Dick listened.

"Where is the merchandise," the fat man demanded in a reedy voice, "for which I am dispatched to bid, O Abdûl? I have scanned the desert, but I have seen no signal."

"Be a little patient, Yahya, my friend. The night is yet young."

"I risk my neck, Abdûl. This is folly. But I have to obey. There is wine in my room?"

"But certainly. Of the best."

"This is where we beat it!" Roscoe whispered.

Back in Roscoe's room, with the door closed, Dick said, "I can't quite make it out. The fat one seems to have

come to bid for some merchandise. He mentioned that he risked his neck. . . . Listen! They're coming upstairs."

They waited in silence. Heavy footsteps mounted the stair to the gallery, then faded away. Evidently the fat one's room was in another wing. A sense of some frightful fatality claimed Dick Cartaret. The one brass lamp, similar to that in his own cell, had been lighted, and cast flickering shadows on the walls of the sordid apartment. He felt as though he had been snatched back into some, primitive world of the past where modern concepts hadn't yet been born.

Drake Roscoe dropped down on the bed and stared straight ahead, seeing nothing.

"Merchandise? Sure that was the word?"

"Sure."

"There's only one kind of 'merchandise' Yahya would be interested in—and only one kind he might be risking his neck for."

"What's that?"

"Slaves."

"*Slaves?*"

"I know it sounds crazy, Dick. But you have to remember that during the time the Turks ruled Egypt—and, as history goes, it isn't so long ago—the slave trade flourished. British rule finished it, more or less—but not entirely. It wouldn't surprise me to hear that the old trade's flourishing again."

"Of course, slavery is legal under Islamic law, but I doubt if the slaves would stand for it today."

"Hm!" Roscoe grinned rather grimly. "What about Soviet Russia?"

Dick was startled. This angle on the thing he had overlooked. Once compliance was brushed aside and force took its place, anything could happen. It became plain jungle law: the will of the stronger.

"I suppose Yahya is the 'great personage' who had engaged all the accommodations." He glanced at Roscoe. "We have to suppose that it includes rooms to store 'merchandise' when the purchase has been made. Oh, it's a nightmare!"

"The old villain didn't want us here. Easy to see why now. But he couldn't hold out against the dollars. We mustn't allow this side light on manners and customs of the modern Egyptians to put us off course. Our cue is to lie low."

"Well, I'm certainly not going to lie low in my little back room. I'm staying put right here. And I'm not even going to try to sleep. Wonder if we could get some coffee. . . ."

Yahya sprawled on a divan in a room more comfortably furnished than that allotted to Drake Roscoe. Two empty wine bottles lay on a rug; a third was already half empty. And Yahya was more than half drunk.

"I say to you, Abdûl, that I shall suffer if I return to Marûk Pasha and tell him that I have no new charming damsel to entertain him. For I assure you, my friend, that the Pasha has come to an age when such stimulus is required. He squanders his money on the woman who calls herself Princess Astar. I understand. She is far more exciting than any female I have ever known. But"—he shrugged fat shoulders—"she refuses him the satisfaction that a generous man is entitled to expect from a woman."

Abdûl es-Sûk, wildly agitated, moved up and down, to and fro like a caged mongoose.

"I assure you again, Yahya, that Ali sent the message forward soon after dawn that a dhow was joining a motor yacht in the gulf. Later came another message. At dusk two females were transferred to the dhow and brought ashore. You know that these consignments are guarded by Achmed the Mâzî across the Eastern Desert. . . . Wait! What do I hear?"

Abdûl threw the door open, ran out onto the gallery. He looked down.

The watchman had opened the gate. Several camels were entering the courtyard.

Abdûl ran to the stair and down to meet this welcome caravan. Ali el-Haggi, known as Ali of Aleppo, strode ahead of the leading camel, on whose back a *musatteh*, a covered camel litter, was mounted. Behind this first camel paced a second—an animal of superior breed and capable of great speed. It was Ali's camel. A third, also bearing a covered litter, followed, and lastly three other riding camels. Each of the beasts was led by an Arab.

The Sudanese porter hurriedly reclosed and barred the gate when the small caravan had entered.

At a word of command from the men who led them and a tap on the foreleg, the two camels bearing litters dropped to their knees in the grotesque fashion of their

kind, and then, snarling reluctantly, went down by the stern.

Led by the Sudanese porter, who carried a huge wooden key, the four riding camels, their riders beside them, filed in the burlesque dignity that belongs to every camel across the shadowy courtyard to a stable. The other men opened the covered litters and lifted out two motionless bodies, each wrapped from head to feet in a woolly burnoose.

Sumuru awoke.

Through a wide-open window, netted against the intrusion of insects, moonlight had flooded her bed, for Our Lady loved to sleep in moonlight. But now the moon had set. It was that darkest hour before the dawn.

Her bed was a divan, with four pillars supporting rose-pink gossamer drapes. It was raised on a mink-covered dais. One silver lamp hung near the door of the chamber, speckled with sparks of light. There was no sound.

Sumuru glanced at an illuminated clock. She snatched up a robe from the coverlet and threw it over her bare shoulders. Invariably she slept in that naked innocence in which we are all born. She thrust the pink curtains aside. They gave out a tinkling of tiny bells.

Rajah awoke, and looked at the two small white feet that swam into his view on the mink rug. The feet were immediately hidden in a pair of feathery slippers. He rose up, stretched his lithe body, and snarled sleepily. Sumuru's magnetic touch rested on his head.

"Did I wake you, Rajah? Lie down again."

Our Lady touched a button on a dial that stood on a mother-of-pearl table beside her and poured out a glass of wine from a long-necked flask. She drank a little, and then, draping the jingling curtain aside, returned to the cushioned divan.

Somewhere, far off, sounded a faint peal of deeper-toned bells.

Then, even more faintly, a voice cried: "Caspar! Our Lady calls you!"

And almost at once came a sibilant shuffling. The door of the room opened without noise, and Caspar came in. His slippers continued to whisper on the polished floor as he crossed to the divan. He saluted, smiling. Rajah lay still. He was at ease with Caspar.

"My Lady called me?"

"Yes, Caspar. You wakened quickly."

"I was not asleep, Madonna."

Sumuru watched him through lowered lashes. "You were uneasy, no doubt?"

"I was uneasy, My Lady. I felt my assurance that Sister Coralie and Sister Dolores would be safe once they had crossed the Nile might be unwarranted. They are very late, Madonna."

"Very late?" The musical voice was no more than audible. "It is disaster! Something has happened to them. Who was driving my car, Caspar?"

"Henryk, Madonna. It was impossible to detail Philo after what occurred in London."

"I agree. Henryk is personable, an excellent pilot and driver. But he lacks Philo's cunning—and Philo's strength."

Caspar's smile didn't desert him, but he protested, "Madonna, if the error is mine I beg you to forgive me. I had not foreseen any use for cunning or for strength on the journey from the Nile. You released Henryk to the Polish Air Force just before the war. He won many decorations, although so young. With the British Royal Air Force he made a new record."

"This is common ground, Caspar. He is a brave man and a skillful man—but he has no brains, except military brains."

"My Lady is harsh. If indeed something unforeseen has occurred, I venture to doubt that Philo could have done better."

My Lady sat up on the divan, raised her arms above her head. "These are mere speculations, Caspar. Let us forget speculations and try to come to the facts. What steps can we take to trace the party?"

Caspar shrugged his shoulders. "I can think of none, Madonna, that I have not taken already."

Sumuru raised her lashes and flashed him a rewarding smile. "Always resourceful," she murmured, "if not quite infallible. Tell me."

"We dare not use the helicopter. That is reserved for a greater emergency. But I have alerted our headquarters in Medinet. Men of My Lady's patrol are already surveying the route. Philo and two Nubian guards are on their way in the armored car. I am in constant touch with the emergency, Madonna. We can do no more—yet."

Madonna lay back on her cushions, closed her brilliant

eyes. "It is possible, Caspar, but nearly unthinkable, that this man Cartaret and Drake Roscoe—financed, let us assume, by William Denvers—have intercepted the car. I must concentrate upon this possibility, although I have little data to go upon where the meddling Englishman is concerned."

"I had considered it, Madonna, and dismissed it."

"But if, as I suspect, Caspar, and so do you, this is a daring attempt by the old Syrian scorpion Ali, then, whatever its outcome, I shall reprieve Ariosto. You know for what purpose?"

"I can guess, Madonna. But we have first to catch Ali."

Sumuru opened her eyes. She spoke in a whisper. "Never fear! I rarely waste my resources on troublesome insects. But Ali shall be delivered to his sorrowing family in a box so small that it would scarcely contain the body of a rat."

Chapter Sixteen

DICK CARTARET was dreaming, and he knew he was dreaming, but he couldn't wake up.

Held down by unbreakable bonds, he moaned, "Roscoe! Roscoe! Where are you?" For he lay imprisoned in a fantastic mirage, never changing, always unreal—a phantom world that he recognized to be illusion, but from which he couldn't escape.

Sometimes it had an eerie beauty, like a delicate Japanese water color. There were trees in blossom, brilliant birds flitted from bough to bough, and fairy bridges crossed streams to pagodas set on fairy islands.

Then a volcano in the background of the picture would erupt and he would run for his life before billows of streaming lava.

Just when destruction touched his flying heels, oblivion came. . . .

He found himself on a rocky causeway crossing a wide and stormy lake. Angry waves lapped the rocks, presently began to sweep right across. And the causeway grew narrower and narrower. At last it became a slippery path no

more than a few inches wide on which he found it next to impossible to keep a foothold. Ahead, it disappeared altogether. Only a great expanse of furious water lay before him.

He turned. He had a hazy view through stormy spray of a woman. She beckoned him back to safety. She was lithe, commanding, resourceful. . . .

He was in Port Said. He was being lifted into a long, narrow case like a coffin. A voice spoke. He knew the voice. It was the voice of Zara, the fascinating Egyptian girl who had led him into a trap.

"I have spoken to Madonna. These are her orders: If he dies, you will die, too."

Madonna? Who was Madonna?

In a room otherwise dark as a tomb, an object that looked like a jeweled star revolved slowly. It cast rays of ever changing colors from its many facets, sometimes touching the ivory features of Caspar, sometimes the beautiful, entranced face of Sumuru.

"Madonna!" Caspar's monotonous voice quivered emotionally. "Madonna, you are pale. I have warned you so often against this ancient Egyptian ritual. It is without scientific sanction, and besides, it exhausts My Lady."

"Be silent!" Sumuru's voice was a whisper. "I cannot find Drake Roscoe. That is strange. But I have found Dolores. She needs me desperately. The star moves too slowly. Speed it, Caspar."

Drake Roscoe woke up with great reluctance. Some peculiar sound had roused him.

He was in a state of pleasant languor that he had no inclination to disturb. But when he raised heavy lids and looked around the dimly lighted room, a different mood came. He found himself madly anxious to shake off this mysterious inertia, to recover control of his wits and of his limbs.

Dick Cartaret lay slumped in a split-cane chair, snoring loudly and regularly.

On a rough wooden stool beside him were a coffeepot and two cups. One cup was unused, the other half filled.

Roscoe lay on the bed, still very drowsy, his mouth dry as a desert. He sat up. He saw a bottle of whisky about a third full on an upturned suitcase, an empty glass, and a porous water jar on the window ledge.

Memory began to return.

He recalled drinking the whisky, or some of it, and discussing the situation with Cartaret. But the whisky up to then had been locked in the bag and couldn't have been tampered with. Dick had managed to get some coffee and to borrow an old cane chair.

Roscoe stood up unsteadily. He remembered that Dick had dropped into a doze. He had no recollection of falling asleep himself.

Yet, as a look at his watch showed him, they had been asleep for all of four hours.

"Dick!" He reached forward, shook Cartaret by the shoulder. "Wake up!"

There was no response. Dick went on snoring.

"Hell!" Roscoe growled. "This thing is becoming a habit of his!"

But in view of his own condition, he couldn't very well blame Dick. He lifted the lid of the brass coffeepot, sniffed the contents, frowned thoughtfully, then poured some out into the empty cup and tasted it.

Now that the sirupy coffee was cold, its unusual bitterness was easy to detect. When hot, it might have been difficult.

It contained a quantity of opium.

But, Roscoe reflected, *he* had drunk no coffee.

The solution came in a flash. He had added a little water to his whisky. He tasted some from the jar. It was very bitter.

Slipping a flashlight into his pocket, he opened the door and carried the water jar out onto the gallery. He knew, from his own condition, that Dick would wake up with a burning thirst, and he must put this stuff out of his reach. Looking down, he saw that the cressets still remained alight. There was no one in the courtyard.

Leaning over the rail, he allowed the drugged water to trickle gently down onto the paving below. He left the jar and set out quietly along the gallery. The sky looked like a velvet umbrella sewn with diamonds.

A sound came from that side of the courtyard where he supposed the stables to be located, which convinced him that camels must have come in while he was asleep. The hysterical whine of a camel resembles no noise made by any other animal; in fact it resembles nothing on earth.

His tongue felt like hot rubber. There would be water *kullahs* in other rooms, and none of the doors opening on

the gallery appeared to possess locks. But would the *kullahs* be filled?

Cautiously he opened a door, listened, then sent a ray from his flashlight in quest of the window.

He found no water jar.

He went on to the next door.

He had gone a long way, and had begun to feel like a frustrated burglar, before he found what he was looking for.

At the moment that he opened the door of this apartment his impulse was to close it again, as softly as possible.

A light was burning inside.

He hesitated, the door ajar. He could hear no sound. He opened the door wider, peered through the crack. This room was much better furnished than his own. There were two reasonably comfortable chairs and a superior bed with a gaudy coverlet. He saw several wine bottles on a coffee table and could detect a smell of Turkish tobacco.

Fully opening the door, he stepped in.

There was no one there, but a pair of silk pajamas lay on the coverlet.

He stared across to where two *kullahs* stood in a recessed *mushrabîyeh* window. Crossing, he lifted one down, took a long, cool, gratifying drink, and then carried the jar to the door. He was about to go out when a sound checked him.

It seemed to come from a large, closed closet on the left. He put the jar down carefully and opened the closet door.

What he saw explained, to some extent, the difference of this room from the others he had inspected. It was a harem apartment, set aside for the accommodation of women travelers in those faraway days when a busy caravan road served this ancient inn.

The closet was in fact an observation post. The back consisted of a fretwork screen that projected over a large room where in former times singers and dancers had performed for the male travelers, while their veiled women looked on above, hidden from the men below. Roscoe had seen similar rooms in Istanbul.

But he had never seen a scene like that in progress now. . . .

Dick Cartaret dreamed on.

The lid of the box in which he lay was being nailed down. Dick tried to shout. No sound would come.

He tried to move, to raise his hands in an attempt to push the lid back. He couldn't stir.

And now he was being carried, on and on and on.

There came a distant sound like that of a running stream. The sound drew nearer.

Suddenly the box was sharply tipped, so that his feet were raised high above his head. Apparently the box was open at one end, for he shot out of it, headfirst, into ice-cold water.

The shock partly wakened him.

He looked about, dim-eyed, realized where he was, and grasped the clay water jar that stood at his elbow. He raised it to his lips and drank greedily. His face and head were dripping wet, which he didn't understand, and a sheet of paper stuck out of the breast pocket of his sports shirt.

Closing his eyes, he was about to go to sleep again when his bemused brain began slowly to function.

Why wasn't Roscoe in the room? And why was he in this strange condition?

He reopened his eyes. It called for a tremendous mental effort. The door was closed, but he became aware of some vague disturbance, apparently a long way off. He tried to find out what time it was, but his vision seemed to be dim.

The effort of concentration further restored him. Learning the time shocked him into complete wakefulness.

It was nearly four o'clock!

He took another drink from the *kullah*. Then he stood up dizzily, pulled out the sheet of paper from his shirt pocket, and held it under the brass lamp.

The paper was a note, scrawled in pencil. It said:

We've been drugged. Put on tarboosh and dark glasses. Bring gun. Turn right on gallery and walk around corner to third room from far end. Go in. Open closet door left. Look through screen at back. Don't interfere unless I call you. DRAKE.

Dick read the note through again, then dried his face and hair and put on his white coat, red cap, and sunglasses.

The automatic was already in his hip pocket. He had a psychological battle before he could convince himself that this wasn't another phase of his appalling dream. But he won. And feeling oddly composed now that a time for action had come, he started out as directed.

He walked quietly, peering down into the shadowy courtyard, medieval in the flickering light of the cressets. There was no one in sight. But that indefinable disturbance he had noticed seemed to come from behind what looked like a stable door. He stood still and listened.

There were camels in there. A caravan must have arrived while he slept.

Excitement boiled up. He transferred the pistol to his coat pocket.

It was easy to spot the room indicated by Roscoe. The door stood open and faint light shone out onto the gallery. Dick reached it in a few strides, looked in cautiously, then went in. He opened the closet door, saw a lighted screen, and heard voices.

He stepped inside, looked eagerly through the lattice-work.

And what he saw so completely confounded him, challenging reason, that he knew he could never, to his last hour, forget it.

The screen projected into a lofty *ka'ah*, or reception room, at a point some ten feet from the tiled floor and six from the ceiling. Cracked paneling and faded paint suggested that sometime, perhaps a hundred years ago, the apartment below had been gaily decorated.

At one end was a raised platform, a sort of dais, surrounded by cushioned divans, at the back a deep, recessed *mushrabîyeh* window that probably overlooked the courtyard. Several oil lamps hanging on chains from above lighted this part of the room. The rest lay in semidarkness.

There were six people present.

Yahya's great bulk occupied one divan. A low coffee table stood in front of him. And facing Yahya, on the opposite divan, was an elderly-young Egyptian, his naturally handsome face seared by lines of overindulgence. He wore a perfectly cut white suit that Savile Row couldn't have bettered, and the inevitable tarboosh. A similar low table nearby accommodated a bottle of French brandy, a siphon of soda water, and a box of cigarettes.

An Arab in desert dress, a man with the face of a vulture, stood on the dais between the two. Abdûl es-Sûk wavered

from point to point, sometimes giving his attention to the dissipated young Egyptian and sometimes to Yahya.

Then he would come down from the dais and bend over a crude table of unpainted wood and plaited rush that stood on the shadowy margin below. A man was seated there on some sort of rickety chair.

The man was Drake Roscoe.

Dick Cartaret closed his eyes, then looked again. He couldn't credit what he saw.

An auction was in progress.

Whenever a bid was made, the amount in cash would be laid on the table in front of the bidder, and Abdûl checked it. When Yahya made a bid, the Egyptian raised it, and Roscoe bid still higher.

The price had reached two thousand Egyptian pounds, and Yahya had begun to wriggle anxiously.

The item offered, standing on the dais beside the hawk-faced Arab auctioneer, was one of the loveliest girls Dick had ever seen. She was dark, her warm ivory skin was gleaming in the lamplight, her full lips set in a contemptuous smile, a silk robe lying at her feet.

She was nude as a classic statue, which in her perfect symmetry she resembled.

Chapter Seventeen

DRAKE ROSCOE had arrived at the slave auction by exercise of that audacity and power of split-second decisions which are qualities a secret agent must pack with his baggage, unless he wants to be reported missing. From the screen at the back of the closet he had seen a captive led onto the shameful rostrum by Ali el-Haggi. She wore a silk robe, but her face was uncovered.

He recognized Dolores d'Eze, Sumuru's favorite, in whose dark eyes he had seen tears of sympathy during the time of his own pitiful slavery to Our Lady.

His brain caught fire. He ran back to the room where Dick Cartaret still lay in deep sleep. He himself seemed to be stimulated by the drug, to be functioning at high pressure.

He penciled a note of instruction to Dick, who remained obstinately unconscious, and stuck it in his shirt pocket. Then, conserving as much of the water from the fresh *kullah* as possible, he splashed some into the sleeper's face, and was glad to get a slight gasping reaction.

But he couldn't wait. There wasn't a moment to spare.

He left the jar beside Dick and ran out onto the gallery. He must find a way into the place where this incredible piece of business was being carried on, and then decide his next move. Above all, he must remember that he was Yussûf Barmek, a wealthy fruit exporter. Cautiously he went down into the courtyard. He assumed, but didn't know, that a night watchman slept in some cubbyhole near the locked gate. And he didn't want to wake him.

The location of the tawdry auction room was easily fixed, for from where he stood he could see the open door of the apartment above, which overlooked it. He searched for the large *mushrabîyeh* window and found it easily; dim light outlined its intricate pattern.

He crossed and stood under it.

The sale had started.

All he had ever known of Arabic came back to him with almost startling clarity, as long forgotten things do under the influence of *afiyûn*, the form of opium used in Egypt.

"Five hundred," he heard a reedy voice say.

"Six hundred," a deep baritone said complacently.

Then the strident tones of the auctioneer: "Six hundred pounds! By the beard of the Prophet! Have you no eyes, no love of beauty? Look at her lustrous hair, her lips, luscious lures to trap a man's soul! Have you no dreams of such a damsel in your arms? See her skin, like new milk. . . ."

Roscoe ran to an archway directly under the projecting window. It led to a narrow passage. The passage was dark and he used his flashlight. Halfway along he saw stone steps leading up to a narrow door. He went up. The door was unlocked.

He pushed it open and found himself at the far end of the auction room, at present unnoticed in the shadows.

"Look at her shoulders! Regard those lovely arms, to lock a lover to her forever!"

"Eight hundred!"

And, impatiently: "I bid a thousand!"

The last bid was made by the well-dressed Egyptian whom Roscoe had seen from the observation post above.

As he tossed notes onto the little table before him, and Abdûl es-Sûk bent over to check them, Roscoe's own voice rang out in fairly good Arabic: "Twelve hundred!"

Drake Roscoe had decided upon his tactics.

His voice electrified the four men, and seemed to bring a momentary change of expression into Dolores' beautiful face.

The Egyptian sprang up, peered into the darkness. Yahya fell back on the divan, gasping. Abdûl plucked at his beard. But Ali el-Haggi, the slave trader, faced this new arrival with a grin of welcome that displayed a set of perfect yellow teeth.

"Here is one who has red blood in his veins!" he shouted. "Here is a buyer worthy of the treasure I offer!"

The Egyptian raised his hands. "Wait, Ali! Stop! It may be a trap." He looked into the shadows. "You are intruding, sir. Who are you?"

Drake Roscoe walked into the light. He carried a brief case. "I am Yussûf Barmek, a guest in the house of Abdûl es-Sûk. It is true, Abdûl?"

"It is true, effendi," Abdûl quavered. "But—"

"But you thought I was asleep? I am awake, and I buy choice wares of many kinds as well as fruit. I will bid, pound for pound, for this choice piece of merchandise."

"Only show us the color of your money"—the auctioneer's voice was exultant—"and you are welcome!"

Drake Roscoe raised a sheaf of Bank of Egypt notes above his head. "I am ready to bid up to ten thousand for the treasure you offer! Abdûl, a table and a chair! Hurry!"

As Abdûl went off, terrified but obedient, the Egyptian spoke aside to Ali el-Haggi. He spoke in English, which Ali evidently understood, and which the speaker supposed Yussûf Barmek didn't.

"Get two of your men, Ali. I suspect this fellow."

"How right you are!" Roscoe snapped out the words, also in English. "I spent several years in the United States, since I left Persia, and I mean to buy this girl and take her there. So you and the fat boy might as well fold up your tents."

Abdûl came back carrying a crude table and the wreck of a Louis Quinze chair, on which little of the gilt remained. Roscoe sat down, opened his case, and put a stack of notes before him. Ali grinned wolfishly, rubbing muscular hands together. Dolores, who seemed to know quite well what was going on, had a faraway look in her dark eyes

that told Roscoe that she was at least partially under the influence of a drug.

The Egyptian was exchanging glances with Yahya.

"I am offered twelve hundred pounds," Ali went on, "by Yussûf Barmek Effendi. Your offer, Aswâmi Pasha, was one thousand. Of course, it is not your last?"

"It is my last, Ali, until I have seen her. Show me what I am buying and I will bid up to the price I think she is worth."

"It is just."

And Ali el-Haggi jerked the robe away from Dolores. It fell at her feet.

"Fifteen hundred!" Aswâmi bid softly.

"Sixteen!" Yahya called.

"Two thousand."

Drake Roscoe added the necessary money to the pile already before him. His hands were steady, but there was murder in his heart. He was a dead shot, and at a cost of four shells could rid the world of four evil men. This exposure of the lovely Dolores to greedy eyes swept him with fury. Naked and unashamed, smiling her contemptuous smile, she stood looking down at him . . . and he thought a vague recognition had begun to dawn.

It was at this stage of the auction that Dick Cartaret reached the lookout above and tried to convince himself that he was really awake.

Roscoe held onto reason. There was no room for impulse here. Yahya he knew had only one attendant, the driver. But he had to assume that the man called Ali, the man who had the nerve to revive the slave trade, to capture travelers and offer them up for sale, didn't work alone. There were camels quartered below. In all probability, Ali had a gang of desperate ruffians somewhere at call.

He must play the game as he found it; too late to revise the rules. He wondered momentarily what Sumuru would do when she knew. . . .

Sumuru did know. In riding habit she was a figure from the colored pages of a fashion magazine.

In glossy riding boots, white whipcord breeches, and an open-necked cream shirt, with a red scarf tied over her hair like a turban, she stood beside a small, sleek Arab mare, black, with the lines of a clever polo pony. She turned to where a group of horsemen stood waiting to

mount, and spoke. Even there, in the great spaces under the stars, her wonderful voice rang out its golden challenge.

"You are my chosen riders, and I will explain your mission."

"Our Lady!" came a hoarse chorus.

"Only once before has anyone dared to molest a sister visiting the convent. A creature known as Ibrâhîm—a procurer belonging to the household of Aswâmi Pasha—kidnaped Thais, a lovely Greek child not yet graduated. She killed herself. It was a tragedy that led me to employ a Mâzî escort in the Eastern Desert. Aswâmi was beyond my reach. His time will come. The man Ibrâhîm I secured and dealt with. But tonight another outrage has been committed. Two of my people have been abducted, here in the Fayyûm, by the old slave dealer called Ali of Aleppo."

A muttered growl answered her words.

"Their driver, who was left for dead, revived and got the news through, and since then I have received further information. Our business is to rescue those who are missing, to punish those who are guilty. I shall make the name of my mounted patrol a name of dread from Kharga to the Delta. Tonight I shall lead you."

"Our Lady!"

The bidding for Dolores had become hectic.

Yahya recognized a treasure that, if he could acquire it, would put him in the good graces of his employer. Aswâmi Pasha, bored voluptuary, was inflamed by the unveiled beauty of that perfect body. His hungry eyes traced every curve of Dolores' satin loveliness as, nostrils distended, he bid against the eunuch and this forever-bedamned Persian-American.

He offered L 2,400.

The calm voice of Yussûf Barmek came: "Two thousand, five hundred."

Yahya gathered up his stack of notes. He had reached his limit. Aswâmi, who had come prepared to buy a comely Arab girl for three or four hundred pounds, had also staked his available ready money. But he couldn't tear his gaze from that alluring white figure.

"Ali!" he called. "My check for the difference. Two thousand, seven hundred!"

Ali turned to him. "A check, Excellency? How can I cash such a check?"

"Don't try!" Roscoe's quiet voice carried authority. "I buy at three thousand."

Abdûl, twittering with excitement, came and counted the additional notes that Roscoe threw down. He nodded to Ali.

"I am offered three thousand pounds Egyptian for a thousand and one nights of rapture. Three thousand is the bid. Going to Yussûf Barmek Effendi. . . . Going. . . going . . . gone!"

As Abdûl began to gather the stack of money, Roscoe stepped up beside Dolores and draped the robe over her shoulders. He picked her up in his arms, turned.

"O Abdûl!" He glanced in the direction of the observation window and spoke loudly. "Be so good as to get my secretary, Mohammed Tawwab. I left him asleep in my room."

Abdûl, the sheaf of notes in his hand, started off obediently.

He didn't get far.

Uttering a sound like the snarl of an enraged tiger, Ali el-Haggi bounded after him, twisted him around, and snatched the money from his grasp.

"O spawn of mules! O mud! O stench! Certainly you will come to a most unfortunate end!" He turned away, stuffing the notes into a pouch he wore under his robe. "We settle at the end of the sale."

Abdûl muttered some smothered curses, but went ahead along the shadowy room. Roscoe followed, the impassive Dolores in his arms. Her composure amazed him.

"Dolores!" he whispered. "You know me?"

"Yes, Drakos."

"Call me Drake. The other was my prison name."

Abdûl was heading down a stair at the foot of which a door opened onto the courtyard. Still muttering imprecations, he crossed to the outside stair that led to the gallery. Roscoe judged that if Dick Cartaret had been at the watching post he would have picked up his cue and returned to the room. He let Abdûl get well ahead, then followed slowly.

"What are you going to do with me?" Dolores whispered.

"If I didn't know you were crazy about Ariosto, I'd keep you."

Her soft arm was around his neck. Now she raised long black lashes, looked up at him.

"I leave Ariosto—long ago. He teaches me to hate, to despise him. But you are in—what is it?—*asservissement* to Our Lady, yes?"

He held her closer. The contact was intoxicating.

"I got over that, too, Dolores. It's finished. She taught me to feel the same way about *her*."

"Madonna?" Her dark eyes opened wide. "You hate and despise *Madonna*?"

"It's a long story, Dolores. Right now isn't the time to tell it. But it seems we've had the same experience. I've been a blind fool, the plaything of a witch. But away from her I've been able to see clearly and to think my own thoughts, see my own mistakes, and dream my own dreams."

"And what are your own dreams about?" she whispered.

"About you. Pretend to struggle. Abdûl will expect it."

He stooped his head and kissed her. His heart leaped when she returned his kiss.

Then she began to struggle. "No! no!" she cried—and offered her lips again.

Much as he now desired, had for a long time subconsciously desired, this lovely girl, the cynic within him prompted the thought that Sumuru certainly trained her disciples to madden their lovers.

As Abdûl opened the door, Dick Cartaret walked out.

"What is this, Abdûl?" he demanded in his easy Arabic. "And what is going on here tonight?"

"A sale, Mohammed." Roscoe, also, spoke in Arabic. "See what I have bought."

Dick, stupefied, totally unable to grasp the situation, stood aside as Roscoe came in and deposited his shapely burden on the bed.

"I must go, Barmek Effendi," Abdûl mumbled. "Do you bid for the other damsel?"

"The other damsel?" Dick Cartaret's voice was a challenge. "Is there someone else?"

"We are captured together," Dolores murmured drowsily. "I am so sleepy, because they try to drug me. You must save her, too, Drakos—Drake. It is Coral Denvers."

The second slave was not brought to the rostrum until Yussûf Barmek, accompanied by his secretary, returned to the auction room—which, Abdûl es-Sûk tremblingly assured the fierce auctioneer, he intended to do.

"Why wait for this man?" Aswâmi Pasha wanted to know. "It may be an hour or more before the dark girl surrenders to him—may he fry in hell! In any case, he cannot have the money to bid for another. Unless, as I suspect, O Ali, this Persian-American who has such a barbarous accent is in fact an agent of someone else."

"He pays cash, Excellency! I agree with you that he cannot leave his purchase until he has established his possession, as is usual. But he is clearly a very wealthy man, and a man of taste. What is more refreshing to one drunk with the fragrance of a red rose than to inhale that of a white?"

"Tcha! Tcha!" Yahya snapped his fat fingers. "Keep your poetry for buyers who don't know their own minds. You mean, perhaps, that you are offering us a blonde girl?"

"A blonde girl!" Ali raised his hands. "As Allah is great and Mohammed his only prophet, you offend my ears! Snow on the mountaintop is no whiter than her skin. Her shape enslaves the beholder."

The entrance of Yussûf Barmek and his secretary prevented him from speaking further. The secretary carried the brief case.

Two cushioned chairs and a large table had been placed for their convenience. They took their seats. The secretary opened the brief case and placed a stack of paper money on the table. He looked up and addressed Ali.

"Yussûf Barmek Effendi wishes me to tell you that if he is pleased with the merchandise you have to offer, he will pay the same price as before."

Yahya's mouth gaped open. His eyes, sunken in fat, turned to Aswâmi Pasha.

"It is a preposterous price for *any* woman!" Aswâmi spoke with heat. "I congratulate Barmek Effendi upon a speedy conquest of his first purchase, but when she is fully recovered from the drug mercifully administered by Ali, she may prove to be a tiger cat. And she may have influential connections."

"O Ali," Roscoe said quietly. "Show us the woman."

Ali el-Haggi, his yellow teeth glittering through his beard, opened a small door on the right of the platform, went in, and came out supporting a girl who wore only slippers and a loose robe. It was Coral Denvers. She seemed to be walking in her sleep, glazed eyes staring un-

seeingly before her. Ali was about to strip her as he had stripped Dolores.

"I am satisfied," Roscoe snapped. "I buy for three thousand pounds."

Aswâmi clenched his hands in fierce frustration as Roscoe took Coral from the supporting arms of Ali el-Haggi and carried her down to the table, where Dick, still shaking with anger, was watching Abdûl check the money.

"You are a fool, Ali!" Aswâmi declared bitterly. "I would, as you know, have paid three times as much for either of them—and you would have been a richer man tomorrow."

"Tomorrow is not born. Yesterday is dead. There is only today."

When Roscoe and Dick Cartaret got back to the room above, Dolores was curled up on the bed, fast asleep, and Coral slipped back into unconsciousness the moment Roscoe laid her in the cane chair.

"The wise thing to do"—Roscoe's expression was uneasy—"would be to get the car out and beat it while the going's good."

Dick, fascinatedly watching Coral, nodded. "But the sleeping beauties are a bit of a problem," he remarked.

"There's a tougher problem than that. This man Ali has already collected over seventeen thousand dollars of William Denvers' money. He knows we have more, and the girls as well. We can't travel fast, whichever road we take, and he has a whole lot of camels and riders tucked away somewhere around here."

"You think they'll try to attack us?"

"It's a certainty. They have nothing to lose by trying. And if they succeed in finishing us, two strangers who might be awkward witnesses have been disposed of at the same time. Men like this Ali have one-track minds. Cash in hand is all they understand. Even if he knew the identity of Coral Denvers, he wouldn't know how to go about holding her for ransom. He's used to a quick turnover."

Dick drew a deep breath. "Roscoe, even now I find it hard to accept the fact that two cultured girls, one of good Spanish family, no doubt, and the other the daughter of a well-known and wealthy American, can be taken by Arab slavers in the year 1959 and offered for sale like prize cattle."

"What you find hard to accept is the quick change that's come over the Eastern world since Western control was cast off. In ten years these people have gone back two centuries."

"But there must be *some* law to protect people against things like this."

"What law? Whose law? You're out of touch with Egypt, Dick. I was here less than two years ago. The slave trade still flourished in the nineteenth century, and this is only the twentieth."

"Good God!" Dick clenched his fists, his eyes fixed on the sleeping Coral. "I'm beginning to wonder what chance we have of getting them away."

"I'd guess, very slight. If we could make either of our embassies in Cairo, we might do it. But even so, it's not a certainty. There's only one power in Egypt strong enough to cover us."

"What power?"

"Sumuru."

"Have you gone mad?"

Drake Roscoe took out a cigar from an inside pocket of his white jacket, tossed his tarboosh on the floor.

"Be a good Samaritan, Dick." He sat down on a suitcase. "This has been quite a night. How about fixing us some drinks?"

Dick went to work, serving himself a small one with plenty of water, for he was still troubled by thirst and a racking headache.

"I asked you if you'd gone mad, Roscoe."

"I heard you. Sounds that way, I admit. But let's look the thing in the face. We're all of a hundred miles by road from Cairo—some of it pretty lonely road. Aswâmi Pasha hates our guts. He's a man of influence. The authorities will believe him where they won't believe me. Right? Yahya is a servant of Marûk, and Marûk is a cabinet minister. Putting all this aside, we have Ali to deal with."

He took a full glass from Dick and went on: "The Convent of Our Lady, across country, mostly desert, is under an hour's drive. If we can make it, we're safe."

"And prisoners for life?"

"Wait. Hasn't it occurred to you that these girls belong to the Order? Whatever their inclinations, I doubt if either of them would come with us unless she had the consent of Sumuru. If I'm to judge from the way you're looking at her, you're all set on Coral?"

Dick Cartaret laughed in an embarrassed way. "You predicted, Roscoe, that when I saw her again I might get lighted up. Well, you were right."

"Well," Roscoe said, "at least you know a beautiful woman when you see one."

"Listen, Roscoe—"

"You listen to *me*. I'm maybe ten years older than you, and I lived a pretty clean life up to the time I met Sumuru. I felt like a poleaxed bullock. But it wasn't the real thing. It was madness—and I'm over it. I saw a lot of Dolores during that time, but I was ashamed of the sympathy in her eyes. It should have taught me something. But it didn't, until I'd filed off the shackles. Then—I knew." He looked steadily at Dick Cartaret. "I'm too old for her, but I feel the same way about Dolores that you feel about Coral."

Dick reached over and grasped Roscoe's shoulder. "Good luck, Roscoe!"

"Thanks a lot. I can use some. So can you."

Chapter Eighteen

IN THE ROOM allotted to Aswâmi Pasha—the room with the hidden observation window—a conference was taking place. Yahya's mass of flesh filled one of the rest chairs and Aswâmi reclined on the bed, smoking rose-tipped cigarettes. Ali el-Haggi squatted on a rug, and Abdûl stood uneasily just inside the door.

"Your plan," Aswâmi was saying, "meets with my entire approval. But I must point out, O Ali, that its success depends primarily upon one thing: their departure before daylight."

"I agree, Excellency," Ali admitted, "that this would be helpful, but not that it is indispensable. It would be bad if they used the light railway from El-Gharak, but there will be no train available. Even if they wait for daylight, we may succeed. Everything then would depend upon the route they take."

"They will take the shortest route to Beni Suêf," Yahya predicted. "Nothing could be attempted there."

"The women did not come by the shortest route," Ali

pointed out. "They made a wide detour. The Persian-American may do the same. This would serve very well, even by daylight. I shall spread my men out, fanwise. They are trained to take cover in the desert, to become invisible to all but the vultures."

"No attempt upon them must be made in this house." Abdûl es-Sûk faced his guests. "I take no more chances."

"You have taken your profit!" Ali sneered.

Aswâmi Pasha blew a ring of expensive smoke and shrugged his shoulders. "The risks are yours, my friends, and the profits. But if you recover the merchandise you have already sold so well, I will buy again—at a reasonable price. But I must have first refusal."

"Excellency!" Yahya bleated. "If this should happen, think of *my* suffering! At least allow me to bid for *one*."

"No. Like two beautiful flowers, each is the perfect complement of the other." Aswâmi signaled to Abdûl. "Wake my man and have my car brought out at once. O Yahya, should these blossoms come into my possession, I may remember your sufferings and send you a gift of ten per cent of whatever sum I pay for them."

Yahya levered himself out of his chair. "My car also, Abdûl. I cannot afford to become involved in the affairs of Ali el-Haggi."

"Yet, O Yahya"—Ali spoke slyly—"I thought I detected evidence on your garments when you arrived of precautions to be taken with any purchase you might make on the way back to the harem of His Excellency Marûk Pasha.

"It is sometimes necessary to soothe them," Yahya admitted.

Ali displayed his yellow teeth in a harsh laugh. "Where jewels are plentiful, so are women," he declared. "Show me the woman who cannot be gagged with a diamond!"

"I regret to disillusion you." Aswâmi's Oxford intonation lent an odd flavor of authority to his native Arabic. "One was procured for me only last year by Ibrâhîm, my steward—a very clever fellow. She was a luscious Greek, but I was unable to subdue her. Evidently she was a devout Catholic, for she kept calling upon Our Lady. She succeeded in obtaining poison and killed herself. This was regrettable; but the disappearance of Ibrâhîm shortly afterward was a disaster. To me Ibrâhîm was indispensable. Some two months later, Ibrâhîm was restored to me—in a small ebony casket."

"I don't know what you mean," Ali el-Haggi growled—"in a small ebony casket."

"Someday I must show you, Sheik. I still have it. The casket contains the body of Ibrahîm, almost as he looked in life, but reduced to the size of about that." He held one hand over the other. "Let us say eighteen inches."

Three pairs of eyes were fixed upon Aswâmi.

"Rumors of this ebony casket have reached me, Excellency." Yahya's reedy voice quivered, he shuddered visibly. "But I never believed them."

"I shall believe when I see." Ali's insolent stare challenged Aswâmi. "Until then, congratulations, Excellency. You are a great storyteller!"

Three of the cressets lighting the courtyard had gone out. At a point where the gallery lay in complete shadow, Drake Roscoe and Dick Cartaret lay, peering through the rails.

They saw one of the many stalls unlocked by a Sudanese, presumably the night watchman, and a handsome French car backed out by its Egyptian driver. The gate was opened, and Aswâmi Pasha was driven away into the darkness.

"He must have arrived after we went to sleep," Roscoe whispered. "Look! The man's going to open the door where I saw the tire marks."

And as he spoke, the Arab chauffeur whom Dick had good reason to remember appeared from somewhere carrying a suitcase, went in, and drove the Cadillac out into the courtyard. Heavy footsteps on the gallery stair announced Yahya. He came down, climbed into the car, and was driven through the gateway.

"The disappointed bidders depart," Dick murmured. "But Ali and his merry men remain."

"So do we."

"Shall we make a dash for it? We can carry the girls."

"No, sir! We stay put. We watch and we wait."

"What for?"

"To see if they aim to attack us up here—in which case we barricade the room and shoot it out—or if they have another plan."

"What other plan?"

"To get us into the open—lead us into an ambush where we shouldn't have a chance. At close quarters, with straight shooting, the odds are in our favor."

Abdûl had come into the courtyard, where he was pres-

ently joined by the Sudanese night watchman. From the stables rose a screaming of angry camels that would have awakened Rip Van Winkle. A door opened, showing moving lanterns and vague ghostly shadows.

Then, dragged and prodded by their Arab drivers, six camels came out, their shrill protests rising to high heaven. Four were riding camels; one of them a creamy pedigreed beast. The other two bore covered litters. All were forced to their knees.

Ali el-Haggi came striding into the half-light. He mounted the cream camel, and as it rose up, his five followers mounted the others.

Silently—for the camels, like their Moslem masters, had accepted that which fate ordained—the miniature caravan passed out into the night. Abdûl es-Sûk retired.

The Sudanese watchman closed and barred the gate.

"What does *that* mean?" Dick wanted to know.

They returned to the room where their two beautiful purchases lay in deep sleep.

"I don't know." Drake Roscoe took up the whisky bottle, looked at the sleeping Dolores, and put it down again. "I'm laying off this stuff as of now, Dick. Not going dry, just going easy. Although, as a matter of fact, I'm not at all sure the load I was carrying tonight didn't offset the opium."

Dick sat down on a suitcase, lighted a cigarette. "You're a remarkable man," he stated frankly.

Roscoe put the bottle on the floor and sat on the other suitcase. "At the small cost to William Denvers of some seventeen thousand dollars, I have recovered his missing daughter. Is that what you mean? If we get through alive, I have that much to report, I agree. But then what?"

"You mean we'll never get Coral back to America?"

Drake Roscoe lighted a cigar. "Consider the chances. First, we're marooned in a lonely Arab inn, miles from any place. The landlord is a slave dealer. We have two of Sumuru's women on our hands. Sumuru's headquarters in Egypt lie about twenty miles away by road. Second, we've made things awkward for Yahya, who represents Marûk Pasha, and awkward for this man Aswâmi, who evidently has considerable influence. Third, there's Ali, a really tough baby who would cut our throats and spit in our teeth if he had half a chance. Fourth, we have two sisters of the Order of Our Lady, who, when they revive, will probably decide to return to her tender care. So what?"

Dick Cartaret stood up excitedly, glanced at the sleeping Coral, and sat down again.

"About this mystery woman Sumuru." He lowered his voice as if afraid to arouse the sleepers. "It seems to me, Roscoe, that we have something to bargain about. After all, we have rescued two of her disciples, or whatever they are, from what used to be known as a fate worse than death. Is she big enough to recognize that fact? Or will she fly off the handle because you've fallen for one of her handmaidens? I mean, seriously, how do you think we stand if we find ourselves forced to face up to her? You know this incredible woman. I don't."

Roscoe was silent for a long time, holding his cigar between his fingers and looking at the lighted end. At last he said, "I know her too well. And so I know she's unpredictable. You'll never understand the power of Sumuru until you meet her—and I'm afraid you're going to meet her. I'll swear she's on the trail of Ali at this very moment. She'll know that Dolores and Coral have been in his hands. And I wouldn't risk a cent of insurance on that character's life! But you've certainly raised an interesting point." He stopped abruptly. "Did you hear what I heard?"

"Yes. Distant gunfire. There it goes again!"

Drake Roscoe ran out onto the gallery and stood there, tense. Dick Cartaret joined him. Complete silence filled the night.

"Wonder what it could mean."

"Ali's men were armed. They may have quarreled about sharing the loot."

"It's possible. Now it's stopped. So the dispute's over."

"Listen!" Dick grasped his arm. "Coming this way!"

A dull thunder of horses' hoofs was drawing nearer. Evidently the firing had aroused Abdûl es-Sûk, for he appeared in the courtyard, calling, "Said! Said!"

"O Abdûl!" Dick called. "Did I hear gunfire?"

"Indeed, Tawwab Effendi, it is so! I fear for the safety of my poor house. There is no law and order in Egypt!"

"I believe you are right, Abdûl." Dick spoke gravely. "There is no respect for authority. Who are these riders? They seem to be coming this way."

"I don't know, Tawwab Effendi. But I am afraid. Said! You are not to open the gate unless I tell you to do so."

The big Sudanese made no reply.

A considerable mounted party could now be heard galloping up the slope to the gate. The horses halted simultaneous-

ly outside, like trained cavalry. Then there came a loud knocking on the gate, and a womans voice:

"Open up here! Quickly!"

Drake Roscoe grasped Dick's arm in a viselike grip.

Even these few words, spoken imperiously in Arabic, brought an instant response from Dolores through the curtain of sleep. A whisper came from the room behind:

"Madonna!"

"My God!" Roscoe spoke hoarsely. "*Sumuru!*"

Abdûl es-Sûk held out as long as his courage lasted.

"It is too late to receive guests, lady, and I have no accommodations."

"Both statements are lies. The law requires you to admit travelers at any hour—and you have accommodations for a hundred." The commanding but strangely musical voice frightened Abdûl. "You have one minute to unbar the gate. If it still remains closed it will be blown open. I am checking the seconds."

Abdûl, his face glistening with nervous perspiration, looked at the Sudanese night porter.

"I open," Said announced laconically.

"There is no God but God," Abdûl moaned.

The great bars and bolts were removed, the clumsy lock was unfastened. And, as the gate swung open, a slender woman mounted on a coal-black horse cantered into the courtyard, followed by six men, also mounted on black horses. She swung out of the saddle with the ease of good horsemanship. Her six followers dismounted simultaneously.

Said withdrew into shadow, but one of the riders grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and hauled the big Sudanese back to his starting point. Sumuru faced the trembling Abdûl.

"What is your name?"

"I am called Abdûl es-Sûk."

"I had no idea that a place such as this existed in the Fayyûm."

"My house is an honest house, lady."

"No slave market is honest! Ali of Aleppo was here tonight with two girls he had kidnaped on their way to the Convent of Our Lady. Have you heard of the Convent?"

"Certainly. But I have never seen it."

"And of Princess Astar, whose house is near to it?"

"Everyone has heard of her, lady."

"I am Princess Astar. These are men of my guard who patrol my property." She was impatiently tapping a riding

boot with a hunting crop she carried. "Where are the two women who were sold in this place tonight?"

"Lady—Highness! There is some mistake!"

"There will be if you dare to lie to me. The mistake will be yours. I have recovered Ali's share of the price paid—or five thousand Egyptian pounds of it. Your own share you will return before I leave."

"Dear lady!"

"But first, where are they?"

Abdûl's teeth chattered. "If you mean the ladies who are with two of my guests—"

Sumuru touched him on the shoulder with her hunting crop. "Lead the way!" She turned to her silent bodyguard. "Follow."

Dick Cartaret, having overheard every word of the conversation, rejoined Roscoe, who was talking earnestly in a low tone to Dolores. Coral slept on.

"She's coming up, Roscoe, with a detachment of her bodyguard. They evidently ambushed Ali, which explains the shooting, and she claims to have recovered the sale money. What a lovely woman—but what a Tartar!"

"Madonna is the most beautiful woman in the world." Dolores sighed. "And she is not a Tartar. She is a genius."

Many footsteps sounded on the gallery stair. The ghostly gray light of dawn began to creep around the courtyard.

"What do we do?" Dick whispered.

"Sumuru will decide that," Roscoe told him grimly.

And when, pushing the trembling Abdûl aside, Sumuru came into the room, her indefinable beauty, the magnetism she radiated, overwhelmed Dick Cartaret. He saw himself as an awkward and rather stupid boy in her presence.

Dolores ran forward, dropped to her knees, and threw her arms around the slender figure.

"Madonna! Dear My Lady! Thank God I see you!"

Sumuru's gloved hand rested on the heavy waves of glossy black hair. She spoke in French.

"Tell me one thing, child: You have not been physically molested?"

"No, Madonna; for I resisted the drug as you have taught me, and so I was never entirely under its influence. It was *afiyûn*. But no violence was offered to either of us."

Coral stirred in her sleep. The voice had reached her.

"Madonna," she murmured.

Dick glanced at Drake Roscoe, and even in the dim light he saw that he had paled under his artificial tan. He won-

dered if Sumuru had failed to penetrate his disguise. He was soon enlightened.

She pulled a glove off and ran her fingers through Coral's disordered curls.

"Lovely child." She fixed her strange gaze upon Drake Roscoe. "So Drakos has served me again?"

"My name is Drake, Sumuru, not Drakos."

A slow smile, enchanting, stole over the beautiful face. "And my name, Drake, is Astar, not Sumuru."

Roscoe's clenched hands relaxed. "Thank you, Astar. Allow me to present Mr. Cartaret. A slave market was held here last night at which we bid against two other buyers."

"I know their names. I learned them from Ali el-Haggi before he was executed."

"Executed!"

The word burst from Dick's lips before he could check it.

Sumuru's eyes turned slowly in his direction, and meeting their strange, contemplative gaze, he seemed to lose identity, to be drowning in their unfathomable depths. He fought against this uncanny sensation.

"How very English!" The magic of her voice made poetry of the simple words. "The world would not be in its present chaotic state if there were a few more executions. Criminals are petted today, psychoanalyzed and treated as though their poisonous lives were precious, something to be preserved at all cost. In such cases I prefer the headsman and the ax to the psychiatrist, a gallows and a noose to the reformers." She turned to Roscoe. "You know my views?"

"I agree with some of them."

"How gracious you are! Yes, Mr. Cartaret, I had Ali el-Haggi and all his men shot. Such creatures are vermin. Their camels I kept. Camels, though treacherous, are useful in desert country. One of them is a fine beast. I shall train him for my own use." She turned to Abdûl, trembling in the doorway. "How many servants sleep in the house?"

"Only four, Highness."

"Your own family?"

"None of them lives here."

"Have you other guests?"

"No, Highness."

"Horses? Camels? Goats?"

"Very few."

"I want every living thing out in ten minutes. I am going to make a bonfire of this place, the smoke of which will be seen all over the Fayyûm."

Chapter Nineteen

"YOUR IDEA of disappearing," Dick Cartaret admitted, "has worked to perfection. We're in a sort of Garden of Eden prison camp. No one could ever hope to find us, because no one but Sumuru and her slaves—that's really what they are—knows we're here! Our paradise is entirely surrounded by a wall. The gates are guarded. Even if we got out, we'd be no better off than the convicts who occasionally escape from Princetown, the great English prison on Dartmoor. They're all run down on the moor. We should be run down on the desert."

Drake Roscoe lay back in his long cane chair and glanced at Dick, who occupied another one beside him. "Do you *want* to escape?"

Dick went on watching a small green lizard lying motionless on the stalk of a palm in a pot that stood on the edge of the veranda. From time to time an unwary fly would settle within reach, and disappear magically. A movement of the lizard's throat alone would betray the fate of the fly.

Something of the kind had happened to himself, and to Drake Roscoe. They had ventured within striking distance of Sumuru, and had been swallowed.

A well-watered flower garden extended from the veranda to the gate of the bungalow guesthouse that they occupied. An ugly but apparently happy gardener was at work among the rosebushes; he sang as he worked. The sun shone. The sky was blue. Somewhere in this enchanted place, Coral Denvers shared his luxurious captivity.

"I don't know," he confessed. "The sight of those dead Arabs we passed—the cloud of vultures. It was horrible!"

"They were the men who captured Coral—drugged her and brought her to the sale. Wouldn't *you* have shot 'em?"

"Yes, if I had caught them in the act, but—"

"Not afterward? Why not? They were still guilty."

"That's true. But they might at least have buried them."

"What the vultures leave the jackals will bury. One thing interested me."

"What?"

"The body of Ali wasn't there. I've learned that he was the notorious Ali of Aleppo. The British government had offered five hundred pounds for his arrest. Ever hear of him?"

"Yes. I remember. Just before I left for home his name cropped up on the badly wanted list."

"That's the man. His career of crime is over. But he wasn't left to the carrion crows with the rest of his gang. I wonder why."

"I don't think it matters, Roscoe. What's worrying *me* is this appointment with Sumuru that's coming up. I like to think I can hold my own with any woman, but there's something about Sumuru that knocks the stuffing out of me."

Drake Roscoe grinned, but it wasn't exactly a happy grin. "You and everyone else. Just pray she doesn't get a crush on you. I wouldn't back the late Saint Anthony to stand up to her. If she's draped in little more than her beauty, try not to lose your head. I'm not ordinarily the kind that loses his head just because a beautiful woman is available, but it was just plain animal desire for her that conquered me, all the same. And don't make the fatal mistake of trying to deceive her. Think of yourself as a plate-glass window. She can see right through you."

He stopped talking as Caspar appeared, walking along a sanded, flower-bordered path that led to the gate of the bungalow. He glanced from side to side, an eternal smile on his ivory-pale face. Reaching the gate, he opened it quietly, and advanced toward the veranda. The gardener stood upright and saluted the robed figure. Caspar slightly raised his hand in acknowledgment and halted a pace away from the two men. He inclined his head.

"Drakos, I welcome you back." Roscoe said nothing. "Mr. Cartaret, Our Lady asks me to conduct you."

Always smiling dreamily, he turned and walked slowly back to the gate. Dick looked helplessly at Roscoe.

"Here goes!"

"Watch your step. Good luck."

Dick walked along behind the dignified but somnolent figure, feeling unpleasantly like a schoolboy going to an interview with the headmaster. He never would have believed that he could fear a strikingly beautiful woman.

The opportunity he had hoped for had come. He had seen Sumuru. Now he was to see her again, alone. And he was frightened. The streak of superstition latent in us all had come to the surface.

They had a long way to go. The path skirted a piece of rising ground, a sort of giant mound, almost entirely covered by olive groves. Dick Cartaret knew that few olives grew in Egypt outside the Fayyûm, and these seemed to be of exceptional quality. Men in white were moving among the trees, and beyond, just topping the farther slope, he saw a range of green-tiled roofs.

Straight ahead, but a long way off, rose a vast, rambling building surrounded by high walls. It was evidently an old monastery, reconstructed and with many modern additions. He called out:

"Is that the Convent of Our Lady over there?"

"It is, sir," Caspar replied.

Their path now turned sharply left. It led through an extensive and well-tended vegetable garden. Many men were at work, and all saluted Caspar. Apricots, grapes, and figs were growing on walls and trellises. It occurred to Dick that as no doubt there was a home farm somewhere on this big property, the Convent of Our Lady must be practically self-supporting.

They came to a door in a high brick wall. Caspar opened the door, and some distance away at the end of a sanded path Dick saw an Arab house entirely enclosed, like the convent, within more high walls.

"This, sir," Caspar said, "is Our Lady's residence. The main entrance faces the road, but we can go in by another. It dates from the time when Egypt was under Turkish rule, as its style indicates. It was built by a certain Abdûl Báshà, and is still known in the Fayyûm as 'Abdûl's House.' At that time, of course, the monastery, which dates from the days of the Thebaid monks, was in ruins."

The sanded path led to a door in the wall. They went in, and were surrounded by a garden several acres in extent. In its floral setting, the rococo Arab house looked unreal, an illustration for a fairy tale. At every step Dick found it harder to fit Sumuru into this background.

Entering the house, he found himself in a small library. The bookshelves were well filled. He saw a desk, a bowl of roses, and a settee covered with fur rugs, which occupied the space between two French windows. In front of it an ivory and mother-of-pearl coffee table stood, and

on it were a decanter, a crystal jug full of ice, a siphon of soda water, and a tumbler. There was also a cloisonné cigarette box.

"Pray be seated, Mr. Cartaret." Caspar indicated the settee. "The whisky is matured Scotch, fifteen years old. There are several varieties of cigarettes in the box. My orders are to beg you to help yourself. Our Lady will join you in a few moments."

He saluted gravely and went out quietly.

Dick sat down without at first availing himself of the invitation. It was all so unexpected that he felt bewildered. Roscoe had prepared him for something wildly exotic, but a room such as this might be found in almost any English country house. And—Scotch and soda!

His hands rested on the fur rug as he sat there, and the incongruity of such a cover prompted him to look at it more closely. He did so. It was silver mink. He helped himself to a drink then.

He had just set his glass down when the door opened and Sumuru came in.

She wore a severely simple white linen dress that left arms and shoulders bare, and a wide-brimmed Panama hat with a gaily colored scarf around it. She was taking off a pair of gardening gloves.

"Please forgive me, Mr. Cartaret. I was busy with my Persian roses when Caspar came to find me." She dropped the gloves on the desk and took a seat behind it. She smiled, and Dick knew he had never seen a more distractingly lovely woman, or heard such music in any human voice. "Please make yourself comfortable. I do my best to make all my guests feel at home."

She had caught and held his glance as she spoke, and he experienced again that appalling consciousness of being a toy in her hands. The eyes of this beautiful witch (he found it impossible to define their color) seemed to grow even larger as one looked into them—to beckon and then to absorb.

He began to feel a profound sympathy for Drake.

"I understand," Sumuru went on, "that Sister Coralie—one of my favorite neophytes—was thrown in your way by what you may regard as chance. I hope to convince you, Mr. Cartaret, that there is no such element as chance known to those few real scientists who concern themselves with the problem of the universe."

"I don't altogether follow you."

"I am quite sure you don't. Let me try to guide you. While the thousands of robots who call themselves scientists are busy perfecting machines whose potentialities are vastly exceeded by their potentialities for evil, a select few thinkers have been trying for many years to perfect the most wonderful and most powerful machine ever created—man. That machine, Mr. Cartaret, is a product of the Master Scientist—God."

The words struck Dick Cartaret like an arctic blast. He said nothing, but words were unnecessary. Sumuru answered his thoughts.

"Blasphemy! That idea flashes across your mind like a stream of fire. I can see it, an angry, red impulse. You are reviewing the milestones that mark my path, as reported to you by Drake Roscoe. You are seeing again the dead men left to the vultures in the desert. You are convinced that I belong to Satan—that lightning should strike me if I dare to pronounce the name of God."

Sumuru laughed. And the wonder of her laughter changed Dick's mood. It wasn't ironic laughter, cynical laughter; it was delicious laughter, the laughter of a carefree child, and it was sweetly musical.

He glanced up, then swiftly away. She was watching him as she laughed through half-closed eyes.

"Why are you afraid of me, Dick Cartaret?" she challenged. "Has Roscoe told you that I am Antichrist in female form?"

"No. He has told me that you have the brain of any three men of genius, that you are dangerously brilliant, and that once you loved him."

Sumuru became silent. Dick opened the cloisonné box, took out a cigarette, lighted it.

"He was excusing his own weakness." Sumuru spoke softly. "He knows that I never loved him. What is called love is not for me. He was at one time a dangerous enemy. I trapped him with a woman's sharpest weapon—desire. He aided me in my escape from the American police."

Dick was getting angry. "You admit, then, that you're a criminal?"

He looked up, and was captured by her eyes. He couldn't look away.

"You have courage," she murmured, "and I respect courage, without necessarily admiring it. You say that I am a criminal. You mean, no doubt, that I have removed

many obstacles from my path? But have I removed a fraction of those who met death in opposing the Allies' triumphant march on Berlin? Is your English Field Marshal Montgomery a criminal? Have the American police attempted to arrest MacArthur? I, too, have an objective. I, too, allow no one and nothing to stand in my way."

Dick felt that free will was being sucked from his brain like juice from an orange. Sumuru snapped her fingers, lay back in her chair.

"You forgot to offer me a cigarette, Mr. Cartaret."

The spell was broken.

He stood up, stepped forward, and placed the cloisonné box, opened, on the desk.

"I'm sorry." He spoke automatically.

He watched the slender, patrician fingers with their glossy, pink, but unvarnished nails as she took out a cigarette wrapped in yellow paper.

"These," she told him, "are made for me in Istanbul. There are none on the market. Yet you chose an ordinary English brand. No! Don't change your mind. You will accuse me of drugging you. A light, please."

As she fitted the yellow cigarette into an onyx holder that lay on her desk, Dick sparked a lighter and lighted it.

He returned to his place on the mink-covered settee.

"It is not by chance that an airliner discharges its passengers at a certain airport. It is by man's design. It is not by chance that another is forced down somewhere else. It is by God's design. Your meeting with Coral Denvers in London was no accident. It was part of a pattern. And I have devoted many years—it would surprise you to know how many—to the study of that pattern."

Dick Cartaret was revising his opinion of Sumuru at intervals of every few minutes. He had come expecting to meet a dazzling courtesan. He had met a typical country-house hostess. Her magnetism had prepared him for an egoistic address in the manner of a dictator. She had spoken of God. He rejected the idea that she was a hypocrite, for hypocrisy is the coward's shield, and there wasn't a cowardly bone in this woman's graceful body. Now, it seemed, she was entering the province of metaphysics.

"I wonder if you realize that if one could trace accurately the thread of a single human life as it is woven into the pattern, the riddle of our place in the universe would be solved. But don't allow me to bore you."

Bore him! He could have listened to that lovely voice reading a railway timetable.

"On the contrary, you fascinate me."

"The circumstances of your second meeting with Sister Coralie indicate the direction of her particular thread in the pattern. Again it crosses yours. This I cannot afford to ignore, for there are no accidents in the Master Plan. But those who presume to interfere with it, or seek to escape from it, are rejected like faulty threads, cast aside. Tell me, are you what is called 'in love' with Coralie?"

Sumuru lay back in her chair, watching him through lowered lashes.

He had become accustomed again to the heat of the Nile valley and normally kept fairly cool; but faced with this forthright question, he grew uncomfortably hot.

"She's beautiful." He spoke haltingly. "All men, I suppose, are attracted by beauty. But I've never exchanged more than a few words with her, so there's been no chance for love to develop. Besides, I'm a poor man, and no fortune hunter."

Sumuru watched him silently. He managed to close his eyes for a moment, and then to look aside. Her unwavering regard was unendurable.

"You have listened very patiently, Mr. Cartaret." Dick knew he had never heard so fascinating a voice. "Talk to *me*, now. Tell me about your work. If your art is as sincere as your honesty, I may have a proposition to make. I hope you are satisfied with your accommodations. . . ."

Chapter Twenty

THE GUEST HOUSES, one of which Roscoe and Dick Cartaret shared, were wonderfully appointed, and service couldn't have been better on a luxury liner. All meals were brought to them by well-trained servants, and were prepared and served to perfection.

During the day they were free to roam wherever it pleased them to go, through flower gardens, orchards, and the model farm. After dusk the gate of the guest compound was locked.

"It's a prison de luxe," Roscoe told Dick. "And God

knows when we'll get out of it. There are playing fields on the north, but they're out of bounds to guests. That great mound on which the olives grow marks the site of part of the famous Labyrinth—although no Egyptologist has ever suspected the fact. The College of Initiates is down there."

Dick had come back from his interview with Sumuru. It had both excited and alarmed him.

"I don't see, Roscoe, how we're *ever* going to get out. Think of all you know, all I have learned, of her organization."

"I knew it all, and more, two years back. She let *me* go. She knew I hadn't the heart to work against her."

"But now?"

"She'll find some other way to tie my hands. I've done her a slight favor—bought back two of her girls at a slave auction. She's as just as the devil. I give her that."

"And what about me?"

"Wait and see, Dick. If I mentioned a few of the internationally famous men who are tied to the Order of Our Lady, it would open your eyes."

"But *how* are they tied, Roscoe?"

Drake Roscoe stared hard at Dick. "Why do you suppose she collects beautiful women from all over the world?" he inquired. "For bait, Dick, to catch the big fish. In a tight corner, she's not above offering herself. Sex, in Sumuru's eyes, is simply an infallible method of conquering men that an all-wise Providence has given to women. As a source of pleasure she despises it. She regards her wonderful body as a weapon of power. For physical passion she has utter contempt—but she uses it."

Dick stared at Roscoe a while, and then spoke slowly. "If this damned sorceress offered herself to you again, could you resist her?"

"No. Could you?"

Dick Cartaret, who was an intrinsically honest man, hesitated before he answered. He relived those moments when, chained, absorbed by Sumuru's eyes, he had known that his powers of resistance, tradition, training were being drained from him.

"No. You were right when you said she could have seduced Saint Anthony. Of course, it isn't just her extraordinary beauty. That would do the trick with many men. It's something else, in her voice, above all in her eyes."

"Quite simply, it's her amazing will power. She could

impose her will on a conclave of cardinals as easily as on a conference of women lawyers. It's sheer hypnotism."

Dick Cartaret lighted a cigarette, stood up, and surveyed the prospect. The little garden between the veranda and the gate displayed an astonishing variety of flowers, many of which he had never before seen growing in Egypt. Beyond, he had a glimpse of two other guest bungalows, apparently untenanted. To the right he could see the slope of the olive grove below which, according to Roscoe, lay part of the fabled Labyrinth.

And even the sky of Egypt, that unchanging luminous blue tent beneath which he had passed several moderately happy years, seemed at last to have changed. This was an Egypt he had never known, had never suspected to exist.

"Roscoe"—he spoke without turning—"have you seen Dolores since the night of the sale?"

"No, or Coral. I suppose Dolores has returned to her duties. Coral will be in Sumuru's house."

"And Sumuru?"

Roscoe was silent a moment, then said, "Caspar informed me while you were away that Our Lady was expecting me at six this evening. Black tie. Cocktails, no doubt," he added dryly.

"But we have no formal clothes."

"You don't know Sumuru. Just glance at what's laid out on my bed. Evening outfit from Savile Row, London. Tuxedo, trousers, shirt, collar, socks, shoes, tie, complete!"

"But do they fit?"

"Perfectly."

Sumuru sat before a large oval mirror framed in a pattern of pearls and amethysts, and mounted on a dressing table of delicate lacquer that included inlays of the exquisite violet (a lost art), and in its composition carried out the scheme of pearl and amethyst framing the mirror. It had come from Japan and was a present from the late Marquis Sumuru, who had committed hara-kiri during the First World War.

"Bella"—Sumuru was brushing long lashes with a tiny brush—"I have changed my mind. The violet dress for tonight. The Pasha has never seen me in violet."

Her statuesque Nubian maid displayed glittering teeth. "My Lady is beautiful in violet."

Bella opened a long, deep wardrobe and took out a robe

like a cobweb seen against an Egyptian sunsets' afterglow.

"What belt will My Lady wear?"

Sumuru smiled at her image in the mirror. "The violet sandals, with the silver heels. The belt I will select later."

Bella brought the sandals and put them on, and Sumuru stood up, a flawless ivory statue, while Bella dropped the violet robe over her mistress's head and smoothed it to the curves of her body. Sumuru sat down again.

"A slight spray of spikenard, Bella. . . . Enough. Now do my hair."

Bella was busily engaged in this duty when there came a faint tinkling of bells, and Dolores raised the draperies hung in the doorway and looked in nervously. She wore a strapless green evening gown offering attractive vistas to a keen observer.

"Sit down, child. Over there, where I can see you in the mirror," the golden voice commanded. Dolores sat down. "You look exquisite, Dolores. Your perfect shoulders have the sheen of cream satin. I am very proud of you. That is the gown we bought in Paris. Remember?"

"Of course I remember, Madonna."

They spoke in French.

"Of course. Women never forget where they bought their gowns. It is a small party tonight for dinner. Just ourselves. Marûk Pasha—and Drakos."

"Madonna, you are not angry with me? When you questioned me I answered truthfully, as was my duty—and my wish. I knew—forgive me, Madonna!—that you had discarded him long ago, despised him, as you despise all men—as I despise Ariosto. With me it was folly, inexperience, physical passion. With you—I don't know—policy. My heart went out to him, Madonna, long ago. And that terrible night when I was offered up for sale as cattle are offered, and he carried me off in my shame—"

"Be quiet, Dolores dear. You disturb me, disturb yourself—and I want you to be at your best tonight."

"I am sorry, Madonna."

"And I am not angry with you. In fact, I might consent to do as you wish. It would be a fitting punishment for Ariosto. Humiliation is harder to bear than life in the ruby mines."

Dick Cartaret watched Roscoe from the gate as he set off, smoking a cigar, for his appointment with Sumuru. Roscoe had an erect, military carriage and a swinging

step. Dick knew that he had done distinguished work in the war and had reached the rank of colonel.

At the bend in the sanded path, Roscoe turned and waved to him.

Dick went in and mixed a Martini. He felt peculiarly nervous, uncertain of himself. It wasn't due to fear for Roscoe. There was nothing in this strange domain of Sumuru's to inspire fear. He had never quite been able to accept the fact that he was a prisoner.

As he was sipping his cocktail on the porch, the young Arab waiter who usually served them came to take his order for dinner.

Dick ordered melon, lamb chops with French-fried potatoes and fresh garden beans, Stilton cheese and water biscuits, and a Neapolitan ice. Hassan handed him a typed wine list. He glanced at the names of fine vintages and settled on a Montrachet '45.

Returning the wine list, he said, "Tell me, Hassan—where did you get your training? You're a perfect waiter."

Hassan smiled. "In London, sir, where I am in the kitchens of the Café Royal, and then at the Ritz in Paris, where I serve Turkish coffee."

"And then you came back to Egypt?"

"But of course, sir. I am born here."

"In what part, Hassan?"

"Here, in the Fayyûm. I belong to Our Lady, like my father before me. We—"

"Wait, Hassan!" Dick was getting bewildered. "Do you mean to say that Our Lady was here in your father's days?"

Hassan's astonishment was clearly honest. "But of course. Our Lady has always been here."

Dick took a deep breath. "When was the first time you saw her, Hassan?"

"Saw her, sir! I have never seen her. My father had never seen her. Who are we to look on the face of Our Lady?"

He saluted respectfully and was turning to go, when Dick asked him, "Do you ever attend parties at Abdûl's House?"

"No, sir. Princess Astar lives there now. She has her own staff. I am told she is very beautiful and has given her fortune to the Convent of Our Lady."

Dick poured out another Martini, lighted a fresh cigarette.

Hassan's naïve conversation had shaken him, but it offered a new angle on the genius of Sumuru. She had perfected a system of disassociating herself from the mystic person known as Our Lady. Probably this dual identity was unknown even in the higher ranks of the Order. Her personal staff alone knew that Our Lady was also Princess Astar, Lady Carradale, the Marquise Sumuru, or whatever her name might be at the time. She had turned herself into a legend. She was the veiled Isis, and at the same time a woman very much of flesh and blood.

Had she succeeded to the title from some earlier "Our Lady"? It was hard to believe that this young and lovely woman had controlled the Order in the days of Hassan's father.

He walked out again onto the porch, carrying his drink, and watched the sun dipping low over the western desert. He had just sat down when he saw Hassan returning.

Hassan opened the gate, saluted. "Excuse me, sir, I only just learn that a lady dines with you." He produced his notebook. "If you please, what would you wish to order for her?"

Dick put his glass down, rather unsteadily. "A lady? What lady?"

Hassan smiled. "If you cannot tell me, sir, I cannot tell you."

Dick controlled himself. The wildest, most improbable ideas flooded his mind.

"She will have to take potluck, Hassan, whoever she is. Repeat the same order."

Hassan saluted again and went away. Dick didn't touch his drink.

A lady was dining with him? He was still turning the possibilities over in his mind when a light step on the sanded path brought him to his feet. He ran down to the gate.

He was just in time to meet Coral Denvers.

When swift dusk fell, with its wonderful afterglow, and Hassan had cleared the dining table, he served coffee on the porch, placed a tray of liqueurs on the coffee table, and silently faded away. Dick glanced at Coral, seated beside him smoking an Egyptian cigarette, and tried to convince himself he wasn't dreaming.

His simple dinner had been augmented by some anonymous epicure, and a bottle of Heidsieck '49 added to his

white Burgundy. As always, a great bowl of the exquisite fruit grown on the property had also been served.

"Which liqueur would you like?" he asked.

"None, thank you—not after all that wine."

She turned, smiled at him. And looking into her eyes, he wondered if even the eyes of Sumuru were more beautiful. He decided that it was impossible.

"The evenings are rather treacherous, Coral. Shall we go in, or shall I get your wrap?"

"Get my fur, please, Dick. I love to watch the sunset."

Dick went in and picked up the mink cape that Coral had brought with her, came back, and draped it over her shoulders. He sat down again beside her.

"You know, Coral, this is the most wonderful night of my life. Although I met you only once—a very brief meeting—I don't believe you were ever out of my mind until I saw you again—being offered for sale!"

"Oh, Dick!" She laid her hand on his arm.

Dick lifted her hand to his lips, then put his arm around her and drew her close to him. "You know, while we were having dinner, Coral, it came to me as a sort of blinding revelation that I fell madly in love with you the first moment I saw you."

Coral peeped up at him. Her lips were very near to his. "Did this happen before or after the champagne?"

He began to kiss her, and only stopped when he was breathless. She rested her head on his shoulder and he buried his face in the fragrance of her hair. . . .

At about the same time a man who wore a white coat, rubber gloves, and a glass mask was engaged in a curious task.

Something that at first sight might have been mistaken for a kind of rubber suit lay on an operating table. The suit had evidently been tailored, for neat, all but invisible seams might be traced in the arms, legs, and body of the garment.

The operator was busy filling this curious container with some steaming substance that resembled red sand. When he lifted it in order to shake the hot filling down the legs, it appeared that the suit included feet. A closer inspection would have established the fact that the thing was not a rubber suit, but the whole skin of a human body.

It must have been, however, a small body, for from foot

to shoulder, when he held up the grisly object, it measured no more than forty-eight inches.

Smoky fumes rose in the laboratory in which this unusual experiment was being carried out.

When the skin had been tightly packed with the hot red substance, the man in the glass mask closed up the neck with a few deft surgical stitches and sealed it.

The thing now resembled, horribly, the headless corpse of a dark-skinned child.

Wheeling to the table a long metal tray, the operator slid the body onto it and, crossing, pressed a bell button.

A second glass-masked man came in, nodded, and wheeled the vehicle supporting the tray out of the laboratory.

The operator turned and opened a white-enameled cabinet that might have been a refrigerator.

He took out a small brown human head and inspected it. He squeezed the wrinkled features gently, hesitated, then put the head back again.

Glancing about the fume-filled laboratory, he went out by an exit with double doors, closing the first before opening the second. This brought him to a dressing room.

He unfastened the glass mask, threw it onto the rug at his feet.

The face uncovered was the handsome, haggard face of Ariosto.

Chapter Twenty-one

SUMURU RECEIVED Drake Roscoe in her favorite room in the harem quarters. She was seated on the cushioned divan, a tailored cream gown trimmed with snow mink worn over her scanty violet dress. Except for the splash of the little fountain, there was no other sound but the curious whisper of Caspar's slippers as he opened the door. Standing just inside, he announced:

"Mr. Drake Roscoe, My Lady."

Caspar retired as Roscoe walked across.

"I am indebted to you—*My Lady*—for instructing Caspar not to refer to me as Drakos."

Sumuru held out her hand, and Roscoe kissed it.

"Now sit down, Drake, on that chair near me, where I can see you. And be yourself. You were once my lover, and when I gave you your *congé*, you had the grace to avoid becoming a nuisance to me as others have done. I am happy to know that you have found consolation, and I trust that you no longer bear me ill will."

The sight of her, the exquisite tones of her voice, conjured up a panorama of past delights, some of them associated with this room. But Roscoe knew he had conquered. This lovely witch could never again whip up his blood to fever heat, make him sick with longing for her kisses, unless . . .

As she had often done before, Sumuru answered his unspoken thoughts!

"I have no intention of hypnotizing you. Whatever you may think to the contrary, I am no sadist, although I am still desirable."

"You are the desire of all men, Astar—like Helen of Troy."

She smiled. "Tell me, Drake, did you seriously suppose that when we traveled together I remained ignorant of Dolores' interest in you? Give me my due. I offered you complete freedom, within the framework of the Order. You had only to choose your partner. I would have given her to you if she had consented."

"I was madly infatuated with you—blind to my real happiness. You left me no choice but to conquer this urge. And as I began to succeed, another image took the place of yours."

"One usually does," Sumuru murmured. "Man was not meant to live alone. But—correct me if I am wrong—at one period of your career, I seem to remember, you were an accountant?"

"I was."

"There is a small task you could do for me—checking a transfer of property to the Convent of Our Lady. Will you be so good?"

Drake Roscoe suspected a trap, but nodded. "With pleasure."

Sumuru offered him a mother-of-pearl box containing many kinds of cigarettes. "It humiliates me to confess it, but I have no gift for legal business."

He took a cigarette, lighted it. "You surprise me. Your transactions have been on a Rockefeller scale, and uniformly successful."

"I had a wonderful accountant. Sir Lewis Westbury of London. Unfortunately, he died."

"I see. I'm no expert, but I'll do my best."

"Thank you, Drake." Somewhere a bell rang softly. "Shall we go and join the other guests?"

Cocktails were being served in the small library in which Dick Cartaret had been interviewed. As Sumuru and Roscoe came in, a stout Egyptian wearing a dinner suit and a tarboosh sat very close to Dolores on the divan, listening raptly to whatever she was saying and devouring her beauty.

"Forgive me, Ismail, for my delay," Sumuru's crystal-clear voice said, "but as you were good enough to tell me you wished to discuss business, I asked my accountant, Mr. Roscoe, to join us." She turned to Roscoe. "This is Ismail Marûk Pasha. Dolores d'Eze you have met."

Dolores flushed swiftly, then grew pale as her eyes welcomed Roscoe.

Marûk Pasha glared contemptuously at him and, opening a box that had lain on the divan, took out a spray of rare orchids from a bed of moist moss in which they nestled.

"These were flown from Nice this morning, Astar—for you. Grant me the privilege of pinning them in place."

Sumuru's eyes beckoned him; her lips curved voluptuously. "You are adorably extravagant, Ismail."

He held the orchids against her breast, cupping one firm curve in his palm as he did so.

"Here?"

"Higher, Ismail."

"So?"

"That is perfect."

The orchids were looped through a platinum ring in which was set a magnificent emerald. As Marûk secured the orchids, he whispered in her ear, "You have often admired the Harûn emerald. It is yours tonight."

Sumuru slipped the ring onto her finger, patted his cheek. "Your generosity fascinates me," she murmured. Then she turned and clapped her hands.

A handsome young Arab, who looked like a Senusi but wore a smart Zouave costume, wheeled in a wagon laden with bottles, ice, shakers, and dishes of delicacies. He proved himself a miracle of efficiency. Lounge chairs had been placed on the veranda outside the French windows, and Dolores, with an almost frightened glance at Sumuru, carried her cocktail out there. Roscoe followed.

Marûk Pasha returned to his place on the divan, clearly expecting Sumuru to join him, which she did. He had a well-stacked plate and a champagne cocktail on the little table before him. Sumuru had a glass of iced wine—a special white wine, which she drank exclusively. She never touched spirits.

As Marûk put his arm around her, she turned and stared at him coldly.

"Have discretion, Ismaîl. Wait until we are alone."

"You drive me mad," he declared huskily. "From no other woman in my life have I suffered such torture! I heap gifts at your feet. You reward me with promises."

"Your punishment, Ismaîl, for once trying to force me. I sincerely hope you have recognized the fact that I cannot be taken by force?"

Marûk made an inarticulate sound like an audible scowl. His eyes were cast down to where a perfect bare leg, the foot clad in a silver-heeled sandal, peeped out impudently from the cream gown, which was made like a coat and fastened at the waist by a single buckle.

"I offered you marriage."

"A Moslem marriage does not attract me." She raised her hand, moving the emerald so that a ray from the setting sun turned it into a flaming green eye. "Could we settle the business to which you referred, Ismaîl, before dinner? This is our first evening together for a long time, and we don't want to waste it discussing boring things."

"But of course, Astar. My brief case is here."

He stooped and lifted it from beside the divan. He opened it and took out a bundle of large, legal-looking documents tied with red tape. He began to unfasten the tape.

"Would you think me awfully ungrateful, Ismaîl?"—Sumuru's voice had the sweetness of harp music—"if I handed all the papers to my accountant to read? It is a pure formality, but you know how I detest such details."

"As you wish. I am at your disposal in all things."

"Mr. Roscoe," she called. "Please come in for a moment."

Drake Roscoe, looking slightly ill at ease, came in from the veranda.

"You wanted me?"

"I want you to take these papers, which Marûk Pasha has been kind enough to bring with him, up to my office and read them. Then you can tell me what I have to do. Mesrûr will bring you another drink."

"With pleasure."

Roscoe took the bundle from the scowling Pasha and went out. He knew his way about the house and had no difficulty in finding Sumuru's office—emphatically not the office of a woman who detested business.

A lamp on the big desk was lighted, and he sat down in a comfortable cushioned chair, putting the sheaf of documents before him.

The situation was intriguing.

Sumuru's grasp of business he counted second to that of none of the great captains of industry; no priestly Vatican accountant could have taught her anything. What, then, could her object be?

As Mesrûr came quietly in, placed a tray on the desk, and went quietly out, Roscoe opened the bundle.

Its contents were surprising.

First, there was a plan of all Marûk Pasha's properties in the Fayyûm, including the land, thousands of acres in extent, upon which the Convent of Our Lady stood. There were deeds establishing Marûk's ownership to each and all of these properties. There was a rent roll that included the rent of the Convent and a lease in favor of the "Superior," Dolores d'Eze. There was also a long-term lease of Abdûl's House, the lessees being described as "Westbury, Allen, and Danby, Chartered Accountants, Threadneedle Street, London. E.C."

Many other leaseholders were evidently dotted all about the Fayyûm, their names being either Arab or Greek.

There was much more. But the crowning surprise took the shape of a deed of gift, properly executed and sealed, of the whole of these properties to Dolores d'Eze.

Overcoming the first shock of this discovery, Roscoe poured out another drink from the shaker on the tray, and thought calmly.

It was a device often used before by Sumuru for securing control of estates. The deeds would be made out to a nominee—such nominee invariably being a trustworthy member of the Order. In this way, if she was compelled to disappear hurriedly, the revenues remained at her disposal.

Dinner was served in a small saloon discreetly lighted in a way that reminded Drake Roscoe of an intimate Manhattan night club. But the dinner was of a kind that very few of the world's great restaurants could have equaled.

Sumuru ate nothing but salad, cheese, fruit, and some

kind of brown bread with butter. She drank only one glass of wine.

Transfer of the vast property had been completed. When Drake wasn't watching Dolores, he studied the face of Marûk Pasha, slowly becoming inflamed with rich food and drink. He had presented a substantial fortune to Sumuru.

Roscoe checked these reflections, modified his contempt for the lovesick man. Hadn't he himself lost reputation and self-respect for her?

When conversation, mostly dominated by Sumuru's voice, flagged, a hidden string orchestra, in which harps prevailed, played soft, unfamiliar strains.

Dolores' hand reached out to him, and their fingers became intertwined.

"What are they playing?" Roscoe spoke aside to her.

But Sumuru had heard him. "You could never guess. A famous Egyptologist whom I know has a papyrus that all the others gave up as indecipherable. He recognized it to be musical notations, and spent five years transcribing it. You are listening to the music of a temple dance as it was played in the reign of the Pharaoh Fhothmes the Third."

When dinner came to an end Sumuru said gently, "Dolores, Mr. Roscoe has never seen the new garden pavilion. Show him the way. I will tell Mesrûr to take your coffee down to you." She turned to Marûk Pasha. "Ismâil, shall we have coffee? There must be many things you want to tell me."

There was only one, and she knew it well.

The pavilion was an arabesque building open on one side to a flower garden from which it was separated only by a mosaic-floored terrace surrounded by a tall hedge. The other side, which faced the house, had a row of latticed windows, and there were carved doors at both ends of the pavilion set in keyhole arches. The place was as old as Abdûl's House, but Sumuru had had it repaired.

A copper lantern with colored glass panels hung over each of six divans placed below the latticed windows. Their dim light was the only illumination, for the moon wouldn't look in over the hedge for some hours yet.

Drake Roscoe drew Dolores down onto one of the divans and kissed her lips, her hair, her neck, her shoulders—but not with that animal desire with which Sumuru had inspired him. Passion there was, but with its sensuality halloed by tenderness.

For the first time in his life, he was really in love.

"Wait, Drake—stop," Dolores whispered.

"Just tell me you love me—and when you first found out you loved me. I don't want to hear anything else."

"But you must—please!" Dolores pulled her disarranged fur over her shoulders. "It is something I must do."

"Why?"

"Because it means so much to me, and to you. May I speak French? Or is your French as bad as my English?"

"My French is better than my Arabic."

A crunching of rubber tires on a sandy path heralded the approach of Mesrûr. He wheeled in a wagon on which were a percolator with a spirit lamp, coffee cups, a sugar bowl, a variety of liqueurs, and a silver cigarette box.

"Your coffee is ready, sir. Shall I pour it out?"

"No, thanks. Just leave it."

Mesrûr bowed and retired.

Roscoe filled two cups with coffee, added sugar, and then said, "What is it you have to tell me, Dolores?"

Dolores was silent for a long time. At last, resting her head on Roscoe's shoulder, she spoke very softly.

"Madonna has given me her consent to love you, Drake."

Roscoe locked his arms around her in what was nearly a strangle hold, and silenced her with kisses.

"Say that again! It's all I want to hear."

"She has given me her consent to love you, if—"

"Yes! Go on!"

"If you will stay here in Egypt and manage the Fayyûm properties."

"My God!" Roscoe groaned. "Become a slave again."

"If you refuse," Dolores went on tonelessly, "you must arrange for a ransom of five hundred thousand dollars to be paid by Mr. Denvers for Coral's return. When it is paid she will go and so will you—but without me."

"Merciful God! Dolores, my dearest! What a trap!"

Chapter Twenty-two

"OUR LADY really arranged for me to dine alone with you tonight so that I could make up my mind," Coral whispered.

They were very close together on the settee in the living room of the bungalow.

"You seem to have made up your mind, darling."

"Yes. I seemed to know there was something inevitable about it. But it's not so simple as that. Our Lady has given me her consent to love you and to go back to America—if you will write a play for which she will provide the plot and some of the dialogue."

"Nobody would produce it."

"She will see that it's produced."

"Well—that's not so hard."

"If we marry—and have any children—as soon as they're old enough to travel they must be placed in the Convent of Our Lady and brought up there."

"Oh, wait a minute, Corry! That's sheer slavery, reaching out to the next generation!"

"I knew how you'd feel about it. But if we say no, my father will have to pay a half-million dollars to get me back, and you'll have to go to New York to collect it."

"Suppose he won't pay?"

"He will. But I'd hate him to do it."

"Very well. He pays and I bring the money back. What then?"

"Our Lady would send me home. She can be harsh, but she never breaks her word. I shall always belong to the Order, Dick, all my life—and I know, if that happened, we should never see one another again."

Caspar had interrupted Marûk Pasha's tête-à-tête with Sumuru, bringing her a message that an urgent telephone call awaited her attention. She had been gone a long time, and the Pasha stalked about the small library.

At last Caspar returned.

"Our Lady is waiting for you, Excellency."

Caspar led the way upstairs to the room in which a fountain played, the room in which Our Lady received none but privileged guests. Caspar stood aside as Marûk entered, closing the door behind him.

Marûk Pasha remained still for a moment, feasting his eyes on the picture he saw before him.

Sumuru had discarded the cream gown. She lay on the divan facing him, so that the light of a hanging lamp outlined the perfect curve of her hip. Her robe surrounded her like a textureless violet haze.

She raised her hand, on which the great emerald

glowed evilly, and pointed to a deep, cushioned chair placed close to the divan.

"Please sit here, Ismaïl, and let us resume our conversation. You were telling me, I remember, how lonely you were in your great house. This surprises me."

Marûk came forward, stepped onto the mink rugs, and then dropped into the chair. He seized Sumuru's hand, covered it with kisses, and allowed his lips to travel up the white arm until, gently, she withdrew her hand and sat erect.

"Why are you lonely, Ismaïl?"

The golden voice spoke the words softly, but Marûk felt rebuffed.

"Now that you are with me, why so strange a question? When a man of my temperament is blindly, helplessly in love with one woman, how can he be otherwise than lonely when she will not return his love?"

"Knowing something of men, I should have supposed that he would seek distraction. There are many beautiful and willing women in Cairo."

Marûk did not reply immediately. He was becoming reduced to a state of mental stupor. He couldn't turn his eyes aside from their contemplation of the beauty of Sumuru's flawless body. She fanned his desire to the verge of madness, but never yet had surrendered herself.

"A willing woman lights a flickering candle; an unwilling one a great flame," he told her huskily.

"How well you understand such matters, Ismaïl," Sumuru murmured. "You have taught me many things I didn't know, had never suspected to be."

But Marûk was lost in study again. Sumuru's violet robe had a long V-shaped opening, so that its gossamer just covered the points of her breasts, the sides of the V meeting where a shadowy dimple appeared above a girdle that resembled a plaited silk rope of many colors. This strange girdle was secured by a clasp in front in the form of a snake's head.

The Pasha's intent gaze traveled lower to where, faintly traced around one white ankle, a similar device appeared.

"Perhaps," Sumuru said meditatively, "the attraction of the unwilling woman accounts for a revival of the slave trade in Egypt that has been reported to me."

"The report is untrue. Cairo would stamp out such a trade. Aswâmi Pasha has given strict orders for its instant suppression."

"Cairo has heard of it, then?"

Frustration now was making Marûk furiously angry.

"There is no slave trade in Egypt!"

"I am so glad," Sumuru murmured. "Dolores was very anxious. She has so many beautiful young girls in her charge—and all unwilling. Even before they reach the grade of the Linked Serpent—which seems to attract you strangely, or are you admiring my ankles?—they are taught to distinguish love from desire."

Marûk made a choking sound, stood up suddenly, met a glance from Sumuru's eyes, and sat down again. He clutched his head.

"Astar," he groaned, "you are very cruel to me. I am a man accustomed to command, not to plead. Yet I have honored your lightest whim. To please you, because you are its *patronne*, I have given perpetual freehold to the Convent. I have given you the whole of my surrounding properties, so that possible developments cannot disturb the amenities you enjoy. Abdûl's House is yours. I have offered you marriage. The offer remains open. In fact, I have laid a great fortune at your feet; given you security for life. Now I ask only one reward. Give me tonight!"

He sprang up, hands clenched, his prominent eyes protruding abnormally.

Sumuru was smiling. "Do you mean you have been trying to buy me, Ismaïl?"

"Every woman has her price. And no man ever paid a higher price than I have paid for you."

The taunting smile remained. Sumuru's eyes were veiled by their long lashes.

"Others have paid a higher price, but none before in the commercial sense of bidding for a piece of merchandise. This, Ismaïl, may be your Egyptian idea of wooing a woman, but it is not mine."

Marûk Pasha lost control at last. "Words, words!" he choked. "You mock me with words! You witch! You cold-blooded Delilah!"

"I have warned you! We of the Order are protected!"

Stooping, Marûk snatched at the violet robe and tore it from her shoulders. His hands clutching her waist like claws, he crushed his burning face against her bare body. His fingers touched the silk girdle. He wrenched it free.

But the girdle didn't fall.

It wrapped itself about his arm, striking again and again at his left wrist.

Marûk staggered back, tried to tear the reptile from his arm. He began to scream.

As he dragged its coils from his left wrist, the thing sank its fangs in the ball of his right thumb. He managed to dash it to the floor.

Screaming wildly, he shattered its head under the heel of his shoe. But he knew that it was too late.

Sumuru's girdle had been a live adder.

Very shortly afterward, Ariosto looked up from the still body of Marûk Pasha as Sumuru, wrapped in a cream mink cloak, came into the laboratory.

"It was hopeless, Madonna. I injected serum for adder bite, and you see where I attached tourniquets above both wrists. It was difficult, for already he was in violent convulsions. Any one of the wounds would have been fatal. The venom had penetrated the radial artery. It was impossible to make deep incisions owing to the location of the bites."

"I have notified Cairo." Sumuru's voice was calm, unruffled. "The Pasha's chauffeur is waiting. You must go with the body. Your degrees will impress the authorities. You may have to remain for the inquest. Take the dead adder with you, and explain how I think it must have been concealed in the rugs."

She turned to go, then paused, looked back.

Ariosto lowered his eyes.

"You think I killed him deliberately. That is not true. He died as the result of trying a second time to force himself upon me—and I had warned him."

"I don't dispute it, Madonna. But, in case of a routine police visit, before I leave for Cairo do you wish me to remove your other tame adders to a safer place?"

Chapter Twenty-three

DRAKE ROSCOE walked quietly into the large enclosure that housed Sumuru's collection of wild animals. This consisted chiefly of specimens of various members of the cat family. Some few were asleep in their dens, but the moon rode high, and these nocturnal hunters grew rest-

less at night. Roscoe knew every inch of Abdûl's House and most of the surrounding terrain. Only a year before he had spent several months here, passion-drunk, enslaved to the witch woman. And Rajah, her Indian cheetah, seemed to recognize him.

Rajah bounded forward across the yard before his den and lifted a small, sleek head, whining softly.

Roscoe put his hand through the bars and stroked the graceful creature. "Hello, Rajah. Remember me?"

Rajah made a purring sound.

Roscoe moved on, and Rajah, who evidently had expected to be let out, whined piteously.

Roscoe's movements now would have puzzled an onlooker, but only because they were designed to avoid attracting the attention of one. Sumuru's bodyguards were recruited from the sons of Working Sisters. They were of many nationalities, of fine physique, but mentally unfitted for higher, executive employment. But, as a *corps d'élite*, every man was blindly devoted to Our Lady. And they patrolled the whole of the great property from dusk to dawn.

Drake Roscoe was playing a grim game—A last throw against the powers of Sumuru. A hair divided success from disaster.

He had much to redeem. He preferred death to failure.

He approached Abdûl's House from the rear, using all the tricks of the commandos with whom he had worked in North Africa during the war. He knew that there would be a porter at the gateway to the courtyard, but he had no intention of disturbing him. He found footholds in the old brickwork of a high wall and dropped from the top into a flower bed. Moving in the shadow of the building, he opened a door leading to the servants' quarters.

Here his knowledge of the ways of the Egyptians served him well. The servants were all in their own dining room, making merry over the remains of the feast prepared for Sumuru's guests.

He slipped out of his shoes, passed the open door undetected, and went up a stairway just beyond. At the top he stood still and listened.

There was no sound from the room in which two girls were on duty every night, ready to attend Our Lady, and Roscoe had no idea if Marûk Pasha remained in the house. The confinement of the cheetah suggested that he did. If so, he must change his plan.

Silently he crept along to a door used by the girls on night duty when they were summoned by Sumuru. He opened it by fractions of an inch until he could peer in.

Moonlight flooded the divan on its mink-covered dais with four pillars from which hung rose-pink gossamer curtains. Only a few hours before, a man had met his death as he held Sumuru in his arms. Now she lay sleeping in childish innocence, or in that primitive innocence which the Greek poets have given to the nymphs.

Roscoe momentarily grew cold. Old doubts came to life again. Was this woman really human?

He knew nothing of the death of Marûk Pasha, but he knew that Sumuru had passed through a period of tension that must have denied sleep to almost any normal woman.

Moonlight streamed in ahead of him. Sumuru faced it, so that she appeared as a silhouette, her shape defined with a silver line.

He reached the dais in silence, leaving the door partly open behind him. He knew that the pink drapes were beaded with tiny silver bells. He drew them open with steady hands, rested his knee on the divan, and pressed the end of his automatic against a silky shoulder.

"Don't move, Astar!" His voice was husky. "I'm not playing. This is the showdown. Do as I tell you, or wish me good-by. First bullet for you, second for me."

"How dreadfully gauche you Americans can be," Sumuru murmured softly. "Surely, Drake, the muzzle of your pistol must be touching that tiny mole you always assured me was maddening?"

"Don't talk, and don't move until I tell you. Just listen. Put on a dress and shoes, and take a fur coat. We're traveling together again. Step out on this side, then walk over to the wardrobe closet."

Sumuru knew he meant it. She hadn't a doubt of that. Yet there wasn't a false note in her voice or a tremor in her body.

She stretched her arms above her head, yawning like a child awakened. "I have been too generous to a man who tried to betray me to the executioner. I have given you Dolores." She swung lightly to the mink-covered dais, turned, faced him. "Are you disappointed? Has she declined to spend the night with you?"

Blazing eyes looked up at him. Roscoe clenched his teeth, keeping the pistol steadily leveled.

"Get dressed. I'm in a hurry."

Sumuru's face was in half-shadow, but he saw a contemptuous smile move the perfect lips. She crossed to a deep closet, opened the door. Roscoe followed, a foot behind. Sumuru took down a dress at random, pulled it over her head, slipped on a pair of shoes, and draped a silver-mink coat over her arm.

"Well?"

"We're going over to the hangar to get the helicopter."

"Indeed? Are you a pilot?"

"No. But Cartaret is—ex-Royal Air Force."

"Suppose it isn't fueled?"

"I happen to know that it is. But first you'll put me through to the bungalow and then speak to Dolores. She's waiting there. You'll tell her to join us at the hangar."

"And where, may I ask, do you plan to take me?"

"Only as far as Ghîzeh."

"Not all the way to Scotland Yard?"

Roscoe realized that Sumuru was mocking him. Suddenly her repressed laughter came bubbling.

"Drake," she declared, "I could almost respect you for this. Suppose we make a bargain? You cannot possibly march me so far at pistol point without being seen by a guard. This would complicate matters. Did you ever know me to break my word?"

"Never."

"Then tell me what you want me to do, and I will give you my word to do it—if it lies in my power. After it is done, I am to be free to act as I see fit."

Drake Roscoe thought hard.

"I want you to give Dolores permission to go with me to America. I want you to give Coral Denvers permission to marry Dick Cartaret and go wherever he may want to take her. I want your word that until we part company you'll do nothing to delay our leaving. I'll give you mine that I'll do nothing against you. Is that clear?"

"Quite. You have my word."

"You have mine. There are loopholes in this pact, but I have a gun."

"Put it in your pocket. The keys of the hangar are held by Caspar. I will call him."

"Agreed. Then he'll go with us to the hangar."

The thing ran as smoothly as a well-rehearsed play. Our Lady gave her orders calmly. Caspar smiled and obeyed. He turned out two capable mechanics who slept in a hut

adjoining the hangar, one who looked like a Swede, the other some kind of Arab. Dolores, her dark eyes constantly glancing toward Sumuru, couldn't hide her emotion. Coral was frankly frightened.

Dick Cartaret, seated at the controls, knowing how much depended upon him, found himself tortured by doubt.

"My knowledge of helicopters is fairly limited," he told Roscoe. "And this American station wagon is clear outside my experience. I warn you I shall have to learn as we shove along."

"Then learn—and fast!"

Roscoe was watching Sumuru. As Dick spoke, he saw Dolores half stand up. He saw Our Lady check her. And he wondered what Dolores had been about to do, to say.

Later he knew.

As they were airborne, Roscoe's last glimpse of Caspar, standing with the mechanics, showed him performing a ceremonious salaam.

It was a race against the moon. Fortunately, Dick Cartaret knew the plateau of Ghîzeh, and knew of several possible landings for a helicopter. The performance of the ship he was piloting surprised him. Navigation was simple. He followed the Nile.

They traveled in a silence rarely broken, and throughout the flight, Dick experienced an uncanny sensation of being directed in his handling of the unfamiliar controls.

He made a safe landing near the Great Pyramid, and the party of five stumbled across the desert road to where a few lights still beckoned from the Mera House Hotel.

The problem presented to the night manager by the arrival of three dazzlingly beautiful women accompanied by only two personable men was further involved when the leader of the party, the American gentleman, insisted upon separate rooms for each of the three ladies. That their car had broken down was understandable. Such accidents often occur in these circumstances. But . . . separate rooms!

There were no phones in the ladies' rooms, the topmost of which was occupied, according to the register, by "Madame St. Sabre"—one of Sumuru's many names. Dolores d'Eze was on the floor below, not far from the room allotted to Coral Denvers. The two men shared a room.

"I thought it best to keep her apart from the girls," Roscoe told Dick. "My truce terms with Sumuru more or less expire with our arrival here. You know something

of her extraordinary powers, and God knows what mischief she might have been up to during the rest of the night."

"What's to stop her, anyway?"

"Well, I took the precaution of locking her doors."

"Great Scott! Does she know?"

"Yes." Roscoe nodded. "I left her laughing."

"But she can ring the bell."

"That may be what she was laughing about," Roscoe admitted. "But I stayed behind there for a look around before she came up. The bell push is on a cord hanging beside the bed. I unscrewed the bulb and disconnected it, then screwed it on again."

Dick and Drake Roscoe were roused very early by a banging on their door. Neither had undressed, and Roscoe, in shirt and trousers, fell out and crossed to open the door. A page stood outside.

"Mr. Roscoe?"

"Yes."

"You're wanted on the phone, sir. Phone at the end of the corridor."

"What's this?" Dick muttered.

"I don't know. But I don't like it."

Roscoe followed the boy to where a telephone stood on a small desk. He took it up and Dick stood at his elbow.

"Is that you, Drake?"

Dick saw Roscoe change color.

"It is."

Sumuru's beautiful voice held nothing but sympathy. "I can only suppose that you sentenced me to solitary confinement in order to avoid my influencing Dolores. I truly understand, Drake. You love her, and if it consoles you, she loves you. But there are many kinds of love. Dolores loves me, too. Surely you knew she would come up to talk to me as soon as I was alone?"

Roscoe suppressed a groan. His eyes, when he raised them to Dick, were haggard.

"You had forgotten, Drake, if you ever knew, that Dolores is a qualified pilot. She is also my friend, a sister of the Order and principal of the Convent of Our Lady. I honored my bargain. The choice was hers. We left very early, and she was far too emotional to see you. But you will find a letter in her room. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"I bear you no ill will. On the contrary, I am happy to know that you have recovered your manhood. Dolores is yours, Drake—but only on *my* terms. Give my sincere regards to Sister Coralie. I may come and visit her and her husband soon. *Au revoir*, Drake. I have such a busy day before me. Poor Marûk Pasha was bitten by an adder as he left last night, and unfortunately has died. Of course, I shall have to attend the funeral. . . ."

Less than a week later, Dick Cartaret and Coral Denvers leaned on the rail of a P. and O. liner leaving Port Said. It was a moonlight night. Drake Roscoe stood in the stern of a motor launch waving them good-by.

Coral turned to Dick. There were tears in her eyes.

"Poor Drake!" she whispered. "Dolores is so lovely, and so loving. Whatever will he do?"

"Give me one guess, darling."

"Yes, Dick?"

"He'll go back to the Fayyûm."

Another month had elapsed before a beautifully made box with a plate-glass lid was delivered to the curator of the Cairo Museum. A typed note was enclosed. It said:

Please notify relatives of the deceased, who live in Damascus, that they may view the body if they care to visit the Museum.

The box contained the naked body of a bearded man, exactly eighteen inches in height. The man, grotesquely shriveled, was that of a human vulture. In almost every respect, the miniature figure appeared perfect. (Later examination showed that the eyes, teeth, and fingernails were synthetic.)

A plate at the base had this inscription: "Ali el-Haggi, known as Ali of Aleppo."

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