

## THE LAST DAYS OF ATLANTIS (According to Dahéla's Manuscript)

### *I. The Ship*

The Little Chariot, at the lowest point of its course, immeasurably magnified, was almost touching the horizon. In the eleven moons since they had quit the beach of Erm-gilt-Herm at the mouth of the Broad River, Argall's companions had watched the familiar constellations of the Polar stars descend thus, one after another, and sink into the sea. At the same time, on the far edge of the sky, unknown stars had risen, the appearance of which plunged them into long reveries and led to endless discussions between them.

Argall and Maghée, although forewarned, were also astonished, the latter with a hint of anxiety—for Maghée, who was very prudent, readily thought about peril. When the peril appeared to him to be inevitable, he threw himself at it furiously, and no one then had ever seen him retreat or let go; but Argall smiled at the most terrible adventures, or yawned lightly, as impassive as a young god.

Argall having lost his own mother at birth, Maghée's mother, Dahéla, had nursed them both together. She was a slave from the south; years of walking had used up her childhood; her beauty seemed singular to that tribe of blonde giants, living by hunting and fishing in the grottos of the Red Rocks and under the huts at the mouth of the Broad River. Her skin had the pale gold hue of flecks of mica shining in the sand. Her somber onyx eyes, her mouth gleaming with nacre and blood, and her hair, which, when spread out, enveloped him with darkness, had seduced Maghée's father, the foremost in the clan after Argall's grandfather. He bought her from the merchants who came every two or three summers to propose exchanges with the people of Erm-gilt-Herm. He had paid thirty reindeer and blue fox pelts for her, and a handful of yellow amber grains brought back from a distant land in the direction where the sun rises, a region of low coasts where the sea-water is less salty—for Maghée's father was an intrepid voyager himself.

She soon learned the language of the tribe but she did not show any taste for women's work: the drying and preparation of pelts, and the division of animal tendons into thin threads for the sewing of winter garments. Her new master chastised her harshly several times. She clenched her teeth under the blows and wept in silence for hours on end; but the corrections were futile; the warrior renounced them; he had other slaves for the necessary work. Dahéla spent her time as she wished, sad or smiling, at her whim. And although he could easily have found a more useful companion, or even a more affectionate one, it was noticeable that he became more attached to her from day to day, for that is the way that the hearts of men are made.

In any case, Dahéla loved her son tenderly, and Argall too, whose mother had died immediately after his birth; she had given birth to him in mourning, the father having drowned in a storm with his boat and eight rowers.

The two little ones grew up together, nourished on the same milk, playing and fighting like two wolf-cubs on the same litter. They did not resemble one another, though; Maghée's short stature appeared to broaden his shoulders immeasurably, whereas Argall, at sixteen, was half a head taller than any of his companions. Furthermore, Maghée had the black hair and dark eyes of his mother Dahéla.

Maghée was the first to carry the Stone, a massive block on which the people of Erm-gilt-Herm sharpened their flint tools, and which weighed as much as two men. The young men lifted it up, in their sixteenth year, to affirm their nascent vigor; the most robust, thus laden, walked a few steps, but it was necessary to take care on the way back; those who dropped the Stone were mocked for their presumption. Argall did not attempt the trial until three moons after Maghée, but he carried the block seven steps further and came back to set it down without haste. Maghée was perhaps better built then, but he did not try it; that was an adolescent proof which they disdained to repeat.

When they wrestled with firm feet, Maghée often came out on top, but in games that simulated combat, as in real battles, neither he nor anyone else could stand up to Argall.

For that and the long habit of being together, they loved one another as brothers and counted on one another.

One further particularity united them: when they were very small, Dahéla had lulled them with the songs of her people, and they had gradually learned her language, so different from the northern dialects that it seemed to them, when they spoke it, that they were thinking with a different soul. Ideas awoke in them with they would not have been able to translate into the simple idiom of the people of Erm-gilt-Herm. Many words retained a vague meaning, signifying unknown things, all the more marvelous for it. Legends and tales mingled the north and the south, rocks and palaces, phantoms of the mist and mirages of the light, monstrous fishes, extraordinary hunts, visions of women with prodigious adornments, so beautiful than imagining them made their adolescent hearts feel faint.

Dahéla had been sold when very young, not yet nubile—perhaps twelve years old—for some mysterious reason of vengeance or politics, for she was surely from a noble family and very carefully educated. She had been taught dancing, music, poetry, and even writing, with hundreds of signs whose combinations expressed all things. The people of Erm-gilt-Herm scarcely knew how to transmit or conserve by means of a few gross designs a very limited number of ideas: matters of hunting or war, and the magic formulae that rendered arrows inoffensive or guided them to an enemy's heart.

Those talents, and her nascent beauty, made her a slave of such great value that they wondered how she had managed to arrive at the mouth of the Broad River, through so many richer nations. But she had revolted furiously, at the age of fifteen or thereabouts, against one of her first masters, a brutal old man who bloodied her with a lash, leaving her for dead, and, as an animal reputed to be untamable loses almost all its value, she had been resold at a derisory price to the northern traders who had ceded her to Maghée's father for thirty reindeer and blue fox pelts and a handful of yellow amber.

Thus, the two young men learned the language and dreamed of the splendors of Atlantis.

No matter how wild a heath was, nor how profound a valley, unless none of its inhabitants had ever crossed its limits, and no stranger had entered it within living memory, as a guest or an enemy, the people who lived there in age-old forests and ancestral caverns, when the time came in long evenings around the fire to tell stories, always ended up pronouncing the name of that fabulous city, that scarcely-human people, lost in the burning seas, with extraordinary mores, incalculable wealth and irresistible weapons.

Many almost doubted its existence, but from time to time, among the stone axes and narwhal-ivory lances, an opulent chief or a famous warrior, on great days, displayed the scintillating broad blade of an Atlantean sword, inherited from his ancestors or conquered in some battle. Merchants sometimes brought them, but at unaffordable process, unless there was some extremely beautiful captive, respected by her abductor, who could be exchanged for the virgin blade with the blue-tinted gleam, invincible and, it was said, feared even by the gods.

Argall's grandfather and Maghée's father each possessed one of those swords, with a narrow hand-grip, forged from a bronze as bright as gold. The people of Erm-gilt-Herm were proud of them, the honor of them reflecting on the whole tribe.

They were not entirely unaware of the utilization of metals. In the fissures of the Red Rocks, small masses of native copper were found from time to time. They knew how to melt them in the hollow of a stone under a pyre of pine-branches, and the cooled mass, hammered out, provided axes that were not as hard as flint but less brittle and more apt for delicate work. There were also, two days march away along a route known to the chiefs, five blocks of iron of unknown origin. Some believed that they had fallen from the sky. Fragments could be dislodged from them to be forged between stones. Those splinters, although too small to provide axes or blades, furnished arrow-heads and short daggers, sometimes excellent, which their possessors wore in their belts in leather sheaths.

In the eighteenth winter that followed the Argall's birth his grandfather died. Maghée's father became chief, without contest. The following spring, however, he suddenly died after a short illness, in spite of Dahéla's care and magical conjurations. Argall and Maghée thus became masters of their own destiny.

There was no lack of young women ready to share their hut, whose parents would gladly have ceded them, for a reasonable price, to such hunters, but the beach of Erm-gilt-Herm, the Red Rocks and the two banks of the Broad River, within a radius of weeks, had no more secrets for them. They had become bored with always living in the same place. In addition, the government of the tribe was about to become uneasy; there had never been a chief younger than twenty years, but, on the other hand, no one but Argall could hope, while he was present, to make the young men obey him. The old men were already talking at length about that matter around the fire, or fell silent, shaking their heads, in anticipation of imminent misfortunes. For their part, without saying anything, Argall and Maghée were thoughtful. One evening, their gazes met, and they felt that they were of one mind.

"Tomorrow," said Maghée, "we'll speak to the council."

"If you wish."

It was Maghée who spoke.

He talked about the awkward situation, the necessity of a chief who was obeyed. For generations, Argall's ancestors or his own had commanded. Now, of those illustrious families, only they remained, two very young men, almost children, women never being admitted to the council, where Dahéla, originally a slave, could not even be heard.

Argall, pensively, kept silent. That modesty pleased the old men.

However, so many memories could not be abolished; the glory of heroes was already shining on the brothers in arms; any other chief risked having his orders scorned if they were contrary to their opinion. Already the young men were forming a party, openly criticizing the resolutions of their elders. The tribe had been living peacefully for years; its members were numerous, to the point that several risked lacking wives. That would cause quarrels to break out. They could not be wary enough of such misfortunes.

A murmur of approval saluted Maghée's precocious wisdom, but no one could see as yet where his speech was going.

"All that a man, a warrior, can do in this land," he continued, "our fathers have done. Our hearts are avid for unknown perils and new glory. There is, as you know, a marvelous country where gold and iron are as common as reindeer antlers and narwhal ivory are among us, where the arms of the humblest warrior would be worth a king's ransom here. That country exists, since my mother came from there, and Argall and I know its language. It is governed by a queen of supernatural beauty, ever young, who does not die."

A few old men shook their heads. Around the council circle, a larger circle had formed. The warriors and adolescents were listening.

"Argall and I are going to construct a boat for twenty rowers. Those who want to can come with us. Those who stay will no longer lack space in the grottos of the Red Rocks, nor wives to maintain their fires. Whatever becomes of those of us who leave, I can promise you this: we shall not tarnish the good renown of the people of Erm-gilt-Herm."

Not all the old men were convinced. Several thought that the tribe would be significantly weakened by the departure of so many of its sons. Those who had daughters to sell were already calculating their losses. But in the pressed ranks of the young men, acclamations burst forth.

"Take me!"

"Take us!"

Hands were extended, breasts were beaten. There were threatening exchanges of words and daggers drawn from their sheaths, for it was obvious that they could not all go.

But Argall raised his voice: "Maghée and I will make our choice, and those who imagine that they can impose themselves by violence are mistaken. I shall only take those who shut up and obey!"

Silence fell, for the young men had recognized the speech of a chief. The old men, privately weighing up the pros and cons, withdrew their objections in order to avoid greater evils.

The next day, in the forest, the axes went to work.

The trees were chosen carefully; it was not only a matter of felling them and stripping their branches, it was necessary that the faultless trunks could be split straight down the middle, from end to end, under the effort of tools of polished stone, greased with seal-fat and embedded with wooden mallets. Twelve

appropriate fir-trees were found. Of medium girth, they measured about four cubits around, to the height of a man. Three, which broke falsely, had to be rejected after much labor; the other nine each furnished two beams, which were curved with the aid of fire under long braziers of dry branches. The sap and the resin ran out together; acrid smoke flew away in the wind; the laborers worked in relays day and night for fear of missing the propitious moment. When a hot beam threatened to catch fire, twenty robust arms seized it by the ends, deliberately left out of the fire, slid it between two trees for a third of its length, and brought the other extremity back forcefully until it described a quarter of a circle. Fibers burst on the side of the bark, torn away in long strips, but the true heartwood, hardened by sixty winters, remained as sound as an aurochs horn, whose curvature it retained when cooled. The edges were evened out very carefully with little blows of copper axes.

A thirteenth fir-tree furnished the keel. That one was a hundred cubits high; two men embracing it could hardly touch their fingertips. Fire was required to fell it, and it was a rude task to drag it to the foot of the Red Rocks, even though it was sliced through the middle. Fire was employed once again to prepare the mortises of the stern-post, the stem and the riders, which were carved in oak, easier to find in curved pieces. Oaks were scarce in the vicinity of Erm-gilt-Herm; they took on all kinds of bizarre forms there, and were extraordinarily hard.

Toward the end of winter the hull was finished. It measured fifty cubits from end to end. Argall's hand, raised against its side, scarcely passed two thirds of its height. Inside, under the planks of the deck, a warrior could walk at his ease. No similar vessel had ever caused the sea in the region of the Broad River to quiver under its prow.

The interstices of the planks were plugged with lichen and wolf-skins saturated with grease and rein. Maghée melted and forged personally two heavy copper rings in which the stem of the tiller moved. If it broke down, two holes at the rear permitted the employment of steering oars. Ten others on each side allowed the oars to pass through for calm weather. The mast was made from a young larch and the two sails of fish-skin.

Putting such a mass into the water appeared difficult, but Maghée had a plan. The end of winter was the epoch of snowstorms; one morning the beach was covered with a white carpet into which one sank knee-deep. That evening, not without hard labor, a sloping causeway extended from the boat to the sea, slightly hollowed out in the middle, carefully beaten, which the nocturnal cold would harden even more. The sun, gathering strength every day, only melted the surface. It became so slippery that children let themselves slide down it, crouched on their heels, with their arms in the air, with shrill cries, all the way to a snowdrift at the very end, which did not always retain them. Those icy baths were so habitual to them that they resumed the game almost as soon as they were out of the water, shaking themselves like wet dogs.

Eventually, there was a very cold clear night, and the jetty seemed as solid as a granite cliff.

At a signal from Maghée, two young men removed the final stays with hammer-blows, freeing the enormous hull. It shuddered, slid over the snow, descending with increasing rapidity toward the sea, where the spray of foam hid it momentarily. Some thought that it had been broken or sunk, but it reappeared, floating without encumbrance; a cheer went up.

Nine more weeks were spent in preparations. Dahéla, resigned from the start, hiding her anxieties under an air of mysterious security, completed instructing her son and Argall with a view to the voyage they were about to undertake. She confided to them the last essential secrets that still ensured her prestige within the tribe. The sea, the stars, the Atlantean language, curative balms and lethal incantations: she had informed them of everything that might serve for their victory. Then, dissimulating all her dolor, she awaited the departure of the two heroes by talking to them about their return.

When the time came that dawn and dusk were confused, Argall announced the departure for three days hence.

They were thirty, under him and Maghée. The youngest had carried the Stone the previous autumn. Each of them had his spear, his shield, a sword or ax of flint or bronze, and a five-cubit bow in yew-wood, with which the people of Erm-gilt-Herm launched half-brass arrows that transpierced a wolf at thirty paces. Except for their weapons and clothing they had given everything to those who were staying

behind, sure of returning rich, if they returned, or considering themselves as already dead, departed for the great voyage of souls. Only a few accepted in exchange some precious jewel, an amber or cornelian amulet, but of gold or silver there was not even a ring for a little finger, for it was to the land of gold that they were going, and to take the metal with them might have offended fortune.

There was a feast, during which night fell twice, of meat, fish and bread of several kinds. Old men talked untiringly; young women, while serving the guests, wiped their eyes furtively, not wanting to show their tears to those who would be their masters tomorrow when the others had gone. They drank the fermented juice of certain berries, reindeer milk sharpened in goatskins, hydromel, and even wine brought by the merchants in earthenware jars in lands so distant that it took three years to travel there and back. Dahéla refused grimly to take part in the farewells of the last evening; after having hugged her two sons to her heart, she ran to shut herself away in the hut where she carried out propitiatory rituals, somewhat apart from the rest of the tribe. Argall did not hide a tear as he watched her leave; Maghée, frowning, held back his own.

The voyagers packed up the remains of the feast the following day, which would supply them for several days.

At first they used their oars, ten to each side, a third of the crew resting, while Argall or Maghée held the tiller. The boat, being so heavy, made slow progress, but it was caught by a current and borne out to sea, and, the wind seeming favorable, they hoisted the sails sowed with reindeer tendons and hemmed with hide thongs. The sea foamed under the stem. The beach of Erm-gilt-Herm lost its form, becoming no more than a gray patch between the glaucous expanse and the immense verdure of the forests. Soon, before dusk, it was no longer visible.

From that moment on, following custom, Argall was no longer called anything but Dhu Hern, or the Chief. He would take back his name on some day of battle or adventure, to the memory of which it would remain attached. His ancestors had made themselves illustrious in that fashion. The stories were still told around the fires of the combat of Marghael, the great hunt of Kimmi, the rescue of Gheres and many others.

Maghée thought about those things, with his hand on the tiller, beneath the star-strewn sky, watching alone, to the profound murmur of the placid waves, over his sleeping companions.

To begin with, they set sail toward the sunset, and then turned due south with a propitious wind, following the land to their left at a considerable distance, so long as they had food and water. When the latter became scarce they drew nearer to the coast, looking for the mouth of a river, dropped anchor—a heavy stone—or allowed themselves to run aground at low tide in some tranquil inlet. In any case, their boat, so robust, had little fear of impacts. On land, they hunted, and as the lines, with their hooks shaped from seashells, were always trailing behind them as they progressed, there was no lack of nourishment.

They encountered villages, but the inhabitants, timid and not very numerous, having seen them from afar, had fled; what they left behind was not worth pillaging. In any case, Argall forbade looting.

Once, they had land in view on both sides, in the form of high white cliffs. The strait was known to them by tradition. In a matter of hours, the sea broadened out again; they were truly entering the unknown.

The rapid decrease of the days surprised them. One might have thought it the approach of winter if the noonday sun had not, on the contrary, acquired more ardor. Squalls of wind obliged them to take refuge on land several times. Another, more sudden, forced them to flee eastwards, then southwards, and finally in an unknown direction, because the sun could no longer be detected. They were almost dying of hunger and thirst. A torrential rain brought them relief. The sky cleared and they saw land.

They disembarked at the mouth of a river. Humans lived there—an entire tribe—who greeted them with arrows. They came to grips, and at the first shock the local inhabitants fled, howling like whipped dogs. But Maghée saw them coming back from far away, so numerous that they were bound to triumph in the end. At the very least they risked leaving the best part of the crew there, and uselessly, because they had all the booty they needed: goats, sheep and a few women, taken by surprise in the initial abrupt attack. They re-embarked.

Then, near another village, they succeeded in making themselves understood by signs. The women were exchanged for more sheep; they were beginning to console themselves, and becoming all the more of a hindrance. Two or three were pretty, but Argall did not deign to notice.

They were still traveling southwards, sailing day and night when the weather was favorable. Months had gone by. The people of Erm-gilt-Herm would be in the middle of winter, but they, although the nights were a little longer than the days, could scarcely tolerate their summer garments. At midday, their bodies no longer projected a shadow. The sun became so hot that bare skin, unable to tolerate it, blistered as if burned. Thirst devoured them, and even going along the shore, several days often passed without their sighting a stream.

Frequent baths soothed them, but monstrous fish followed the boat. Two swimmers, caught by them, disappeared in a redness that was glimpsed and vanished. Three other rowers had remained on land, killed at a distance by slingshots at the foot of a cliff where round huts sheltered men the color of burnt wood.

Further on, near an excellent spring, they were surprised by an enormous animal, with a short tawny pelt and a darker mane, which felled Pergast, the best helmsman, at the first impact, and then placed a paw as broad as two hands on his belly, with a cry that made their entrails quiver. Fortunately, several of them had their bows, and the wounds it received from either side, caused it to hesitate, even though it was furious. It leapt, scratched Maghée with a thrust of its claw from the left shoulder to the elbow, marking him for life with a bloody line, fortunately not very deep. Dahéla's son, wounded, plunged his sword into the beast's flank all the way to the hilt. They finished it off from a distance, because it was still struggling, redoubtably.

The skin was found to be seven cubits long. Pergast was buried honorably.

After that, a wind swelled their sail, strong and steady, which caused them to lose sight of land for days on end. It was blowing from the north-east, unhurriedly but incessantly, like the breath of an indefatigable giant. The sky remained clear, the sea calm. There was scarcely any need to steer. The only provisions they had left were a little barley and other grains found in a coastal village where they had been welcomed kindly. The fishing was still abundant, but their water was diminishing in the jars, even though they had filled them up at the last spring, and a terrible thirst was menacing them.

Argall opened his eyes, stretched, felt for the sword at his side with a habitual gesture, turned toward the mast and saw that the sail was hanging limply.

"Look!" he said to Maghée. "The breeze has dropped."

"Yes," said the other. "Suddenly, just now."

"Perhaps a storm is brewing."

"May it please the gods! But the sky is clear. If we don't sight land tomorrow, though, and it doesn't rain, we'll be thirsty. The day after, we'll be dead."

Argall laughed lightly. Maghée always saw things in black!

"We've been thirsty before; we're not dead. Look at those stars on the southern horizon; isn't that the constellation described by your mother Dahéla? Surely we're in the vicinity of Atlantis. Don't those large birds over there also announce the proximity of land?"

Maghée shook his head sullenly. "Your amulet stank last night! The boat's embalmed by it. Can't you smell it?"

It was a little piece of red wood, carved into a minuscule hammer with a short shaft. Dahéla had kept it all her life as a souvenir of her childhood. On the eve of her sons' departure, she had given it to Maghée; it was, according to her, a fetish that would guide them to Atlantis. It emitted an odor, penetrating in spite of all the years that had passed, so distinctive that it could be distinguished among a thousand.

Surprised, Maghée opened his nostrils wide, and sniffed the leather bag suspended around his neck. It really was the same odor, but it was scarcely perceptible through the envelope. Every gust of wind was, however, impregnated with it. He remembered having breathed the sap of the fir-trees of Erm-gilt-Herm in spring, in the same fashion.

Suddenly, he remembered that Dahéla had told them an Atlantean saying relating to that marvelous tree in its native forests: "that it perfumes the ax that cuts it."

And they understood that that delightful breeze was the breath of nearby Atlantis.

## *II. Soroé*

In the east, the horizon displayed its contours vigorously under the ardent pallor of dawn. For a moment, in the blue-tinted night, the breeze freshened; errant mauve and purple clouds dissipated in the sky, at the edge of which the scarlet sun of a new morning sprang forth. The rapidity of the dawn abridged, over Atlantis, the struggle between the shadows and the daylight.

The snows of Bol-Gho, the colossus with the ashen shoulders, sparkled in the sun's rays, while at its feet, blurred by floating mists, the awakening of the birds made a continuous rumor, vibrating confusedly like innumerable harp-strings.

As the fiery disk rose into the sky with the majesty of a hymn or the flight of a prayer toward the divinities of the azure, the woods and the shore, disengaged from the vapors crawling along the ground, surged from the penumbra; the corollas of the flowers expanded in the sunlight, and the scattered stones of the strand shone with all the colors that the magic of the dew made resplendent as gems.

The Temple of Light rose up on the edge of the sea on a narrow plateau, between the amphitheater of the city, the port and the sheer slopes of Bol-Gho. The first fires of the sun gilded it from base to summit, projecting into the depths of the ship the svelte shadows of the eight columns of the peristyle. It was a mediocre edifice, a whiteness of pink-veined marble almost buried beneath the giant leafy crowns, animated by a population of birds, but the hill that supported it, hollowed out by sanctuaries, sculpted with bas-reliefs, with its staged terraces, its balconies overhanging the foamy strand and the woods with the flowery crowns, was itself nothing but a semi-subterranean temple, in which the cool vaults, the shade of the arches and the curtains of lianas gracefully enveloped the mystery of crypts and millenary foundations.

Outside the peristyle, a parvis extended, alternating its enormous flagstones of granite and jasper. To the left, on the preliminary altar, a thin plume of smoke rose from a bronze bowl in front of a polychromatic relief representing a virgin and a warrior. The latter, one knee on the ground and one hand on his lips in a gesture of adoration, was receiving from the former a broad blade that she was holding out to him, seizing it in a virile grip. She, smiling and leaning forward, but scarcely touching the ground with her bare foot, was visibly lingering over final words, supreme recommendations; all her being, as if immaterial, was on the point of detachment, of taking flight.

It was, in a dream in stone, the history and the legend of primitive Atlantis: the hero armed by the goddess in order to tame the tumult of forces and extract the world from chaos. The generations transmitted it, in the course of the centuries, with hymns of gratitude and consoling oracles, for the blessed couple was to return sooner or later, after centuries of ordeals. Atlantis would see itself once again triumphant, immortal, sovereign of a renewed earth, from which evil would be vanished forever. When? No one could say. Perhaps tomorrow! Surely, there had been suffering enough...

The hymn had sprung forth with the first ray of sunlight under the tall colonnade, vibrant and pure but rather frail, for there was scarcely anyone around the altar but virgins and children. The Gods of Light, alas, the splendid messengers of the Being, the favorable, clement gods, were no longer the uncontested sovereigns of Atlantis. Other sanctuaries had emerged, and even in their ancient temples, on their own altars, dispossessed, they saw the bloody idols of Gold and Iron enthroned.

That is why the adoration of their last worshipers became more tender and more ardent, and their supplications addressed to the glimpsed Being, the primal source, the creator, the father, the beginning and end of all things, ineffably good, became increasingly bewildered.

The temple had its particular cult, its familiar divinity, powerful in spite of everything, and so gentle: the same one that, in distant ages, had tamed the scourges, subjugated the forces, and brought Atlantis out of chaos. And still, nowadays, in spite of the wickedness of men, she presided over the regular course of the seasons, maintained the favorable breezes, the fertilizing rains, the eternal fecundity of the plains. The flowers were embalmed by her breath; the cloudless sky reflected her eyes; the folds of her virginal veil draped the summit of Bol-Gho with snow. She only accepted as offerings the pure water of springs,

stainless fruits, choice perfumes; and although she had once personally forged, and tempered with her own hands, the formidable Sword, bloodshed horrified her.

A young woman detached herself from her companions and came to stoke up the sacred fire beneath the odorous ashes. Dry branches crackled, the flame bust forth, sudden and vivid, a fortunate omen. The child stimulated it with her breath.

She might have been sixteen. A long piece of white cloth, in accordance with the custom of Atlantean virgins, was wound twice around her slender body, from the hip to the shoulder and from the waist to the feet, which were shod in narrow sandals. The bare arms, of a puerile grace, the pure oval of the face, and the delicate hands, seemed those of a pale amber statue, a sure indication of princely or sacerdotal family. She was believed to be the granddaughter of the priest Ruslem, the last servant of the gods, almost exiled, of whom his ancestors, in the distant days of their triumph, had reflected the splendor.

She stood up, took a step backward, her wrists crossed over her breast. All her gestures, smoothed by the habit of the ritual movements, developed in a grave rhythm in the symbolic harmony of attitudes.

Her knee touched the flagstones, her arms rounded, the hands stretched, extended toward the flames. Her gaze sought the marble visage of the goddess, and her quivering lips invoked her by her innumerable names:

“Soroé, Queen with the calm eyes, Queen whose return is prophesied, Splendor of the sunsets, Softness of the evening, Pearl of the depths, Murmur of the pacified waves, Freshness of the springs...”

She invoked her for her father Ruslem, for her companions, for herself, who bore her name, consecrated to her worship in childhood, for Atlantis, prey to scourges, for the earth avid for dew, for all beings...

“Soroé, Frisson of the palms, Radiance of the morning, Lily of whiteness, Hope of crops, Most chaste, Most pure...”

The young women, in chorus, raised their voices, and mingled their appeal:

“Our divine Sister!”

Harps played a prelude; alternating choruses proclaimed the glory of the goddess, her pity for sad mortals, the choice of the predestined hero, Argall, first king of Atlantis, the marvelous sword, forged and tempered by the divine hands, the struggle against the scourges, the victory...

Spoken words resonated under the portico. The priest Ruslem emerged from the temple, the interior rites accomplished. His right hand traced the liturgical sign of benediction in the air while the consecrated syllables fell from his lips.

He was a tall old man with silvery hair but sharp eyes, whose paternal smile revealed the teeth of a young man. A simple gold clasp retained the long folds of his white mantle at his shoulder. He fell silent; the bowed heads straightened.

It was the end of the morning service. The faithful dispersed. Some came to salute the old man before leaving. The virgin Soroé approached, bent her knee and tried to kiss his hand, but he lifted her up gently.

“No, no, my daughter. Only the gods should receive such a homage from you.”

She looked at him, slightly surprised. She rendered him that entirely filial homage every day. Was he not the priest and the ancestor, her unique protector down here? All her companions honored him in the same way, glad to approach him thus. If anything distinguished her from them, it was the blood she obtained from him, the pure blood that beat in her breast—but now, in his tone, that of the ancestor and the priest, she had sensed, mingled with a profound tenderness, a kind of respect.

A question rose to her lips, but the echo in her thought seemed so strange that she kept silent, confused, her cheeks on fire.

The priest leaned over and kissed her forehead.

“Go, my daughter. Soon, perhaps, I shall have to tell you...but it is not yet time.”

He was visibly hesitant; but footsteps sounded on the flagstones. A man approached at a rapid and decisive pace. He was a warrior in the prime of life, dressed like Atlanteans of high caste, in a tunic of fine wool and a broad silken sash sustaining a bronze-hilted sword. His thick black hair was covered by a

head-dress of woven plumes. The artisans of Atlantis excelled at extracting impermeable tissues of an incredible lightness from the skins of birds. His hand was resting on a javelin whose point was shining like his eyes, shaded by coarse eyebrows. His coppery complexion slightly belied the richness of his garments, denouncing some admixture of inferior blood. His confident gaze and all his attitudes, however, revealed an almost regal pride and the habit of command.

Ruslem had scarcely perceived him than he walked swiftly to meet him. The warrior, halting at a respectable distance, sketched a slight flexion of the knee. The priest did not give him time to complete it, raising him up with a gesture and bowing. It was like a brief assault of courtesy between two worthy adversaries, equalized by a reciprocal esteem.

“Greetings, noble Illaz,” said the priest. “The signs were favorable this morning; this is the arrival they announced.”

The young man had let him speak first, with an air of deference, but he hastened to respond.

“Greetings venerable Ruslem. Your signs have, indeed, shone upon me if you deign to welcome me with benevolence.”

They had moved through the temple and descended a few steps. A vault was offered to them, wide open to the sea breezes, furnished with a table and a marble bench covered with mats. Already, at a sign from Ruslem, Soroé had gone away and come back with a salver carrying a basket of fruits, bread, a few sculpted silver flasks and fresh water in an earthenware jar. She laid a fine, dazzlingly white cloth of silky appearance over the marble personally, disposed the food and flowers, and dismissed the slave with a gesture.

A shadow of discontentment passed over the old man’s face, but any reflection translated into words would have been inappropriate in the presence of a guest. In any case, the young woman had done nothing that he had not taught her himself; the duties of hospitality were imposed even on royal hands, for a stranger is the envoy of the gods.

The two men tasted the bread and moistened their lips. The traveler thanked the young woman courteously. She bowed, blushing slightly, and made sure with a glance that nothing was lacking.

“Go,” said Ruslem. “I’ll call Tang-Kor, if necessary.”

She left; the traveler followed her with his gaze.

“The gods have blessed you in your daughter, venerable Ruslem! No nobler virgin has ever flowered a paternal dwelling with her presence. Thrice fortunate the spouse that your prudence will be able to choose for her...have perhaps chosen already?”

The last words were uttered lightly, a discreet interrogation that accepted in advance that it would remain without response, but a crease in the forehead and a quiver of the nostrils betrayed the interest that the Atlantean was trying to hide. The priest thanked him, simply, his thought impenetrable.

“The gods can only desire good; evil comes from men alone. Let us submit to the celestial Will.”

“Always and in everything?”

A brief flame gleamed beneath the old man’s eyelids.

The other went on: “You don’t want, you dare not, reply to me! These vaults are discreet, however, and the worst enemies of Illaz would not suspect him of betraying, after having solicited them, the confidences of his host.”

The priest dismissed the outrageous suggestion with a gesture. The Atlantean, half risen to his feet, said down again, rearranged his muscular limbs, and breathed out slowly, seeking calm with an effort.

“Excuse my vivacity, noble Ruslem. I want to contain myself, but my mother’s blood boils within me at times, and I retain the heart of a slave in feeling the insults of my brothers, the oppressed.”

All Atlantis knew the birth of Illaz. His father, the most illustrious chief of the warrior caste, had married a freedwoman. The heritage of an almost sovereign rank, immense estates and accumulated treasures had not effaced the original defect. Far from hiding it, however, he affected to draw glory from it, either because his pride took pleasure in braving the envious disdain of his peers, or because he wanted to conserve a popularity in the lower classes for reasons of ambition.

There was a silence.

“What can be done?” murmured the priest, finally, as if reluctantly. “The ordeal is long. It will come to an end, however.”

“You believe so?”

“The promise of the oracles is formal.”

“How many of the faithful still share your hopes? How many temples remain open to your cult?”

The old man sighed. The temples of the ancient faith were falling into ruin throughout Atlantis. It was not that it was forbidden to assemble there, to render homage to the Gods of Light and celebrate their mysteries of gratitude and love. The memory of Argall and Soroé remained dear to the hearts of the Atlanteans. The hope of their return was not entirely extinct, but it was becoming more distant and more illusory every day.

Meanwhile, the cruel gods imposed themselves, manifesting their formidable power. The slightest forgetfulness, the most involuntary omission, unleashed scourges: plagues, hurricanes and convulsions of the earth, which decimated villages, ruined and starved entire provinces. The richest offerings did not succeed in appeasing them.

“For centuries,” Illaz said, “the sword of Argall has been lost and his family extinct. A woman reigns over the Atlanteans. Gold and Iron are the true gods, the only ones whose protection seems efficacious, when they deign to grant it—you know at what price!”

An exclamation of horror was the priest’s response.

The warrior continued, with somber bitterness: “Gold and Iron always flow. They are necessary for swords and plowshares, for palaces and temples. Our mines have never been more productive, our fields more fecund, Atlantis richer. The Queen received me yesterday in her new residence, in the midst of her priests and her warriors, her jesters and her eunuchs. The silken wall-hangings were streaming with precious stones. The least soldier would think himself dishonored by exchanging his weapons for mine.”

A scornful smile uncovered the whiteness of his teeth. His voice, embittered, grated in his throat.

“I came to ask for mercy for the miners of the north, once my father’s serfs, whom I freed, and whose tribute has recently been doubled, although the impoverished seams are running out, dissolving in the flow of springs. The Treasury is selling their fields, which they do not have time to cultivate, and the cabins they can no longer repair. Then, at the first delay, the chain and the whip! Every evening, a few of them remain in the galleries, too exhausted to return to the daylight. It means less work for the gravediggers!”

“Poor folk! And what did the Queen reply?”

“She sent me to the Chief of Subterranean Works, who assured me of all his solicitude. That means, I think, that the dead will be replaced. Are gold and iron not necessary?”

“Laborers at least live and die under the sky.”

“Unless they’re needed in the quarries; but the masters prefer to take their sons, when they’re well-built and robust. As for their daughters, the prettiest are attached to the service of the temples, where they’re taught, whether they like it or not, to become the ornaments of the ceremonies and the delights of young warriors. Those shameful things will end one day—I want to believe that; but are we not going to make any attempt to hasten the deliverance?”

“If it were only a matter of giving my life! What can one old man do? I’ve spoken to the Queen. She listened to me with deference...”

“And you obtained nothing?”

“She has advisors: the priests of Gold and Iron.”

“Iron is a powerful god; my father taught me to serve it...elsewhere than in the temples.”

“A revolt?”

“Our miners are only asking for a leader. They’re men, when they’re fed; and our woodcutters can employ their axes in other ways than cutting wood for forges.”

“Victory would nevertheless be uncertain...and with what bloodshed would it be necessary to buy it?”

“Blood is flowing on the altars every day throughout Atlantis. What does one sacrifice more matter? That one, at least, would be the last. Have you not announced favorable presages to me?”

“A savior is promised to us: a hero devoid of fear or blame. The sword of Argall will shine in his hand. The scourges, tamed, will retreat. He will come!”

“How do you know that he has not come already? If you wanted...perhaps the sword of Argall is not so completely lost that you could not rediscover it...”

This time, the old man shivered. A brief redness, and a movement immediately repressed, betrayed a profound emotion in such a self-controlled ancient. The Atlantean chief hastened to interpret it in accordance with his desires.

“I’m not asking for your secrets. Undoubtedly, when you know where to obtain the divine weapon, you’ll judge me unworthy to draw it from its sheath. I’m only a man...”

The priest had already collected himself. His response tried to spare the pride of the conspirator without satisfying his curiosity.

“The blood of a hero runs in your veins, noble Illaz. If it pleased the gods that that it were in my power to give you the marvelous Sword, Atlantis, I’m sure, would see the days of Argall again.”

“What prevents us from rediscovering it? One word from you would assure me of the collaboration of the devotees of the old religion. There are thousands still; at the first victorious battle, the entire people would follow them. What could the servants of Gold and Iron do against us then?”

“More than one audacious individual has already risen against the infamous power that is crushing us; victory has even appeared to crown generous efforts. Alas, they were triumphs without tomorrows!”

“Because those tomorrows had not been prepared; the victors of a day had only thought about themselves, and the people, forgotten by them, abandoned them in the time of true difficulties. It’s not enough, I know, to expel a Queen from her palace, even if, like our Yerra, she is the most redoubtable of sorceresses, and to throw the bloody idols and their hideous priests out of the temples.”

“What do you want to do, then?”

“Return to everyone his legitimate share: to the liberated people, the soil that they fecundate; to the clement gods, their purified altars; to sages like you, the government of public affairs—and to ensure the edifice, for want of a new Argall, I would put on the throne another Soroé, as young and beautiful as her divine sister: your daughter, in a word, whose hand would then be my recompense. Forgive my boldness, venerable Ruslem! My ambition is great, undoubtedly; but you need to know my entire thought, and perhaps the memory of my father will prevent you from finding the expression of my dearest wish offensive.”

The Atlantean chief had pronounced the final words standing tall, his head thrown back. Among the several sentiments by which his eloquence was nourished—pride, ambition, wounded vanity, the thirst for domination and revenge—a sincere ardor stood out, the aspiration of a strong soul, in which the glimpsed beauty of the young woman had just awakened, like a thunderbolt, the imperious flame of desire.

The penetrating mind of the priest could not be deceived; perilous as the proposed adventure was, the perspectives opened to his own ambition, to his religious and patriotic zeal, responded in a way to his own dearest hopes; Illaz’ request coincided so strangely with certain facts known to him alone, which were not far from implying, in his eyes, a divine intervention; and finally, the person of the young Atlantean was presented at that moment in such a favorable aspect, that he almost hesitated over declining to seize the opportunity. The irrevocable consent trembled momentarily upon his lips—but that moment sufficed for reflection.

He resolved to keep the future in reserve.

“Your proposal will be the pride of my old age, generous son of the most illustrious of our warriors. I admire the grandeur of your plans. Give me time to accustom myself to their boldness. Soroé is scarcely sixteen years old. She does not even know how to blush under the gaze of young men. Her entire life has been devoted to the cult of the celestial Protectress whose name she bears, and who, I firmly believe, will preside over the choice of her spouse. Permit me to seek at the foot of the altar, to await in solitude and prayer, for the inspiration that she will deign to send me.”

A deep pleat of discontent brought the eyebrows of the Atlantean chief together. “Be careful,” he said, in a mocking voice in which a muted threat trembled, “that the inspiration does not descend too late.

Our miners do not have your wisdom, venerable Ruslem! Their patience might finally run out. If the Gods of Light delay too long in helping them, they're capable of helping themselves, and then..."

"Then?"

"They might well reject everything pell-mell, and return the old religion to oblivion along with the new, the bloody idols and the gods of love alike. The legend of Argall and Soroé has cradled their misery for centuries. The idea might finally occur to them that it's only a legend."

"Don't blaspheme!"

"Heaven preserve me from it! But I'm not the master of their thoughts, and I fear that I won't be master of their actions for long."

Supporting those words with a significant gaze, the Atlantean stood up, and adjusted with a shrug of the shoulder the silken sash tightened over his hip by the weight of the sword. His entire being radiated strength and audacity.

The priest shivered, thinking about possible upheavals.

"Deign to remember my proposals, venerable Ruslem. In a few days, with your permission, I shall seek your presence again, and perhaps you'll have found another response."

"Your coming will be the joy of my abode. My response depends on the gods. Believe me when I say that my dearest desire is that they will be favorable to you."

Illaz' forehead cleared. The old man seemed sincere; his prudence and his dignity prevented him from giving an immediate welcome to such a grave proposition, with incalculable consequences. In a few days, reflection, or some new insolence of the party of Gold and Iron, would assure the ardent young man of a precious alliance and the joys of satisfied amour.

Ruslem escorted him as far as the exterior parvis, and went back to his simple dwelling, buried in the sacred shade, pensively.

Only a few minutes had gone by when a discreet knock was heard at the door and the slave Tang-Kor appeared, one hand on his forehead and the other extended in a sign of respect. His master interrogated him with a gesture.

"Ortiz, the Queen's equerry, is asking to speak to you on her behalf."

"Ortiz? Very well...I'll come."

A path opened between the immense trees, taller than the most majestic edifices. In their shadow, slender tree-ferns deployed the frail fans of their green foliage, seeming to the eye as light as the plumes of giant swans. An almost imperceptible breeze made them sway very slightly with a slow, seemingly drowsy palpitation. Creepers ran from branch to branch, florid with strange corollas, in the fantastic forms of insects and fish, of all the colors of the rainbow and perfumes of penetrating sweetness. Enormous butterflies and minuscule birds besieged their blossoms with an avid hum, and a sparkle of living gems.

The Queen's equerry was waiting, standing, his shoulder nonchalantly leaning against the scaly bole of a tree-fern. His slim and supple figure, his scarcely-bronzed complexion, the slenderness of his ankles and his ring-laden fingers revealed at the first glance a warrior of the pure race, of irreproachable origin. His garments were reminiscent of those worn by Illaz, but a light steel helmet on his head, a narrow buckler falling over his hip and a coat of mail scarcely thicker than an ordinary fabric indicated an officer on a mission, ready to have the orders of the sovereign whose messenger he was carried out, by force if necessary. The helmet, buckler, silken tunic and baldric were glittering with precious embroidery and gems with dazzling fires. The golden hilt of his sword was sculpted like an item of female jewelry. The sharkskin scabbard, encrusted with rare metals was attached to the sash radiant with the royal colors by a ruby clasp.

His attitude, as Ruslem approached, offered an admirable mixture of military stiffness and insolence. A cold politeness, more impenetrable than his armor, was the sole homage that he deigned to render to his interlocutor's age and blood. He gave the appearance of addressing himself to a mortal fortunate enough to have attracted, under whatever pretext, the momentary attention of the sovereign and thus merited the honor of his visit.

Half a century of priesthood and thirty generations of illustrious ancestors, however, made the old man an adversary inaccessible to intimidation. Without appearing to notice the brief and detached salute

of the royal envoy, he stopped the announcement of his message on his lips by means of a gesture of benediction simultaneously so paternal and so majestic that the young man felt his knees flex and his head incline involuntarily.

He wondered whether the old gods, in the vicinity of their most ancient sanctuary, might not conserve a residue of power, still dangerous to confront. A few ritual syllables, vestiges of the sacred idiom of the ancestors, only understood today by initiates, seemed to him to be a magical invocation, capable of attracting to him all the redoubtable scourges of Atlantis. Rapid alternations of fugitive redness and sudden pallor betrayed the intimate frisson of his being.

The priest, whom not one of those symptoms had escaped, but who was too wise to abuse his advantage, raised his visitor from his semi-kneeling posture and interrogated him in a tone of familiar simplicity, lending to the dignity of his initial attitude the appearance of an inestimable favor.

“What does the Queen desire?”

“Your presence at the palace, and that of your daughter, the virgin Soroé.”

“Soroé?”

Had he been less emotional, the equerry would have divined the old man’s anxiety. Before the explicit order of the sovereign, however, all resistance was impossible; the slightest hesitation would have increased the peril, if any existed for the young priestess. A painted and gilded chariot and an escort of select warriors were already waiting at the temple gate.

Stifling a sigh, Ruslem called Tang-Kor and gave him the necessary orders. A few minutes later, the Queen’s coursers were carrying him, with Soroé, toward the new palace on the other side of the city, along a semicircular road bordered by magnificent habitations with walls of porphyry and marble, surrounded by garden and embalmed flower-beds. That avenue, paved with large granite flagstones, went around the city and the port, through a shallow valley hollowed out between the hill of the temple and the first slopes of Bol-Gho.

At every step, between the houses and the trees, the gaze plunged over the populous city, with the roseate whiteness of its terraced roofs, the metallic gleam of its cupolas, the airy grace of its colonnades, its perforated galleries and its sculpted frontons, laid out in the form of an amphitheater.

Half way along the route, on an isolated hill crowned with ancient walls, stood the former palace of the kings, severe in its splendor, abandoned now for more cheerful dwellings, and the colossal Temple of Gold and Iron.

Seven steps of marble, onyx and porphyry, in the seven hues of the rainbow, rose from the ground to the peristyle, formed by a triple row of enormous columns, higher than the tallest palm trees, not one of which had a duplicate. All the rocks of Atlantis, from the depths of the mines to the moraines of glaciers, all the metals, all the alloys, and even blocks of coral wrenched from marine depths, had found a place in the superposition of their gigantic foundations. Each one represented one of the great trees of the land, with its bearing, its bark, its foliage, its flowers and its fruits, its parasitic creepers, the animals that were habitual guests of its branches and roots, the humans whose lives were spent in its shade, and the heroes and gods with whom some legend mingled the existence with its own. From the base to the summit, bas-reliefs wound in spirals, turning around the capitals, incrusting in the moldings, hanging on to the projections, fixing in eternal images scenes of everyday life, processions, hunts, combats, tortures, apotheoses, and royal or divine amours.

Generations of workers and artists had been used up in that formidable labor. Some had given the effort of their arms, others the skill of their hands, the accuracy of their judgment and the spark of their genius. None had signed or engraved his name on the stone or in human memory. An unknown architect and anonymous draughtsmen had drawn up the plans, communicating the orders from the depths of an impenetrable retreat reserved for priests of superior rank, enclosed on the other side of a ravine, under which, it was said, mysterious galleries extended from one edifice to the other. The kings had succeeded one another on the throne, emptying their treasuries, driving under the whip, at the foot of the colonnade, incessantly-renewed herds of captives. And the work was not complete. The forest of capitals only supported an immense terrace projecting above the first step the rigid alignment of its prodigious slabs,

the aerial parvis of the future temple, if it had ever been raised in that vertiginous region between heaven and earth, to the glory of Gold and Iron.

In the meantime, all the exoteric ceremonies, the only ones to which the people were admitted, were held outside, on the vast square of which the temple formed one side. There stood, between two metal colossi, the supreme altar of the victorious cult, the sacrificial stone, an obsidian slab seven cubits long and two wide, placed horizontally, slightly inclined, on four basalt prisms. The upper surface, slightly concave, was polished like a mirror. The water of the heavens scarcely moistened it, immediately streaming over the compact surface, incapable of absorbing a drop. A narrow groove poured it into a crystal vase, where the priests devoted to the observation of the stars measured it every day, calculating the magnitude of the rainfall and the irrigations necessary to the crops. At the time of sacrifices, however, which had only ever taken place in serene weather, an enormous silver basin replaced the transparent ewer, and the pitiless gods delighted in the odor of blood.

With a frisson of horror and disgust, Soroé clung more closely to Ruslem. The old man, externally impassive, remembered Illaz' recent words.

For the moment, the immense square was deserted. Vague human forms were slipping between the columns of the temple; a sad and soft chant floated and faded away. Already, the chariot, launched down a steep slope, was plunging into the ravine, leaving to the left the palace of the priests, as vast as a city, invisible behind a double curtain of walls and foliage. An entire township of accessory edifices surrounded it: the dwellings of servants and acolytes, colleges for young noblemen, and gynaecea as impenetrable as fortresses, where selected virgins were instructed in the service of the gods.

Further on, the road cut across the principal avenue of Atlantis, the triumphal road descending through the prosperous districts and the central quarters, increasingly populous, all the way to the harbor cluttered with ships. There, for the first time, in spite of the equerry's disdain for the vulgar crowd, the chariot was obliged to slow down. Serried files of pedestrians, riders, heavy teams dragging all kinds of vehicles, and light chariots with frisky coursers, in two inverse currents, troubled by eddies, occupied with their multitudinous tread the entire breadth of the causeway. Squadrons of soldiers and funeral corteges had great difficulty fraying a passage.

For a moment, his brow furrowed and his hand lightly placed on the pommel of his sword, the impatient officer seemed to be ready to launch his warriors, with drawn swords, against the unconscious and unarmed mass. A gesture of fright and a supplicant gaze on the part of Soroé stopped him. Then, saluting her with a smile, he maneuvered his horse with so much skill, and so aptly, that a furrow opened up, of which the driver of the chariot took advantage, closely followed by the rest of the escort.

Once the highway was crossed, the route became free again and the wind of their progress, striking the young woman in the face, inflated her lungs to the point of oppression.

Now the road straightened out, climbing slightly, through marvelously cultivated fields, opulent meadows, and clumps of trees of various species. All that land was the private property of the Queen. Gradually, the country took on the aspect of a magnificent park, traversed by regular driveways, shady paths, and murmurous streams whose union formed a fairly broad rivulet with a sinuous course, almost curving back on itself, as if to delay the moment when its waters would mingle with the ocean waves.

A bridge was crossed; massive gates rotated on their bronze hinges; brief commands were uttered; weapons clinked; the blue flash of swords drawn from their scabbards saluted the royal quadriga as it passed by, rumbling like thunder in a whirlwind of blond dust. The racket of steel-encircled wheels suddenly died down, becoming no more than a dull rattle over the fine sand, with reflections of gold and coral. Masses of verdure seemed to move aside, obedient to some magical formula, before the expected guests. The façade of the new palace loomed up, cutting the horizon with the sudden deployment of its fine lines, vaporous and almost unreal in their grace and splendor.

Between two bends in the river, whose rapid flow bathed its two flanks, there was a long terrace charged with a triple row of open galleries and superposed verandas, with slender colonnettes of hard stone and bulbous balustrades of precious woods incrustated with nacre and silver. There was no apparent regularity, but a secret harmony of innumerable details, the sharpened slenderness of the cupolas, and the vertiginous sweep of the arches, gave the impression of a dwelling less terrestrial than aerial, the caprice

of a queen or goddess, realized in an hour by some magic power and destined to vanish like a dream at the first breath of a new caprice.

On reflection, nevertheless, a profound thought was revealed in the choice of location, in the unshakable foundations of the substructure, barring with its mass the narrow isthmus of a circular peninsula, designed by the miniature river that surrounded it with an insurmountable moat. The opposite face, at the top of a sheer cliff, overlooked the sea, with no other access than a zigzag path overhanging a beach beaten by the waves, where a well-sheltered little harbor had nevertheless been hollowed out. That smiling palace, that abode of delights, offered all the security of a citadel. A handful of resolute defenders could hold off an army there,

The chariot stopped in front of a lateral entrance, at the foot of a perron of white marble with pale blue veins, covered by a silken awning with nacreous reflections, heightened by silver torsades. The high door with sandalwood battens opened wide on to a vestibule paved with mosaics, lined with enamels with a varying gleam of pale opal and aquamarine, where a few guards, as richly dressed as Ortiz himself, were standing in a meditative fashion or chatting in contained voices, like devotees at the entrance to a sanctuary.

In spite of that homage rendered to royal majesty, a few more expressive gestures and stifled laughter indicated among the handsome cavaliers thoughts very different from those inspired in virtuous souls by the contemplation of divine mysteries. The presence of Ortiz, after the brief salutes due to his rank, and much less that of Ruslem, would probably not have been enough to modify their attitude, but at the appearance of Soroé, silence succeeded the murmur of conversations so abruptly, and the sudden convergence of gazes was so expressive, that the young woman received a kind of shock therefrom, and stopped momentarily, her cheeks on fire and her bosom palpitating, in a delightful pose of naïve modesty and virginal confusion.

An imperceptible signal from her grandfather, and the proud instinct of her race, caused her to stiffen herself against a sentiment of shame that she could not even explain. Then, hastening her step slightly, she passed by, her gaze lowered but her head high and her eyes motionless, as impassive in appearance as a young goddess traversing the vain agitation of mortals untouched.

An interior door opened and closed behind her. Questions, answers and exclamations of praise immediately overlapped,

“Heavenly powers, what a pretty girl!”

“Who is she?”

“Where does she come from?”

“A little thin as yet, but elegant.”

“I’ll take her as she is, if anyone offers her to me.”

“You wouldn’t have any cause for complaint. That beautiful child is the richest heiress in Atlantis.”

“Get away!”

“Didn’t you recognize the old man accompanying her? Ruslem, the priest of the old gods.”

“So what?”

“His ancestors served the first descendants of Argall, and married, it’s said, some of their daughters. And since then, no misalliance! You only have to look at the color of her skin. It’s a certificate of origin.”

“On parchment!”

“Who’ll mention you to the old man?”

“Then I’ll ask to examine her closely.”

“Pooh! A noble family but a decadent one. Where are their lands?”

“Ask to visit the subterrains of the old temple. There’s more gold there than the scribes of the treasury could weight in a year. Ruslem himself can’t count it.”

“Another verification for which I’ll take responsibility.”

“Marry the daughter and succeed the old man. We’ll come to see you pontificate.”

“As a priest?”

“And a son-in-law.”

The conversation, engaged in that tone, continued in increasingly licentious terms, the echoes of which, fortunately, stopped at the threshold of the interior apartments. There, a profound silence reigned, scarcely interrupted by the occasional opening of a door, a distant murmur of harmonious voices, brushed harp-strings, and jets of water spilling their crystalline pearls into the sonority of basins. Large fans, moistened with perfumes, palpitated slowly on the ceilings of the rooms, activated by invisible hands. Sometimes, a deformed eunuch, covered in silk and precious stones, and girls scarcely clad in transparent sashes, crossed the path of the visitors, or, hastening at their approach, lifted up door-curtains emblazoned with the royal colors, aurora and pale blue, the gray-blue reflected by steel: the livery of Gold and Iron.

Finally, at the end of an open gallery overlooking the sea and the divined frisson of flowing waters, two armed slaves stood up straight, crossing their pikes in front of a closed door. Their loins were circled by narrow strips of cloth. Their legs and bare torsos were outlined with the color and solidity of bronze. A short dagger, a crescent-shaped ax and a square buckler hung from their belts. Their curly hair, flattened out over the cranium by thin metal chains, was equivalent to a sword-proof helmet. A guttural grunt emerged from their fleshy mouths, broadly rounded and hideously empty between their white carnivorous fangs.

Ortiz approached and pronounced a few words in a low voice. The mutes stood aside, straightening their pikes. The maple and rosewood battens opened as if by themselves.

Ruslem and Soroé, following their guide, penetrated into a room of mediocre extent, where five or six young women, coquettishly draped in light fabrics, their hair loose and their arms bare, sitting or nonchalantly extended on mats, stood up with a rustle of silks and a rattle of jewelry, like a flock of frightened birds. Two harps with sixteen strings stretched on a cedar-wood frame, an ivory flute and a viol with a long ebony neck mounted on the shell of a turtle, indicated the part played by four of them in the concert that had just finished or had been interrupted. The fifth, her head thrown backwards and gripping her pure throat with both hands, was breathing slowly, with an attitude of contented lassitude, her lips still quivering with the absent song.

All of them were beautiful, and their scarcely gilded complexion, the slimness of their wrists and ankles, the slender elegance of their figures, affirmed that they were children of noble families, separated permanently from the herd of vulgar musiciennes, consecrated in their adolescent grace, while awaiting some illustrious alliance, to the service of the Queen and the gods.

The songstress and her accompanists, after a profound bow to the visitors and a few smiling glances to the particular address of the handsome equerry, gathered on a kind of bed with cushions of byssus cloth, whose frame and embossed silver back curved inwards like an unfurling wave, with a foamy crest.

Not a word had been spoken. All the movements seemed regulated in advance, as in sacred ceremonies. Ruslem, doubtless acquainted with that species of ritual, had stopped after a few paces, in a pose of tranquil expectation. Soroé, still quivering with contained emotion, pressed herself to his side and, her lips slightly parted, strove to slow down the precipitate beating of her heart, without appearing to pay any attention to it.

Ortiz, as if gripped by a scruple, drew nearer to her and whispered, at such close range that she could feel his breath on her ear: "Do you know how you ought to salute the queen?"

The young woman turned, surprised; she was about to interrogate him but his gesture stopped her, as if on the edge of a precipice, and in an even lower voice, he pointed at the musiciennes.

"Silence! Do as they do—exactly."

She stood there, trembling beneath the imperious gaze of the equerry. He, however, had stepped back with a rapid, oblique, almost fearful movement, and now, motionless, with his left hand on the pommel of his sword and his right raised as if saluting the gods, seemed changed into a statue of obedience. Soroé, following the direction of his gaze, immutably fixed on the back of the room, perceived a crimson curtain whose folds were slowly drawn aside.

An inexpressible anguish gripped her. Evidently, someone was there, doubtless the Queen herself, lifting up the heavy fabric,

Although the divined gesture was not at all menacing, or even unexpected, the young woman had the impression of a hostile and formidable presence. She felt like a captive, defenseless, in the depths of the mute palace, at the mercy of a limitless power, like a sparrow in a bird-catcher's net.

A slight sound made her shiver; it was the musiciennes kneeling down, one hand on the ground and the other extended before the forehead.

Prostrated, they no longer moved. The undulation of the drapery had ceased. The opening, not so much visible as divined, did not let any light pass, or allow any form to be glimpsed.

Silence reigned again.

Abruptly, the young woman felt herself seized by the arm; a crushing weight came down on her shoulder; harsh syllables rang in her ear, simultaneously vibrant and contained, quivering with anger and muted by terror.

"Wretch! Do you want to die! The Queen! Kneel! Kneel, then!"

Scarlet with shame, chilled by fear, she resisted instinctively, shaking herself free of the grip that was bruising her flesh and causing her pride to revolt. But she was out of strength. It seemed to her that there was a lack of air around her, that a furious torrent was bearing her away, stifling with the growl of its waters the cry ready to spring from her lips.

Breathless and bewildered, half-fainting, she turned round and fell, like a wounded bird, upon Ruslem's breast. The old man's arms, still strong, enveloped her with an almost maternal caress, while his indignant gaze nailed the aggressor to the spot.