

THE MOONLIT WAY

Robert W. Chambers



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The Moonlit Way

Robert W. Chambers

PROLOGUE

CLAIRE-DE-LUNE

There was a big moon over the Bosphorus; the limpid waters off Seraglio Point glimmered; the Golden Horn was like a sheet of beaten silver inset with topaz and ruby where lanterns on rusting Turkish warships dyed the tarnished argent of the flood. Except for these, and the fixed lights on the foreign guard-ships and on a big American steam yacht, only a pale and nebulous shoreward glow betrayed the monster city.

Over Pera the full moon's lustre fell, silvering palace, villa, sea and coast; its rays glimmered on bridge and wharf, bastion, tower arsenal, and minarette, transforming those big, sprawling, ramshackle blotches of architecture called Constantinople into that shadowy, magnificent enchantment of the East, which all believe in, but which exists only in a poet's heart and mind.

Night veiled the squalour of Balat, and its filth, its meanness, its flimsy sham. Moonlight made of Galata a marvel, ennobling every bastard dome, every starved façade, every unlovely and attenuated minarette, and invested with added charm each really lovely ruin, each tower, palace, mosque, garden wall and balcony, and every crenelated battlement, where the bronze bulk of ancient cannon slanted, outlined in silver under the Prophet's moon.

Tiny moving lights twinkled on the Galata Bridge; pale points of radiance dotted Scutari; but the group of amazing cities called Constantinople lay almost blotted out under the moon.

Darker at night than any capital in the world, its huge, solid

and ancient shapes bulking gigantic in the night, its noble ruins cloaked, its cheap filth hidden, its flimsy Coney Island aspect transfigured and the stylographic-pen architecture of a hundred minarets softened into slender elegance, Constantinople lay dreaming its immemorial dreams under the black shadow of the Prussian eagle.

The German Embassy was lighted up like a Pera café; the drawing-rooms crowded with a brilliant throng where sashes, orders, epaulettes and sabre-tache glittered, and jewels blazed and aigrettes waved under the crystal chandeliers, accenting and isolating sombre civilian evening dress, which seemed mournful, rusty, and out of the picture, even when plastered over with jewelled stars. Few Turkish officials and officers were present, but the disquieting sight of German officers in Turkish uniforms was not uncommon. And the Count d'Eblis, Senator of France, noted this phenomenon with lively curiosity, and mentioned it to his companion, Ferez Bey.

Ferez Bey, lounging in a corner with Adolf Gerhardt, for whom he had procured an invitation, and flanked by the Count d'Eblis, likewise a guest aboard the rich German-American banker's yacht, was very much in his element as friend and mentor.

For Ferez Bey knew everybody in the Orient—knew when to cringe, when to be patronising, when to fawn, when to assert himself, when to be servile, when impudent.

He was as impudent to Adolf Gerhardt as he dared be, the banker not knowing the subtler shades and differences; he was on an equality with the French senator, Monsieur le Comte d'Eblis because he knew that d'Eblis dared not resent his familiarity.

Otherwise, in that brilliant company, Ferez Bey was a jackal—and he knew it perfectly—but a valuable jackal; and he

also knew that.

So when the German Ambassador spoke pleasantly to him, his attitude was just sufficiently servile, but not overdone; and when Von-der-Hohe Pasha, in the uniform of a Turkish General of Division, graciously exchanged a polite word with him during a moment's easy gossip with the Count d'Eblis, Ferez Bey writhed moderately under the honour, but did not exactly squirm.

To Conrad von Heimholz he ventured to present his German-American patron, Adolf Gerhardt, and the thin young military attaché condescended in his Prussian way to notice the introduction.

"Saw your yacht in the harbour," he admitted stiffly. "It is astonishing how you Americans permit no bounds to your somewhat noticeable magnificence."

"She's a good boat, the *Mirage*," rumbled Gerhardt, in his bushy red beard, "but there are plenty in America finer than mine."

"Not many, Adolf," insisted Ferez, in his flat, Eurasian voice—"not ver' many anyw'ere so fine like your *Mirage*."

"I saw none finer at Kiel," said the attaché, staring at Gerhardt through his monocle, with the habitual insolence and disapproval of the Prussian junker. "To me it exhibits bad taste"—he turned to the Count d'Eblis—"particularly when the *Meteor* is there."

"Where?" asked the Count.

"At Kiel. I speak of Kiel and the ostentation of certain foreign yacht owners at the recent regatta."

Gerhardt, redder than ever, was still German enough to swallow the meaningless insolence. He was not getting on very well at the Embassy of his fellow countrymen.

Americans, properly presented, they endured without too open resentment; for German-Americans, even when millionaires, their contempt and bad manners were often undisguised.

"I'm going to get out of this," growled Gerhardt, who held a

good position socially in New York and in the fashionable colony at Northbrook. "I've seen enough puffed up Germans and over-embroidered Turks to last me. Come on, d'Eblis——"

Ferez detained them both:

"Surely," he protested, "you would not miss Nihla!"

"Nihla?" repeated d'Eblis, who had passed his arm through Gerhardt's. "Is that the girl who set St. Petersburg by the ears?"

"Nihla Quellen," rumbled Gerhardt. "I've heard of her. She's a dancer, isn't she?"

Ferez, of course, knew all about her, and he drew the two men into the embrasure of a long window.

It was not happening just exactly as he and the German Ambassador had planned it together; they had intended to let Nihla burst like a flaming jewel on the vision of d'Eblis and blind him then and there.

Perhaps, after all, it was better drama to prepare her entrance. And who but Ferez was qualified to prepare that entrée, or to speak with authority concerning the history of this strange and beautiful young girl who had suddenly appeared like a burning star in the East, had passed like a meteor through St. Petersburg, leaving several susceptible young men—notably the Grand Duke Cyril—mentally unhinged and hopelessly dissatisfied with fate.

"It is ver' fonny, d'Eblis—une histoire chic, vous savez! Figurez vous——"

"Talk English," growled Gerhardt, eyeing the serene progress of a pretty Highness, Austrian, of course, surrounded by gorgeous uniforms and empressement.

"Who's that?" he added.

Ferez turned; the gorgeous lady snubbed him, but bowed to d'Eblis.

"The Archduchess Zilka," he said, not a whit abashed. "She is a ver' great frien' of mine."

"Can't you present me?" enquired Gerhardt, restlessly; "—

or you, d'Eblis—can't you ask permission?"

The Count d'Eblis nodded inattentively, then turned his heavy and rather vulgar face to Ferez, plainly interested in the "histoire" of the girl, Nihla.

"What were you going to say about that dancer?" he demanded.

Ferez pretended to forget, then, apparently recollecting:

"Ah! Apropos of Nihla? It is a ver' piquant storee—the storee of Nihla Quellen. Zat is not 'er name. No! Her name is Dunois—Thessalie Dunois."

"French," nodded d'Eblis.

"Alsatian," replied Ferez slyly. "Her fathaire was captain—Achille Dunois?—you know——?"

"What!" exclaimed d'Eblis. "Do you mean that notorious fellow, the Grand Duke Cyril's hunting cheetah?"

"The same, dear frien'. Dunois is dead—his bullet head was crack open, doubtless by som' ladee's angree 6 husban'. There are a few thousan' roubles—not more—to stan' between some kind gentleman and the prettee Nihla. You see?" he added to Gerhardt, who was listening without interest, "—Dunois, if he was the Gran' Duke's cheetah, kept all such merry gentlemen from his charming daughtaire."

Gerhardt, whose aspirations lay higher, socially, than a dancing girl, merely grunted. But d'Eblis, whose aspirations were always below even his own level, listened with visibly increasing curiosity. And this was according to the programme of Ferez Bey and Excellenz. As the Hun has it, "according to plan."

"Well," enquired d'Eblis heavily, "did Cyril get her?"

"All St. Petersburg is still laughing at heem," replied the voluble Eurasian. "Cyril indeed launched her. And that was sufficient—yet, that first night she storm St. Petersburg. And Cyril's reward? Listen, d'Eblis, they say she slapped his sillee face. For me, I don't know. That is the storee. And he was ver' angree, Cyril. You know? And, by God, it was

what Gerhardt calls a 'raw deal.' Yess? Figurez vous!—this girl, déjà lancée—and her fathaire the Grand Duke's hunting cheetah, and her mothaire, what? Yes, mon ami, a 'andsome Géorgianne, caught quite wild, they say, by Prince Haledine! For me, I believe it. Why not?... And then the beautiful Géorgianne, she fell to Dunois—on a bet?—a service rendered?—gratitude of Cyril?—Who knows? Only that Dunois must marry her. And Nihla is their daughtaire. Voilà!"

"Then why," demanded d'Eblis, "does she make such a fuss about being grateful? I hate ingratitude, Ferez. And how can she last, anyway? To dance for the German Ambassador in Constantinople is all very well, but unless somebody launches her properly—in Paris—she'll end in a Pera café." Ferez held his peace and listened with all his might.

"I could do that," added d'Eblis.

"Please?" inquired Ferez suavely.

"Launch her in Paris."

The programme of Excellenz and Ferez Bey was certainly proceeding as planned.

But Gerhardt was becoming restless and dully irritated as he began to realise more and more what caste meant to Prussians and how insignificant to these people was a German-American multimillionaire. And Ferez realised that he must do something.

There was a Bavarian Baroness there, uglier than the usual run of Bavarian baronesses; and to her Ferez nailed Gerhardt, and wriggled free himself, making his way amid the gorgeous throngs to the Count d'Eblis once more.

"I left Gerhardt planted," he remarked with satisfaction; "by God, she is uglee like camels—the Baroness von Schaunitz! Nev' mind. It is nobility; it is the same to Adolf Gerhardt."

"A homely woman makes me sick!" remarked d'Eblis. "Eh, mon Dieu!—one has merely to look at these ladies to guess their nationality! Only in Germany can one gather together

such a collection of horrors. The only pretty ones are Austrian.”

Perhaps even the cynicism of Excellenz had not realised the perfection of this setting, but Ferez, the nimble witted, had foreseen it.

Already the glittering crowds in the drawing rooms were drawing aside like jewelled curtains; already the stringed orchestra had become mute aloft in its gilded gallery. The gay tumult softened; laughter, voices, the rustle of silks and fans, the metallic murmur of drawing-room equipment died away. Through the increasing stillness, from the gilded gallery a Thessalonian reed began skirling like a thrush in the underbrush.

Suddenly a sand-coloured curtain at the end of the east room twitched open, and a great desert ostrich trotted in. And, astride of the big, excited, bridled bird, sat a young girl, controlling her restless mount with disdainful indifference.

“Nihla!” whispered Ferez, in the large, fat ear of the Count d’Eblis. The latter’s pallid jowl reddened and his pendulous lips tightened to a deep-bitten crease across his face.

To the weird skirling of the Thessalonian pipe the girl, Nihla, put her feathered steed through its absurd paces, aping the haute-école.

There is little humour in your Teuton; they were too amazed to laugh; too fascinated, possibly by the girl herself, to follow the panicky gambols of the reptile-headed bird.

The girl wore absolutely nothing except a Yashmak and a zone of blue jewels across her breasts and hips.

Her childish throat, her limbs, her slim, snowy body, her little naked feet were lovely beyond words. Her thick dark hair flew loose, now framing, now veiling an oval face from which, above the gauzy Yashmak’s edge, two dark eyes coolly swept her breathless audience.

But under the frail wisp of cobweb, her cheeks glowed

pink, and two full red lips parted deliciously in the half-checked laughter of confident, reckless youth.



NIHLA PUT HER FEATHERED STEED THROUGH ITS ABSURD PACES

Over hurdle after hurdle she lifted her powerful, half-terrified mount; she backed it, pirouetted, made it squat, leap, pace, trot, run with wings half spread and neck stretched level.

She rode sideways, then kneeling, standing, then poised on one foot; she threw somersaults, faced to the rear, mounted and dismounted at full speed. And through the frail, transparent Yashmak her parted red lips revealed the glimmer of teeth and her childishly engaging laughter rang delightfully.

Then, abruptly, she had enough of her bird; she wheeled, sprang to the polished parquet, and sent her feathered steed scampering away through the sand-coloured curtains, which switched into place again immediately.

Breathless, laughing that frank, youthful, irresistible laugh

which was to become so celebrated in Europe, Nihla Quellen strolled leisurely around the circle of her applauding audience, carelessly blowing a kiss or two from her slim finger-tips, evidently quite unspoiled by her success and equally delighted to please and to be pleased. Then, in the gilded gallery the strings began; and quite naturally, without any trace of preparation or self-consciousness, Nihla began to sing, dancing when the fascinating, irresponsible measure called for it, singing again as the sequence occurred. And the enchantment of it all lay in its accidental and detached allure—as though it all were quite spontaneous—the song a passing whim, the dance a capricious after-thought, and the whole thing done entirely to please herself and give vent to the sheer delight of a young girl, in her own overwhelming energy and youthful spirits.

Even the Teuton comprehended that, and the applause grew to a roar with that odd undertone of animal menace always to be detected when the German herd is gratified and expresses pleasure en masse.

But she wouldn't stay, wouldn't return. Like one of those beautiful Persian cats, she had lingered long enough to arouse delight. Then she went, deaf to recall, to persuasion, to caress—indifferent to praise, to blandishment, to entreaty. Cat and dancer were similar; Nihla, like the Persian puss, knew when she had had enough. That was sufficient for her: nothing could stop her, nothing lure her to return.

Beads of sweat were glistening upon the heavy features of the Count d'Eblis. Von-der-Goltz Pasha, strolling near, did him the honour to remember him, but d'Eblis seemed dazed and unresponsive; and the old Pasha understood, perhaps, when he caught the beady and expressive eyes of Ferez fixed on him in exultation.

"Whose is she?" demanded d'Eblis abruptly. His voice was hoarse and evidently out of control, for he spoke too loudly

to please Ferez, who took him by the arm and led him out to the moonlit terrace.

“Mon pauvere ami,” he said soothingly, “she is actually the proprietee of nobodee at present. Cyril, they say, is following her—quite ready for anything—marriage——”

“What!”

Ferez shrugged:

“That is the gosseep. No doubt som’ man of wealth, more acceptable to her——”

“I wish to meet her!” said d’Eblis.

“Ah! That is, of course, not easee——”

“Why?”

Ferez laughed:

“Ask yo’self the question again! Excellenz and his guests have gone quite mad ovaire Nihla——”

“I care nothing for them,” retorted d’Eblis thickly; “I wish to know her... I wish to know her!... *Do you understand?*”

After a silence, Ferez turned in the moonlight and looked at the Count d’Eblis.

“And your newspaper— *Le Mot d’Ordre* ?”

“Yes.... If you get her for me.”

“You sell to me for two million francs the control stock in *Le Mot d’Ordre* ?”

“Yes.”

“An’ the two million, eh?”

“I shall use my influence with Gerhardt. That is all I can do. If your Emperor chooses to decorate him—something—the Red Eagle, third class, perhaps——”

“I attend to those,” smiled Ferez. “Hit’s ver’ fonny, d’Eblis, how I am thinking about those Red Eagles all time since I know Gerhardt. I spik to Von-der-Goltz de votre part, si vous le voulez? Oui? Alors——”

“Ask her to supper aboard the yacht.”

“God knows——”

The Count d’Eblis said through closed teeth:

“There is the first woman I ever really wanted in all my

life!... I am standing here now waiting for her—waiting to be presented to her now.”

“I spik to Von-der-Goltz Pasha,” said Ferez; and he slipped through the palms and orange trees and vanished.

For half an hour the Count d’Eblis stood there, motionless in the moonlight.

She came about that time, on the arm of Ferez Bey, her father’s friend of many years.

And Ferez left her there in the creamy Turkish moonlight on the flowering terrace, alone with the Count d’Eblis.

When Ferez came again, long after midnight, with Excellenz on one arm and the proud and happy Adolf Gerhardt on the other, the whole cycle of a little drama had been played to a conclusion between those two shadowy figures under the flowering almonds on the terrace—between this slender, dark-eyed girl and this big, bulky, heavy-visaged man of the world.

And the man had been beaten and the girl had laid down every term. And the compact was this: that she was to be launched in Paris; she was merely to borrow any sum needed, with privilege to acquit the debt within the year; that, if she ever came to care for this man sufficiently, she was to become only one species of masculine property—a legal wife.

And to every condition—and finally even to the last, the man had bowed his heavy, burning head.

“D’Eblis!” began Gerhardt, almost stammering in his joy and pride. “His highness tells me that I am to have an order—an Imperial d-decoration—”

D’Eblis stared at him out of unseeing eyes; Nihla laughed outright, alas, too early wise and not even troubling her lovely head to wonder why a decoration had been asked for this burly, bushy-bearded man from nowhere.

But within his sinuous, twisted soul Ferez writhed exultingly, and patted Gerhardt on the arm, and patted

d'Eblis, too—dared even to squirm visibly closer to Excellenz, like a fawning dog that fears too much to venture contact in his wriggling demonstrations.

“You take with you our pretty wonder-child to Paris to be launched, I hear,” remarked Excellenz, most affably, to d'Eblis. And to Nihla: “And upon a yacht fit for an emperor, I understand. Ach! Such a going forth is only heard of in the Arabian Nights. Eh bien, ma petite, go West, conquer, and reign! It is a prophecy!”

And Nihla threw back her head and laughed her full-throated laughter under the Turkish moon.

Later, Ferez, walking with the Ambassador, replied humbly to the curt question:

“Yes, I have become his jackal. But always at the orders of Excellenz.”

Later still, aboard the *Mirage*, Ferez stood alone by the after-rail, staring with ratty eyes at the blackness beyond the New Bridge.

“Oh, God, be merciful!” he whispered. He had often said it on the eve of crime. Even an Eurasian rat has emotions. And Ferez had been in love with Nihla many years, and was selling her now at a price—selling her and Adolf Gerhardt and the Count d'Eblis and France—all he had to barter—for he had sold his soul too long ago to remember even what he got for it.

The silence seemed more intense for the sounds that made it audible. From the unlighted cities on the seven hills came an unbroken howling of dogs; transparent waves of the limpid Bosphorus slapped the vessel's sides, making a mellow and ceaseless clatter. Far away beyond Galata Quay,

in the inner reek of unseen Stamboul, the notes of a Turkish flute stole out across the darkness, where some Tzigane—some unseen wretch in rags—was playing the melancholy song of Mourad. And, mournfully responsive to the reedy complaint of a homeless wanderer from a nation without a home, the homeless dogs of Islam wailed their miserere under the Prophet's moon.

The tragic wolf-song wavered from hill to hill; from the Fields of the Dead to the Seven Towers, from Kassim to Tophane, seeming to swell into one dreadful, endless plaint:

“My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?”

“And me!” muttered Ferez, shivering in the windy vapours from the Black Sea, which already dampened his face with their creeping summer chill.

“Ferez!”

He turned slowly. Swathed in a white wool bernous, Nihla stood there in the foggy moonlight.

“Why?” she enquired, without preliminaries and with the unfeigned curiosity of a child.

He did not pretend to misunderstand her in French:

“Thou knowest, Nihla. I have never touched thy heart. I could do nothing for thee——”

“Except to sell me,” she smiled, interrupting him in English, without the slightest trace of accent.

But Ferez preferred the refuge of French:

“Except to launch thee and make possible thy career,” he corrected her very gently.

“I thought you were in love with me?”

“I have loved thee, Nihla, since thy childhood.”

“Is there anything on earth or in paradise, Ferez, that you would not sell for a price?”

“I tell thee——”

“Zut! I know thee, Ferez!” she mocked him, slipping easily into French. “What was my price? Who pays thee, Colonel Ferez? This big, shambling, world-wearied Count, who is, nevertheless, afraid of me? Did he pay thee? Or was it this

rich American, Gerhardt? Or was it Von-der-Goltz? Or Excellenz?"

"Nihla! Thou knowest me——"

Her clear, untroubled laughter checked him:

"I know you, Ferez. That is why I ask. That is why I shall have no reply from you. Only my wits can ever answer me any questions."

She stood laughing at him, swathed in her white wool, looming like some mocking spectre in the misty moonlight of the after-deck.

"Oh, Ferez," she said in her sweet, malicious voice, "there was a curse on Midas, too! You play at high finance; you sell what you never had to sell, and you are paid for it. All your life you have been busy selling, re-selling, bargaining, betraying, seeking always gain where only loss is possible—loss of all that justifies a man in daring to stand alive before the God that made him!... And yet—that which you call love—that shadowy emotion which you have also sold to-night—I think you really feel for me.... Yes, I believe it.... But it, too, has its price.... *What was that price, Ferez?*"

"Believe me, Nihla——"

"Oh, Ferez, you ask too much! No! Let *me* tell *you*, then. The price was paid by that American, who is not one but a German."

"That is absurd!"

"Why the Red Eagle, then? And the friendship of Excellenz? What is he then, this Gerhardt, but a millionaire? Why is nobility so gracious then? What does Gerhardt give for his Red Eagle?—for the politeness of Excellenz?—for the crooked smile of a Bavarian Baroness and the lifted lorgnette of Austria? What does he give for *me*? Who buys me after all? Enver? Talaat? Hilmi? Who sells me? Excellenz? Von-der-Goltz? You? And who pays for me? Gerhardt, who takes his profit in Red Eagles and offers me to d'Eblis for something in exchange to please Excellenz—

and you? And what, at the end of the bargaining, does d'Eblis pay for me—pay through Gerhardt to you, and through you to Excellenz, and through Excellenz to the Kaiser Wilhelm II——”

Ferez, showing his teeth, came close to her and spoke very softly:

“See how white is the moonlight off Seraglio Point, my Nihla!... It is no whiter than those loveliest ones who lie fathoms deep below these little silver waves.... Each with her bowstring snug about her snowy neck.... As fair and young, as warm and fresh and sweet as thou, my Nihla.” He smiled at her; and if the smile stiffened an instant on her lips, the next instant her light, dauntless laughter mocked him.

“For a price,” she said, “you would sell even Life to that old miser, Death! Then listen what you have done, little smiling, whining jackal of his Excellency! I go to Paris and to my career, certain of my happy destiny, sure of myself! For my opportunity I pay if I choose—pay *what* I choose—when and where it suits me to pay!——”

She slipped into French with a little laugh:

“Now go and lick thy fingers of whatever crumbs have stuck there. The Count d'Eblis is doubtless licking his. Good appetite, my Ferez! Lick away lustily, for God does not temper the jackal's appetite to his opportunities!”

Ferez let his level gaze rest on her in silence.

“Well, trafficker in Eagles, dealer in love, vendor of youth, merchant of souls, what strikes you silent?”

But he was thinking of something sharper than her tongue and less subtle, which one day might strike her silent if she laughed too much at Fate.

And, thinking, he showed his teeth again in that noiseless snicker which was his smile and laughter too.

The girl regarded him for a moment, then deliberately mimicked his smile:

“The dogs of Stamboul laugh that way, too,” she said, baring her pretty teeth. “What amuses you? Did the silly old Von-der-Goltz Pasha promise you, also, a dish of Eagle?—old Von-der-Goltz with his spectacles an inch thick and nothing living within what he carries about on his two doddering old legs! There’s a German!—who died twenty years ago and still walks like a damned man—jingling his iron crosses and mumbling his gums! Is it a resurrection from 1870 come to foretell another war? And why are these Prussian vultures gathering here in Stamboul? Can you tell me, Ferez?—these Prussians in Turkish uniforms! Is there anything dying or dead here, that these buzzards appear from the sky and alight? Why do they crowd and huddle in a circle around Constantinople? Is there something dead in Persia? Is the Bagdad railroad dying? Is Enver Bey at his last gasp? Is Talaat? Or perhaps the savoury odour comes from the Yildiz——”

“Nihla! Is there nothing sacred—nothing thou fearest on earth?”

“Only old age—and thy smile, my Ferez. Neither agrees with me.” She stretched her arms lazily.

“Allons,” she said, stifling a pleasant yawn with one slim hand,—my maid will wake below and miss me; and then the dogs of Stamboul yonder will hear a solo such as they never heard before.... Tell me, Ferez, do you know when we are to weigh anchor?”

“At sunrise.”

“It is the same to me,”—she yawned again—“my maid is aboard and all my luggage. And my Ferez, also.... Mon dieu! And what will Cyril have to say when he arrives to find me vanished! It is, perhaps, well for us that we shall be at sea!”

Her quick laughter pealed; she turned with a careless gesture of salute, friendly and contemptuous; and her white bernous faded away in the moonlit fog.

And Ferez Bey stood staring after her out of his near-set,

beady eyes, loving her, desiring her, fearing her,
unrepentant that he had sold her, wondering whether the
day might dawn when he would find it best to kill her for
the prosperity and peace of mind of the only living being in
whose service he never tired—himself.

I

I

A SHADOW DANCE

Three years later Destiny still wore a rosy face for Nihla Quellen. And, for a young American of whom Nihla had never even heard, Destiny still remained the laughing jade he had always known, beckoning him ever nearer, with the coquettish promise of her curved forefinger, to fame and wealth immeasurable.

Seated now on a moonlit lawn, before his sketching easel, this optimistic young man, whose name was Barres, continued to observe the movements of a dim white figure which had emerged from the villa opposite, and was now stealing toward him across the dew-drenched grass.

When the white figure was quite near it halted, holding up filmy skirts and peering intently at him.

“May one look?” she inquired, in that now celebrated voice of hers, through which ever seemed to sound a hint of hidden laughter.

“Certainly,” he replied, rising from his folding camp stool. She tiptoed over the wet grass, came up beside him, gazed down at the canvas on his easel.

“Can you really see to paint? Is the moon bright enough?” she asked.

“Yes. But one has to be familiar with one’s palette.”

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“Oh. You seem to know yours quite perfectly, monsieur.”

“Enough to mix colours properly.”

“I didn’t realise that painters ever actually painted pictures by moonlight.”

“It’s a sort of hit or miss business, but the notes made are interesting,” he explained.

“What do you do with these moonlight studies?”

“Use them as notes in the studio when a moonlight picture is to be painted.”

“Are you then a realist, monsieur?”

“As much of a realist as anybody with imagination can be,” he replied, smiling at her charming, moonlit face.

“I understand. Realism is merely honesty plus the imagination of the individual.”

“A delightful *mot*, madam——”

“Mademoiselle,” she corrected him demurely. “Are you English?”

“American.”

“Oh. Then may I venture to converse with you in English?” She said it in exquisite English, entirely without accent.

“You *are* English!” he exclaimed under his breath.

“No ... I don’t know what I am.... Isn’t it charming out here? What particular view are you painting?”

“The Seine, yonder.”

She bent daintily over his sketch, holding up the skirts of her ball-gown.

“Your sketch isn’t very far advanced, is it?” she inquired seriously.

“Not very,” he smiled.

They stood there together in silence for a while, 21 looking out over the moonlit river to the misty, tree-covered heights.

Through lighted rows of open windows in the elaborate little villa across the lawn came lively music and the distant noise of animated voices.

“Do you know,” he ventured smilingly, “that your skirts and slippers are soaking wet?”

"I don't care. Isn't this June night heavenly?"

She glanced across at the lighted house. "It's so hot and noisy in there; one dances only with discomfort. A distaste for it all sent me out on the terrace. Then I walked on the lawn. Then I beheld you!... Am I interrupting your work, monsieur? I suppose I am." She looked up at him naïvely. He said something polite. An odd sense of having seen her somewhere possessed him now. From the distant house came the noisy American music of a two-step. With charming grace, still inspecting him out of her dark eyes, the girl began to move her pretty feet in rhythm with the music.

"Shall we?" she inquired mischievously... "Unless you are too busy——"

The next moment they were dancing together there on the wet lawn, under the high lustre of the moon, her fresh young face and fragrant figure close to his.

During their second dance she said serenely:

"They'll raise the dickens if I stay here any longer. Do you know the Comte d'Eblis?"

"The Senator? The numismatist?"

"Yes."

"No, I don't know him. I am only a Latin Quarter student."

"Well, he is giving that party. He is giving it for me—in my honour. That is his villa. And I"—she 22 laughed—"am going to marry him— *perhaps* ! Isn't this a delightful escapade of mine?"

"Isn't it rather an indiscreet one?" he asked smilingly.

"Frightfully. But I like it. How did you happen to pitch your easel on his lawn?"

"The river and the hills—their composition appealed to me from here. It is the best view of the Seine."

"Are you glad you came?"

They both laughed at the mischievous question.

During their third dance she became a little apprehensive and kept looking over her shoulder toward the house.

"There's a man expected there," she whispered, "Ferez Bey. He's as soft-footed as a cat and he always prowls in my vicinity. At times it almost seems to me as though he were slyly watching me—as though he were employed to keep an eye on me."

"A Turk?"

"Eurasian.... I wonder what they think of my absence? Alexandre—the Comte d'Eblis—won't like it."

"Had you better go?"

"Yes; I ought to, but I won't.... Wait a moment!" She disengaged herself from his arms. "Hide your easel and colour-box in the shrubbery, in case anybody comes to look for me."

She helped him strap up and fasten the telescope-easel; they placed the paraphernalia behind the blossoming screen of syringa. Then, coming together, she gave herself to him again, nestling between his arms with a little laugh; and they fell into step once more with the distant dance-music. Over the grass their united shadows glided, swaying, gracefully interlocked—moon-born 23 phantoms which dogged their light young feet....

A man came out on the stone terrace under the Chinese lanterns. When they saw him they hastily backed into the obscurity of the shrubbery.

"Nihla!" he called, and his heavy voice was vibrant with irritation and impatience.

He was a big man. He walked with a bulky, awkward gait—a few paces only, out across the terrace.

"Nihla!" he bawled hoarsely.

Then two other men and a woman appeared on the terrace

where the lanterns were strung. The woman called aloud in the darkness:

“Nihla! Nihla! Where are you, little devil?” Then she and the two men with her went indoors, laughing and skylarking, leaving the bulky man there alone.

The young fellow in the shrubbery felt the girl’s hand tighten on his coat sleeve, felt her slender body quiver with stifled laughter. The desire to laugh seized him, too; and they clung there together, choking back their mirth while the big man who had first appeared waddled out across the lawn toward the shrubbery, shouting:

“Nihla! Where are you then?” He came quite close to where they stood, then turned, shouted once or twice and presently disappeared across the lawn toward a walled garden. Later, several other people came out on the terrace, calling, “Nihla, Nihla,” and then went indoors, laughing boisterously.

The young fellow and the girl beside him were now quite weak and trembling with suppressed mirth.

They had not dared venture out on the lawn, although dance music had begun again.

24

“Is it your name they called?” he asked, his eyes very intent upon her face.

“Yes, Nihla.”

“I recognise you now,” he said, with a little thrill of wonder.

“I suppose so,” she replied with amiable indifference.

“Everybody knows me.”

She did not ask his name; he did not offer to enlighten her. What difference, after all, could the name of an American student make to the idol of Europe, Nihla Quellen?

“I’m in a mess,” she remarked presently. “He will be quite furious with me. It is going to be most disagreeable for me

to go back into that house. He has really an atrocious temper when made ridiculous."

"I'm awfully sorry," he said, sobered by her seriousness. She laughed:

"Oh, pouf! I really don't care. But perhaps you had better leave me now. I've spoiled your moonlight picture, haven't I?"

"But think what you have given me to make amends!" he replied.

She turned and caught his hands in hers with adorable impulsiveness:

"You're a sweet boy—do you know it! We've had a heavenly time, haven't we? Do you really think you ought to go—so soon?"

"Don't you think so, Nihla?"

"I don't want you to go. Anyway, there's a train every two hours——"

"I've a canoe down by the landing. I shall paddle back as I came——"

"A canoe!" she exclaimed, enchanted. "Will you take me with you?"

25

"To Paris?"

"Of course! Will you?"

"In your ball-gown?"

"I'd adore it! Will you?"

"That is an absolutely crazy suggestion," he said.

"I know it. The world is only a big asylum. There's a path to the river behind these bushes. Quick—pick up your painting traps——"

"But, Nihla, dear——"

"Oh, please! I'm dying to run away with you!"

"To Paris?" he demanded, still incredulous that the girl really meant it.

"Of course! You can get a taxi at the Pont-au-Change and take me home. Will you?"

“It would be wonderful, of course——”

“It will be paradise!” she exclaimed, slipping her hand into his. “Now, let us run like the dickens!”

In the uncertain moonlight, filtering through the shrubbery, they found a hidden path to the river; and they took it together, lightly, swiftly, speeding down the slope, all breathless with laughter, along the moonlit way.

In the suburban villa of the Comte d’Eblis a wine-flushed and very noisy company danced on, supped at midnight, continued the revel into the starlit morning hours. The place was a jungle of confetti.

Their host, restless, mortified, angry, perplexed by turns, was becoming obsessed at length with dull premonitions and vaguer alarms.

He waddled out to the lawn several times, still wearing his fancy gilt and tissue cap, and called:

“Nihla! Damnation! Answer me, you little fool!”

He went down to the river, where the gaily painted row-boats and punts lay, and scanned the silvered 26 flood, tortured by indefinite apprehensions. About dawn he started toward the weed-grown, slippery river-stairs for the last time, still crowned with his tinsel cap; and there in the darkness he found his aged boat-man, fishing for gudgeon with a four-cornered net suspended to the end of a bamboo pole.

“Have you see anything of Mademoiselle Nihla?” he demanded, in a heavy, unsteady voice, tremulous with indefinable fears.

“Monsieur le Comte, Mademoiselle Quellen went out in a canoe with a young gentleman.”

“W-what is that you tell me!” faltered the Comte d’Eblis, turning grey in the face.

“Last night, about ten o’clock, M’sieu le Comte. I was out in

the moonlight fishing for eels. She came down to the shore—took a canoe yonder by the willows. The young man had a double-bladed paddle. They were singing.”

“They—they have not returned?”

“No, M’sieu le Comte——”

“Who was the—man?”

“I could not see——”

“Very well.” He turned and looked down the dusky river out of light-coloured, murderous eyes. Then, always awkward in his gait, he retraced his steps to the house. There a servant accosted him on the terrace:

“The telephone, if Monsieur le Comte pleases——”

“Who is calling?” he demanded with a flare of fury.

“Paris, if it pleases Monsieur le Comte.”

The Count d’Eblis went to his own quarters, seated himself, and picked up the receiver:

“Who is it?” he asked thickly.

“Max Freund.”

“What has h-happened?” he stammered in sudden terror.

27

Over the wire came the distant reply, perfectly clear and distinct:

“Ferez Bey was arrested in his own house at dinner last evening, and was immediately conducted to the frontier, escorted by Government detectives.... Is Nihla with you?”

The Count’s teeth were chattering now. He managed to say:

“No, I don’t know where she is. She was dancing. Then, all at once, she was gone. Of what was Colonel Ferez suspected?”

“I don’t know. But perhaps we might guess.”

“Are *you* followed?”

“Yes.”

“By—by whom?”

“By Souchez.... Good-bye, if I don’t see you. I join Ferez. And look out for Nihla. She’ll trick you yet!”

The Count d’Eblis called:

“Wait, for God’s sake, Max!”—listened; called again in vain. “The one-eyed rabbit!” he panted, breathing hard and irregularly. His large hand shook as he replaced the instrument. He sat there as though paralysed, for a moment or two. Mechanically he removed his tinsel cap and thrust it into the pocket of his evening coat. Suddenly the dull hue of anger dyed neck, ears and temple: “By God!” he gasped. “What is that she-devil trying to do to me? What has she *done* !”

After another moment of staring fixedly at nothing, he opened the table drawer, picked up a pistol and poked it into his breast pocket.

Then he rose, heavily, and stood looking out of the window at the paling east, his pendulous under lip aquiver.

II

II

SUNRISE

The first sunbeams had already gilded her bedroom windows, barring the drawn curtains with light, when the man arrived. He was still wearing his disordered evening dress under a light overcoat; his soiled shirt front was still crossed by the red ribbon of watered silk; third class orders striped his breast, where also the brand new Turkish sunburst glimmered.

A sleepy maid in night attire answered his furious ringing; the man pushed her aside with an oath and strode into the semi-darkness of the corridor. He was nearly six feet tall, bulky; but his legs were either too short or something else was the matter with them, for when he walked he waddled, breathing noisily from the ascent of the stairs.

“Is your mistress here?” he demanded, hoarse with his effort.

“Y—yes, monsieur—”

“When did she come in?” And, as the scared and bewildered maid hesitated: “Damn you, answer me! When did Mademoiselle Quellen come in? I’ll wring your neck if you lie to me!”

The maid began to whimper:

“Monsieur le Comte—I do not wish to lie to you.... Mademoiselle Nihla came back with the dawn—”

“Alone?”

29

The maid wrung her hands:

“Does Monsieur le Comte m-mean to harm her?”