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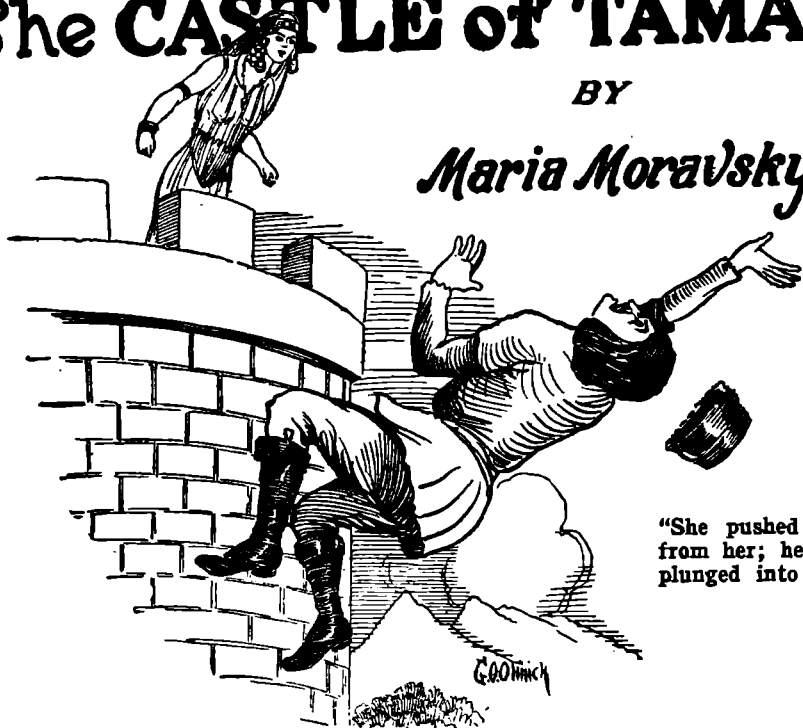
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The CASTLE of TAMARA

BY

Maria Moravsky



"She pushed him away from her; he reeled and plunged into the river."

G. O. H. M. I. C. H.

THE indolent Tartar guide, whom Rex Wilton hired to show him Caucasus, pointed his finger toward the nearest mountain peak.

"See? The Castle of Tamara."

The traveler looked in the direction of the already drooping bronze hand adorned with many cheap rings, and for a moment could not see anything because the setting sun struck the stones of those rings and played on them, awakening myriads of rainbows. Only when that blazing hand dropped, he saw the vision. It stood on a steep mountain slope, its gray towers taking on the color of old rose. Purplish mists rose from the foamy river rushing by its walls and hid its foundation. With its graceful Moorish towers silhouetted against the darkening sky, it seemed to be poised on clouds.

"Gee, it's beautiful!" the traveler cried impulsively, in unmistakable

American. Then he asked in his six-months-old Russian, "Who lives there?"

To his surprise, the guide answered in English, "A cruel lady. Haven't you heard of Princess Tamara?"

Wilton remembered the well-known Caucasian legend about the princess who would lure travelers to her castle, and after a night of passion throw the discarded victims of her fleeting favor into the river swirling below.

"I meant, who lives there now?" he asked the guide, being sure that he had mixed his tenses.

"Tamara lives there," was the amazing answer.

"She lives there now?"

"Now."

Wilton smiled tolerantly. Those people were like children in their weird beliefs. Brought up in the sober atmosphere of the New World, he

considered himself immune from such nonsense. But, as he glanced once more at the castle above, the smile faded from his ironical lips. For up there, in the tall, narrow windows, lights flashed up one after another, like large yellow stars, rivaling the pale stars above those slim towers.

"You mean the castle is occupied by her descendants?" he said persuasively, and it was partly himself whom he tried to satisfy that the guide was talking nonsense.

"No, she herself, Princess Tamara," was the obstinate answer.

"But she lived centuries ago!"

"But she lives again."

They descended the mountain path in silence. There was no use arguing with that superstitious boy. The lights of the village lying in the misty valley glittered faintly like phosphorescent fires over an unplumbed swamp.

The swish of the torrent left behind them was like an unintelligible whisper trying to convey a mystery.

The silence grew oppressive. To break its unnerving spell, Wilton asked his guide, "Sing for me, Ibrahim. Let us rest for a while on this rock, so you can take your guitar off your shoulder."

"I may sing while walking. I would not stay so near Tamara's place."

As he was unstrapping from his shoulder his precious Italian instrument, Wilton asked, "By the way, where did you learn your English?"

"In New York. I had a rug shop there."

"The business was not good? You had to return?"

"Not that. I no like New World. Everything too clear."

"Just what do you mean?"

But the boy did not answer. He plucked the strings of his guitar and

sang the popular ballad about Tamara:

"From that turret, so high and so narrow,
Fair Tamara was casting her spell,
She was fairer than angels of heaven,
She was cruel as demons of hell."

On trailed the ballad, sung in a low, indolent voice. Wilton did not understand half of the words, but their meaning was familiar. In the pale light of the rising moon, he pictured to himself the unfortunate victims of her love, how they were hurried to the cataract below, how the stormy waves mourned their death. . . . The song went on:

"Her good-bye was so sweet and so tender,
So caressing her musical voice,
You would think it was promising passion. . . ."

Wilton thought with dismay of how those Orientals delighted in descriptions of tragic love, while his guide sang about the deathly paleness of the lover's lips, the rocks tearing his body and the waves kissing his dead cheeks. He seemed to enjoy the gloomy ballad. His deep, dark eyes were fire-pools of sensuous dreams. His indolent face looked tender and more beautiful than ever. Wilton recalled the stories of the wealthy Russian ladies robbed and violated by those tender-faced Tartar guides. He wondered how such a delicate, effeminate beauty could be so savage.

THE moon rose higher, surrounded by a great opal ring. Suddenly a wind from the east dispersed the fog billowing around the castle and it could be clearly seen, proudly perched on the cliff above the waterfall. Its towers were now ominously dark, and the lights flickering in its windows were like winking eyes of the malicious mountain djinns.

"Let's return to the hotel," the American ordered, abruptly.

But it became suddenly impossible. The clouds gathered, and there followed one of those unexpected, unaccountable showers so frequent in the mountains.

It stopped almost as soon as it started, but the air, saturated with dampness, became even more misty; the moon was blotted out; they could only guess its presence by the milky color of the fog, pierced now and then by a shaft of liquid silver. It was as if the moonlight became solidified, forming a wall of mystery between them and the village below.

The guide refused to move. He sat on a stone boulder, and declared he was going to stay there until the mists cleared. The impatient American produced an electric torch and a compass.

"This will keep us from being lost," he explained to the guide.

But the boy refused to trust it. "I will not move," he said. "Something may turn the magnet the wrong way. . . ."

"Quit these infernal superstitions! You are plain lazy! Are you afraid that your witch from the castle—?"

"Please, *barin*," he pleaded, "she may hear you."

"You are a coward!"

But even the insult failed to move Ibrahim. He bent toward his companion's ear and whispered something which made the American stare incredulously.

Was the boy lying? There was no reason for it. Yet the thing seemed utterly impossible; here, in this comparatively civilized part of the Caucasus, a woman had thrown a man over the precipice and was not even tried for it.

"Why didn't they arrest her?"

"You can not arrest a witch," the boy said with deep conviction.

"Have you heard of others being killed?"

"No—she is old now. She doesn't care for lovers, I believe."

Wilton fell silent, his eyes trying to pierce the seething mists. Strange to say, after the story which he had just heard, he wanted to go there, to meet that woman. He had never had a real adventure in his life, never a wild night, not even while in college. His mother had had a weak heart, and the boy was brought up with awed consideration for her illness. It was always: "You must not do this," and "You must not do that, because it might kill mother," and this was stronger than fear of punishment. When he grew up, he still remained a model boy, always suppressing his adventurous nature, until she died, leaving him a small legacy which enabled him to take the long-desired trip around the world.

He went to Russia just because people had warned him that he should not. The possibility of dangerous, romantic happenings attracted him. But he had met with no real danger as yet, save the legal hold-ups of the hotelkeepers and guides, who proved to be the same the world over.

But here, at last, was a sense of mystery. It was absurd to believe in the reincarnation of the cruel princess who probably had never existed save in a legend. Yet he longed to believe in it, for like most of us he longed for something unusual to happen, something which he did not have to plan ahead. Now that unusual thing seemed to lurk up there in the Castle of Tamara. Yet it was absurd to invite disaster.

Forcibly he sobered himself and declared, "Well, we can't stay here all night. Since you refuse to go, I will return to the village alone."

"Oh, *barin*, don't do that!"

But Wilton would not listen to the whining boy. By now he had lost patience with his cowardly superstitions. The village was but a short

distance away, and he did not believe in witches turning the needle of the compass.

HE WALKED away, it seemed to him, in the right direction, yet half an hour passed and he did not reach the village. The road before him became steep again, rising up in curves—and he had expected to reach the valley by now! Clammy fear assaulted him, as he looked at his compass. The needle was turning restlessly like a weathercock!

"I must be near some magnetic ore," he assured himself aloud. If it were so, it was bad, but natural. "Wilton, don't be a superstitious idiot!" he upbraided himself when the other thought obtruded.

The wind blew in his direction, chasing down the mists and bringing to his ears the ever-increasing swishing of the mountain torrent. It unveiled the foamy waves, and above them Wilton saw the walls of the castle.

The view of that dark structure, glinting in the faint moonlight, was so unexpected and so somber that it filled him with awe. The castle, seen closely, lost its airy grace. It loomed solid, massive, forbidding, its gates crisscrossed with huge iron bars. The narrow mountain road leading to it seemed too steep for either horse or carriage.

"How do people communicate with the valley below?" came the involuntary thought. And, in harmony with his superstitious mood, there flashed across his mind a picture from a folk-story—a witch flying home on a broom. There seemed no other way to approach the castle, except on foot or with wings.

Yet the road proved broader than it looked in the deceitful moonlight. Presently there appeared a rider in a rain-soaked black *burka* and high white *papaha*, its glistening wet fur hanging over the rider's face. The

foam-flecked horse climbed heavily up the steep slope.

As if at a given signal, the massive gates swung open and the stranger rode in. Moved by irresistible curiosity, Wilton ran toward the slowly closing gates, and reached them just in time to push his alpine stick into the narrow slit which still remained between them.

A voice from within called hoarsely, "Who is it?"

"A stranger; I lost my way."

This was enough. Wilton knew that the unwritten law of Caucasian hospitality entitled any stranger who had lost his way to be admitted into any home in the mountains. The gates swung wide again, moaning on their hinges like a beast in torment, and the traveler found himself in the vast courtyard paved with black and white slabs of marble.

He looked around with curiosity. The strange rider who had preceded him had disappeared as if removed from the scene by a stroke of a magic wand. He caught only a glimpse of the servant leading away the foaming horse.

Another servant, a broad-shouldered Georgian with a wasplike waist, approached him and politely invited him "to enter the *sakla* and accept shelter and food." Wilton followed him into a large hall, lighted only by the logs burning in a cavernous fireplace. As soon as he seated himself comfortably on a bearskin-covered bench, there entered a stout lady in black with a veil hanging from her traditional Georgian headgear resembling a narrow crown. The veil was thrown off her face and covered her graying hair.

She looked at him benignly with her languorous black eyes, the only remains of her faded beauty, and asked, "May I know your name, most welcome stranger?"

After Wilton answered, adding that he was lost during his descent into the valley, she nodded her head indifferently, as if there was nothing unexpected in a man's being lost within sight of his destination.

"The fogs and the magic stones," she explained; her voice was unusually musical for an old woman.

Wilton interpreted the "magic stones" as the magnetic ore, the existence of which he had blamed for the queer behavior of his compass. After all there was nothing mysterious in the lady's manner. She must have sheltered many a strayed traveler before; then why should she be surprized? he argued with himself. But unreasonable insidious thoughts crawled into his reasoning; what if the meeting was—arranged?

"Wilton, don't be a superstitious idiot!" he upbraided himself again.

His hostess clapped her hands. Two boys entered noiselessly like apparitions. Wilton knew it was their felt boots which made them glide so noiselessly, yet there was something uncanny about their catlike steps.

An order was delivered in a strange tongue, and, almost instantly after the boys disappeared, his nostrils caught the appetizing smell of a broiled *shahlyk*. It seemed as if his appearance was the signal for supper, as if the hostess waited expressly for him.

She made him a sign to resume his seat, which he had left at her entrance, and slumped heavily on the bench opposite. Instantly the watchful servant pushed a little footstool under her feet, which was scarcely visible under the heavy silk skirt. Her hands went to her bosom and she took from it a Mohammedan rosary made of amber, with a shining golden bead on its tassel end, and started fingering it absently.

"And now tell me where do you come from and who are your parents."

It was just a formal question of politeness, for she listened with a detached air. As he was answering her briefly, he could not help asking himself: was she bored by his explanation or had she known it all in advance?

Catching himself thinking weird thoughts again, Wilton concluded that the Caucasus "went to his head."

The servants brought in the tasty *shahlyk*, broiled on silver skillets, and offered it to him and his hostess on the same large plate. They also brought native bread, long, soft, flat, which one could roll like a piece of heavy fabric. His hostess ate it, tearing little pieces from the whole roll.

He looked at her pudgy fingers with beautiful fingernails and wondered against his will if this was the reincarnation of the woman to whom the legend ascribed the love murders. If so, her second life was nearing its decline. This overripe bosom, this craped face, he thought, could not lure men any longer. He wanted to laugh at his guide's notion that this benign elderly woman in chaste black dress was a dangerous enchantress.

His hunger appeased, his thoughts clarified, he bid his hostess a thankful good-night and briskly followed a servant whom she sent to show him his room, situated up the narrow stairs, in an octagonal tower. After the servant left, the self-invited guest began to undress rapidly, feeling too tired even to observe his surroundings.

He took off one of his muddy shoes and stiffened, holding it in his hand, his attention arrested by low melodious singing. He heard the gentle strumming of a *zurna* accompany the unintelligible foreign words. He could not understand

them, but it was unmistakably a song of love.

Its languor, its insidious sweetness, the longing it awakened, reminded him of the less tender but equally passionate air sung by his guide.

So this was how the witch attracted her victims! His critical mind surrendered. The night, the strange surroundings, the weariness of his journey, all conspired to make him succumb to the waves of superstition which haunt the air of Caucasus. He listened, listened hungrily, longing to see the singer. Could it really be his hostess singing? Could an old woman possess such a voice?

He again drew on his muddy shoe and laced it absent-mindedly, still listening to the languorous song. As it died out, a window was opened one flight below—he heard its shutters strike the stone wall. Something like a beating of heavy bat's wings flapped against the window glass. Then he heard musical laughter, young, yet somehow sadly forced. The window-frame shook, the glass trembled. . . His curiosity aroused beyond endurance, Wilton ran to the window and looked out.

Below, in the uncertain light of the mist-veiled moon, he saw a black form dangling from the window ledge. He shrank back, terrified. In a flash he recalled the stranger who had ridden into the castle just before him. Sudden conclusion made his heart contract with horror and pity. That stranger was being thrown out of the tower window, just as the ballad had it.

Then why did he not cry for help? Was he too proud or too desperate?

Wilton did not consider for long. His natural chivalry aroused, he was bending out of the window before he knew it, shouting, "Hold out, fellow; help is coming!"

He snatched a sheet from his bed, tore it in two, tying the parts in a secure marine knot, fastened one end to the hook of the shutter and easily swung down the improvised line, trying to reach the black form now plastered helplessly against the wall.

As he steadied himself enough to grasp the hanging form, the swiftly passing clouds unveiled the moon, and in its full light Wilton saw a wet *burka* hung out to dry.

He felt that he had made himself utterly ridiculous with his attempts to save that comical cloak dripping with rain. He wanted to retreat as soon as possible, but could not climb back. He had seen it done so neatly in the "movies," but in real life it required unusual strength. He felt that if he did not reach the window below he would have to let go and then— He heard the mountain river swishing below his feet. The wind swayed his body rapidly and made him dizzy.

He could lift himself only to the level of the window. Fortunately, it was open. In the faint light of an image lamp burning in the distant corner, he saw a woman's figure with a *zurna* on her lap.

He was ashamed to disturb her, yet he had to do so, as his strength was ebbing fast. He made the last desperate effort and succeeded in climbing a little higher up his line. His feet were now touching the window ledge. He stepped on it with a sigh of relief. Instantly he heard a piercing shriek.

Jumping in, he approached the screaming figure with rambling words of explanation. Luminous black eyes widened with horror stared at him from the ghastly pale face.

It was not the face of his hostess. To be sure, there was a resemblance: the eyes were the same. But her features, although distorted with horror, were beautiful, and the fig-

ure shrinking away from him was slim like a young palm. As she sprang to her feet, her tightly plaited black hair tumbled down her back like a great glistening snake.

"I beg your pardon," he repeated, again and again, "I did not mean to intrude."

His soothing voice calmed her somewhat and she consented to listen to his explanations, huddled back into her rattan chair, pressing her *zurna* to her breast as if it were a weapon of defense. Her slim brown hands trembled and the instrument gave a plaintive sound as she nervously jerked at its strings.

"But how could you take my *burka* for a man? Why should a man hang out of the window?" she asked at last, still suspicious.

He gave no answer. How could he tell her the truth? His wild thoughts about a man being hurled out of the window by a witch seemed to him now utterly incredible. He could not bring himself to confess them.

She looked at him long and searchingly. Then a somber smile stirred her face. That smile made her look suddenly older. Only now he noticed a gray lock among the heavy black waves of her hair.

"So you, too, have heard about that?"

Still he stood silent, his head bent low, ashamed to look into her face. It was a sweetly sad face, kindly and trustful, now that she had accepted his explanation. How could anyone suspect such an innocent-looking, frightened little woman of premeditated murder?

"I would not be surprized if a Caucasian believed the silly story. But you, an American!"

"How do you know I am an American?"

"My aunt told me. Do sit down, now that you are here." She pushed toward him a little padded footstool.

"She would think me compro-

mised if she saw you here. But I don't mind. It is ages since I saw a new face; the solitude here drives me mad! It's several years since——"

She stopped abruptly, her beautiful eyes widened again as if she saw a ghost.

"She came to live with me since my father died. She doesn't care for the mountaineers' superstitions and is surprized at nothing. She seems to take everything for granted. This is because she is so very primitive. When I was young I thought it was because she is so very wise."

"But you are young!" he protested.

"I am twenty-six. An old age for a Georgian woman. I gave up marriage. None would marry a witch."

Again she smiled, bewitchingly.

"They think me a reincarnation of Princess Tamara. They say I can grow old and young at will." She laughed forcedly. "Ridiculous, isn't it? Unfortunately, my name is also Tamara."

She fell silent, her smooth forehead crossed by a frown.

"Now that they think the worst of me," she continued in a plaintive, musical voice, "I don't care what I do. I prance on horseback until late into the night, alone, in men's clothes. I saw you entering the castle after me."

"Riding up that steep slippery road! You might have killed yourself!"

As he said this he looked at her small hands, at the delicate oval of her face, into her eyes of a timid doe, and wondered how such a woman could "prance on horseback."

"You might have killed yourself," he repeated, and felt a painful contraction of the heart at the very thought of it. That strange woman, with her childlike face and wisp of gray hair over her left temple, was

rapidly arousing in him unusual tenderness.

"I could not! Nothing could happen to a witch!"

"Please, stop reproaching me for my stupid notions, and tell me how it happened that people began to believe it. Some strange misunderstanding, no doubt. A guide in the village told me——"

He stopped abruptly; it would be cruel to repeat to her Ibrahim's story.

"He told you that I killed a man," she supplemented. "Quite right!"

Her face took on hard grimness. Her gentleness was gone.

"He was a guide who taught me to ride on horseback. He was very drunk that day; he insulted me. I had to fight for my honor. He followed me to the flat tower roof . . . my father and his servants were on a big hunt, and I hated to cry for help to my women. I pushed him away from me; he reeled and plunged into the river. Before he died, he told the priest who ministered to his departing soul—what you have heard. Such a vengeance!"

They were both silent. The sky outside darkened as if saddened by the tragic story. The moon disappeared, the rain began pouring again.

"Ah, it is good to tell it to an outsider, to one who is not obsessed with those insane beliefs! This is Asia, old Asia I am living in! As stuffy with legends as it was thousands of years ago. It was cruel of my father to educate me abroad and then to seclude me in this hole!"

Her eyes blazed with indignation. Without realizing it, Wilton laid his hand on her shoulder to calm her. His sympathy and tenderness became tinted with a warmer feeling.

"They made my life miserable. Children hoot after me when I come to the village. My father—he was a very influential man here—had hushed the affair, and I was not even

brought to trial, partly because the man was a Tartar guide, and they are hated here. Maybe it would be better if I were tried. As it is . . . that bloody veil of mystery about me! It suffocates me!"

Her voice broke. She was sobbing now, sobbing pitifully like an abused child. Imperceptibly her head rested on his shoulder. It was warm and scented with the roses of Shiraz. Her soft body, not bound by any corset, swayed gently against his. Struggling through the sympathetic pity, there arose in him intense desires. . . He wanted to silence those sobs with kisses.

"It is wonderful!" he whispered hotly. "Wonderful that I found you!"

All his life he had had dreams which he deemed foolish, dreams about finding his love in some distant land, rescuing her from distress, as is told in romantic books. And now that the meeting was realized, it seemed a vision.

"You, such a gentle flower, in these jungles! I will take you away from here. They do not believe in witches in my country."

"Oh, do you mean it? Do take me away!"

"Would you go? Would you trust me?"

"Go with you? Why, yes! You are the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me! Would I trust you? Let me look at your face! You—you look like Saint George, the dragon-killer, the patron saint of Georgia."

She looked into his large, deep-set blue eyes, stroking indolently his high forehead with light wet curls plastered to it; she lightly touched with her finger his broad, generous mouth. She admired every feature of that face, so spiritual in comparison with the full-lipped, swarthy men of her race.

"You look like Saint George," she repeated.

Suddenly the door-knob shook, and they heard the muffled sounds of retreating steps. Tamara looked around dazedly like one awakened from a dream.

"Why did I tell you all this? Why? It was shameless of me, shameless! Please go away. I am afraid, servants were spying. . ."

Gently she shook his hand from her shoulder.

"I am a lost one, anyhow," she whispered; "I shouldn't care. But my aunt. . . She would be furious if she saw a man in my room."

Reluctantly he turned to the door. She stopped him.

"Oh, no! I just heard steps there. They may be watching still. Can't you go through the window?"

Dubiously he looked out. The rain still lashed the castle walls, the gusts of wind were shaking the shutters. It would be a heroic stunt to go out this way. Well, was he not wishing for an adventure? A dangerous adventure? Here it was, mocking him.

Knowing that he was about to do a foolish, a neck-breaking thing, he braced himself to refuse. Yet one look into those languid eyes, those appealing lips breathing sweeter than the roses of Shiraz, and his mind was made up. An instinct stronger than that of self-preservation prompted him to smile assuredly.

"Certainly, I will go through the window—if you kiss me."

There was a commotion at the door. The girl turned her flushed face toward him. Her lips were parted expectantly.

HE KISSED her so long and so hard that her lips bled. Yet she smiled beatifically through her tear-stained eyes, repeating caressingly words in a foreign tongue, the words

which, he felt, were endearments. Absurdly he remembered lines from the ballad:

"Her words were so sweet and so tender,
So caressing her musical voice,
You would think it was promising passion. . ."

The remembrance was ominous, but he chased it away.

The door shook on its hinges as if forced by a hurricane.

The woman rose to her feet. Her body rigid, her face grave, she appeared taller and older.

"She will kill me if she finds you here. Such a disgrace! Oh, good-bye, beloved!"

She pushed him toward the window. As he was feeling for the rope line, clammy with dampness, and grasped it, he heard the door open. Swiftly he jumped out and hung, swayed by the wind.

He tried to climb upward, but could not. The wind was too strong and his muscles strangely tired as if the long moments of passion had exhausted their strength. He remained there, lashed by the rain, listening with sinking heart to the stormy torrent below, asking himself how long he could endure it.

Tamara stood at the window, watching him, whispering: "If you can't climb up, jump down!"

At first he thought that his ears deceived him. To jump down into that torrent which he could hear roaring below! The woman who had just called him "beloved" was ordering him to leap to certain death!

Again he heard her saying, this time louder: "Jump down!"

Her face peered at him from the surrounding gloom, unearthly beautiful, a wistful, sweet face, looking like a mystic vision which blossomed out of the fog. The light behind her made her raven hair shine like a

dark halo. He recalled the words from the ballad:

"She was fairer than angels of heaven,
She was cruel as demons of hell."

In that moment he believed everything that Ibrahim had told him. The woman was a witch. He believed it fully, desperately, as he saw her closing the window, deliberately locking him out.

His hands tightened on the rope line, he decided to wait until the intruders left her room, then break the window and force his way back.

He peered within, trying to blink off the drops of rain clinging to his eyelashes. But he could see only a blur of strong light and dim figures moving through it. It was like a moving picture film out of focus. He heard the angry voice of his hostess booming on and on. When she came nearer the window, he caught the words:

"I don't believe you. You must have invited him into your room. No one heard you crying for help. You are as bad as they say. I wouldn't be surprised if you were really a witch! I am leaving you, hear me? Live here alone, you do not need a decent woman to protect you any longer, you hussy!"

With that she left the room, stamping heavily, her women servants following her.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Tamara opened the window. When Wilton scrambled in, she said appealingly, "My aunt is enraged; she wants to leave me here alone! Will you go to her, my beloved, and ask my hand in marriage?"

He was speechless with amazement and rage. To ask such a thing of him, after she had wanted him to be killed! He had an impulse to swear, to strike her.

Restraining himself, he said witheringly, "You don't imagine I am

going to marry you, after you wanted to kill me?"

She flew toward him with a faltering cry. "To kill you, my clear-eyed falcon! How can you say such a thing?"

The hypocrisy of the woman seemed to him appalling. He had to go away, or he would strike her. His hand on the door-knob, he turned his head scornfully. "Didn't you ask me to jump down?" he accused her.

"Yes, I did. But——"

He opened the door, and the squeaking of its hinges drowned the rest of her sentence. Her voice, until now pitifully low, grew desperately loud.

"Listen! Don't go! I will explain!"

"I will not listen to any explanations! You are a liar! If you are not a witch, then you are a heartless, cruel woman!"

He was already on the other side of the door. He was shaken with rage when thinking that a short while ago he believed in her explanations of the murder. That bewitching voice held no more appeal for him.

"I loathe you!" he cried, slamming the door after him.

He heard her muffled cry: "You don't believe me! You hate me! Then look!"

Against his will, he was moved to open the door. Bewildered, he saw her jumping out of the window.

Dazedly he approached it and bent over the void filled with crawling fog. The rain had ceased, the moon had set, the mists below grew milky white, lighted by the promise of dawn. For a while, nothing was heard from below save the steady swish-swash of the torrent. Then Tamara's voice, more appealing than ever, sounded through the fog.

"Leap—leap down, beloved!"

His head went dizzy. After the sleepless night, those swift changes from horror to love, from love to rage, his brain was fagged. The melodious voice sounding through the milky mists once more swayed his heart. There could be no danger in that call. He felt irresistibly drawn toward it, down, down, to join her. . . She could not have called from the bottom of the torrent. She called to love and safety.

Only when his feet were already slipping off the window ledge, he recalled with frenzy of new suspicions the tales about the sirens who lured the sailors to their doom, down into the waves, to be dashed against the rocks.

Once again he heard her call. Then his head struck against something hard and he lost consciousness.

WHEN he opened his eyes, his head was lying on her lap, his temples bathed with some fragrant lotion. The sun shone over the dispersing mists, and the air was filled with vanishing rainbows. He looked dazedly around, and saw they were in a small garden, only a few paces away from the roaring torrent but separated from it by a high fence of grilled iron. Little rock-flowers, the color of dawn, trailed down beyond the bars, like wistful prisoners longing for their freedom.

He looked up, and the happenings of last night became suddenly clear to him. For the window from which he had jumped was but a few feet from the ground.

Shamefacedly he met the great luminous eyes of "the witch." Her

face, wan, pale and suffering, bent over his.

"I was so afraid," she said. "You wouldn't open your eyes for so long. . . You had struck your head against the edges of the fountain."

Only now he saw the little round fountain playing among the water-lilies. Its marble basin was broken by the storm, and the water trickled out of it, running along the narrow flagstone path to join the waves raging below that secluded, flower-scented spot.

"But—hadn't he—hadn't that man leapt from there to his death?"

"Why, not from this tower. Do you think I could bear living here afterward? That wing is on the very brink of the torrent. The entrance has been nailed up; no one has entered it since the accident. Servants say demons live there."

At any other time he would have laughed at their superstitions; now, after he had been a victim of equally fantastic beliefs, he did not feel like scorning anyone's wild notions. Instead, he asked gently:

"Will you forgive me and go away from here, with me, away from witches and demons?"

She laughed tenderly.

"There are no devils here, only the bad will of the people. But I would go with you even to the top of the Witch Mountain."

He looked admiringly at her clear young face uplifted toward the sun sailing above the morning mists, and the heavy darkness rolled off his mind as if the sunshine reached its depths, chasing away the mists of superstition.

