## The Hairless Mexican

W. Somerset Maugham

‘Do you like macaroni?’ said R.

‘What do you mean by macaroni?’ answered Ashenden. ‘It is like asking me if I like poetry. I like Keats and Wordsworth and Verlaine and Goethe. When you say macaroni, do you mean spaghetti, tagliatelli, rigatoni, vermicelli, fettucini, tufali, farfalli, or just macaroni?’

‘Macaroni,’ replied R., a man of few words.

‘I like all simple things, boiled eggs, oysters and caviare, truite au bleu, grilled salmon, roast lamb (the saddle by preference), cold grouse, treacle tart and rice pudding. But of all simple things the only one I can eat day in and day out, not only without disgust but with the eagerness of an appetite unimpaired by excess, is macaroni.’

‘I am glad of that because I want you to go down to Italy.’

Ashenden had come from Geneva to meet R. at Lyons and having got there before him had spent the afternoon wandering about the dull, busy and prosaic streets of that thriving city. They were sitting now in a restaurant on the place to which Ashenden had taken R. on his arrival because it was reputed to give you the best food in that part of France. But since in so crowded a resort (for the Lyonese like a good dinner) you never knew what inquisitive ears were pricked up to catch any useful piece of information that might fall from your lips, they had contented themselves with talking of indifferent things. They had reached the end of an admirable repast.

‘Have another glass of brandy?’ said R.

‘No, thank you,’ answered Ashenden, who was of an abstemious turn.

‘One should do what one can to mitigate the rigours of war,’ remarked R. as he took the bottle and poured out a glass for himself and another for Ashenden.

Ashenden, thinking it would be affectation to protest, let the gesture pass, but felt bound to remonstrate with his chief on the unseemly manner in which he held the bottle.

‘In my youth I was always taught that you should take a woman by the waist and a bottle by the neck,’ he murmured.

‘I am glad you told me. I shall continue to hold a bottle by the waist and give women a wide berth.’

Ashenden did not know what to reply to this and so remained silent. He sipped his brandy and R. called for his bill. It was true that he was an important person, with power to make or mar quite a large number of his fellows, and his opinions were listened to by those who held in their hands the fate of empires; but he could never face the business of tipping a waiter without an embarrassment that was obvious in his demeanour. He was tortured by the fear of making a fool of himself by giving too much or of exciting the waiter’s icy scorn by giving too little. When the bill came he passed some hundred-franc notes over to Ashenden and said:

‘Pay him, will you? I can never understand French figures.’

The groom brought them their hats and coats.

‘Would you like to go back to the hotel?’ asked Ashenden.

‘We might as well.’

It was early in the year, but the weather had suddenly turned warm, and they walked with their coats over their arms. Ashenden knowing that R. liked a sitting-room had engaged one for him and to this, when they reached the hotel, they went. The hotel was old-fashioned and the sitting-room was vast. It was furnished with a heavy mahogany suite upholstered in green velvet and the chairs were set primly round a large table. On the walls, covered with a dingy paper, were large steel engravings of the battles of Napoleon, and from the ceiling hung an enormous chandelier once used for gas, but now fitted with electric bulbs. It flooded the cheerless room with a cold, hard light.

‘This is very nice,’ said R., as they went in.

‘Not exactly cosy,’ suggested Ashenden.

‘No, but it looks as though it were the best room in the place. It all looks very good to me.’

He drew one of the green velvet chairs away from the table and, sitting down, lit a cigar. He loosened his belt and unbuttoned his tunic.

‘I always thought I liked a cheroot better than anything,’ he said, ‘but since the war I’ve taken quite a fancy to Havanas. Oh, well, I suppose it can’t last for ever.’ The corners of his mouth flickered with the beginning of a smile. ‘It’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good.’

Ashenden took two chairs, one to sit on and one for his feet, and when R. saw him he said: ‘That’s not a bad idea,’ and swinging another chair out from the table with a sigh of relief put his boots on it.

‘What room is that next door?’ he asked.

‘That’s your bedroom.’

‘And on the other side?’

‘A banqueting hall.’

R. got up and strolled slowly about the room and when he passed the windows, as though in idle curiosity, peeped through the heavy rep curtains that covered them, and then returning to his chair once more comfortably put his feet up.

‘It’s just as well not to take any more risk than one need,’ he said.

He looked at Ashenden reflectively. There was a slight smile on his thin lips, but the pale eyes too closely set together, remained cold and steely. R.’s stare would have been embarrassing if Ashenden had not been used to it. He knew that R. was considering how he would broach the subject that he had in mind. The silence must have lasted for two or three minutes.

‘I’m expecting a fellow to come and see me to-night,’ he said at last. ‘His train gets in about ten.’ He gave his wrist-watch a glance. ‘He’s known as the Hairless Mexican.’

‘Why?’

‘Because he’s hairless and because he’s a Mexican.’

‘The explanation seems perfectly satisfactory,’ said Ashenden.

‘He’ll tell you all about himself. He talks nineteen to the dozen. He was on his uppers when I came across him. It appears that he was mixed up in some revolution in Mexico and had to get out with nothing but the clothes he stood up in. They were rather the worse for wear when I found him. If you want to please him you call him General. He claims to have been a general in Huerta’s army, at least I think it was Huerta; anyhow he says that if things had gone right he would be minister of war now and no end of a big bug. I’ve found him very useful. Not a bad chap. The only thing I really have against him is that he will use scent.’

‘And where do I come in?’ asked Ashenden.

‘He’s going down to Italy. I’ve got rather a ticklish job for him to do and I want you to stand by. I’m not keen on trusting him with a lot of money. He’s a gambler and he’s a bit too fond of the girls. I suppose you came from Geneva on your Ashenden passport.’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve got another for you, a diplomatic one, by the way, in the name of Somerville with visas for France and Italy. I think you and he had better travel together. He’s an amusing cove when he gets going, and I think you ought to get to know one another.’

‘What is the job?’

‘I haven’t yet quite made up my mind how much it’s desirable for you to know about it.’

Ashenden did not reply. They eyed one another in a detached manner, as though they were strangers who sat together in a railway carriage and each wondered who and what the other was.

‘In your place I’d leave the General to do most of the talking. I wouldn’t tell him more about yourself than you find absolutely necessary. He won’t ask you any questions, I can promise you that, I think he’s by way of being a gentleman after his own fashion.’

‘By the way, what is his real name?’

‘I always call him Manuel, I don’t know that he likes it very much, his name is Manuel Carmona.’

‘I gather by what you have not said that he’s an unmitigated scoundrel.’

R. smiled with his pale blue eyes.

‘I don’t know that I’d go quite so far as that. He hasn’t had the advantages of a public-school education. His ideas of playing the game are not quite the same as yours or mine. I don’t know that I’d leave a gold cigarette-case about when he was in the neighbourhood, but if he lost money to you at poker and had pinched your cigarette-case he would immediately pawn it to pay you. If he had half a chance he’d seduce your wife, but if you were up against it he’d share his last crust with you. The tears will run down his face when he hears Gounod’s “Ave Maria” on the gramophone, but if you insult his dignity he’ll shoot you like a dog. It appears that in Mexico it’s an insult to get between a man and his drink and he told me himself that once when a Dutchman who didn’t know passed between him and the bar he whipped out his revolver and shot him dead.’

‘Did nothing happen to him?’

‘No, it appears that he belongs to one of the best families. The matter was hushed up and it was announced in the papers that the Dutchman had committed suicide. He did practically. I don’t believe the Hairless Mexican has a great respect for human life.’

Ashenden who had been looking intently at R. started a little and he watched more carefully than ever his chief’s tired, lined and yellow face. He knew that he did not make this remark for nothing.

‘Of course a lot of nonsense is talked about the value of human life. You might just as well say that the counters you use at poker have an intrinsic value, their value is what you like to make it; for a general giving battle, men are merely counters and he’s a fool if he allows himself for sentimental reasons to look upon them as human beings.’

‘But, you see, they’re counters that feel and think and if they believe they’re being squandered they are quite capable of refusing to be used any more.’

‘Anyhow, that’s neither here nor there. We’ve had information that a man called Constantine Andreadi is on his way from Constantinople with certain documents that we want to get hold of. He’s a Greek. He’s an agent of Enver Pasha and Enver has great confidence in him. He’s given him verbal messages that are too secret and too important to be put on paper. He’s sailing from the Piraeus, on a boat called the Ithaca, and will land at Brindisi on his way to Rome. He’s to deliver his dispatches at the German embassy and impart what he has to say personally to the ambassador.’

‘I see.’

At this time Italy was still neutral; the Central Powers were straining every nerve to keep her so; the Allies were doing what they could to induce her to declare war on their side.

‘We don’t want to get into any trouble with the Italian authorities, it might be fatal, but we’ve got to prevent Andreadri from getting to Rome.’

‘At any cost?’ asked Ashenden.

‘Money’s no object,’ answered R., his lips twisting into a sardonic smile.

‘What do you propose to do?’

‘I don’t think you need bother your head about that.’

‘I have a fertile imagination,’ said Ashenden.

‘I want you to go down to Naples with the Hairless Mexican. He’s very keen on getting back to Cuba. It appears that his friends are organising a show and he wants to be as near at hand as possible so that he can hop over to Mexico when things are ripe. He needs cash. I’ve brought money down with me, in American dollars, and I shall give it to you to-night. You’d better carry it on your person.’

‘Is it much?’

‘It’s a good deal, but I thought it would be easier for you if it wasn’t bulky, so I’ve got it in thousand-dollar notes. You will give the Hairless Mexican the notes in return for the documents that Andreadi is bringing.’

A question sprang to Ashenden’s lips, but he did not ask it. He asked another instead.

‘Does this fellow understand what he has to do?’

‘Perfectly.’

There was a knock at the door. It opened and the Hairless Mexican stood before them.

‘I have arrived. Good evening, Colonel. I am enchanted to see you.’

R. got up.

‘Had a nice journey, Manuel? This is Mr. Somerville, who’s going to Naples with you, General Carmona.’

‘Pleased to meet you, sir.’

He shook Ashenden’s hand with such force that he winced.

‘Your hands are like iron, General,’ he murmured.

The Mexican gave them a glance.

‘I had them manicured this morning. I do not think they were very well done. I like my nails much more highly polished.’

They were cut to a point, stained bright red, and to Ashenden’s mind shone like mirrors. Though it was not cold the General wore a fur coat with an astrakhan collar and with his every movement a wave of perfume was wafted to your nose.

‘Take off your coat, General, and have a cigar,’ said R.

The Hairless Mexican was a tall man, and though thinnish gave you the impression of being very powerful; he was smartly dressed in a blue serge suit, with a silk handkerchief neatly tucked in the breast pocket of his coat, and he wore a gold bracelet on his wrist. His features were good, but a little larger than life-size, and his eyes were brown and lustrous. He was quite hairless. His yellow skin had the smoothness of a woman’s and he had no eyebrows nor eyelashes; he wore a pale brown wig, rather long, and the locks were arranged in artistic disorder. This and the unwrinkled sallow face, combined with his dandified dress, gave him an appearance that was at first glance a trifle horrifying. He was repulsive and ridiculous, but you could not take your eyes from him. There was a sinister fascination in his strangeness.

He sat down and hitched up his trousers so that they should not bag at the knee.

‘Well, Manuel, have you been breaking any hearts to-day?’ said R. with his sardonic joviality.

The General turned to Ashenden.

‘Our good friend, the Colonel, envies me my successes with the fair sex. I tell him he can have just as many as I if he will only listen to me. Confidence, that is all you need. If you never fear a rebuff you will never have one.’

‘Nonsense, Manuel, one has to have your way with the girls. There’s something about you that they can’t resist.’

The Hairless Mexican laughed with a self-satisfaction that he did not try to disguise. He spoke English very well, with a Spanish accent, but with an American intonation.

‘But since you ask me, Colonel, I don’t mind telling you that I got into conversation on the train with a little woman who was coming to Lyons to see her mother-in-law. She was not very young and she was thinner than I like a woman to be, but she was possible, and she helped me to pass an agreeable hour.’

‘Well, let’s get to business,’ said R.

‘I am at your service, Colonel.’ He gave Ashenden a glance. ‘Is Mr. Somerville a military man?’

‘No,’ said R., ‘he’s an author.’

‘It takes all sorts to make a world, as you say. I am happy to make your acquaintance, Mr. Somerville. I can tell you many stories that will interest you; I am sure that we shall get on well together. You have a sympathetic air. I am very sensitive to that. To tell you the truth I am nothing but a bundle of nerves and if I am with a person who is antipathetic to me I go all to pieces.’

‘I hope we shall have a pleasant journey,’ said Ashenden.

‘When does our friend arrive at Brindisi?’ asked the Mexican, turning to R.

‘He sails from the Piraeus in the Ithaca on the fourteenth. It’s probably some old tub, but you’d better get down to Brindisi in good time.’

‘I agree with you.’

R. got up and with his hands in his pockets sat on the edge of the table. In his rather shabby uniform, his tunic unbuttoned, he looked a slovenly creature beside the neat and well-dressed Mexican.

‘Mr. Somerville knows practically nothing of the errand on which you are going and I do not desire you to tell him anything. I think you had much better keep your own counsel. He is instructed to give you the funds you need for your work, but your actions are your own affair. If you need his advice of course you can ask for it.’

‘I seldom ask other people’s advice and never take it.’

‘And should you make a mess of things I trust you to keep Mr. Somerville out of it. He must on no account be compromised.’

‘I am a man of honour, Colonel,’ answered the Hairless Mexican with dignity, ‘and I would sooner let myself be cut in a thousand pieces than betray my friends.’

‘That is what I have already told Mr. Somerville. On the other hand, if everything pans out OK Mr. Somerville is instructed to give you the sum we agreed on in return for the papers I spoke to you about. In what manner you get them is no business of his.’

‘That goes without saying. There is only one thing I wish to make quite plain; Mr. Somerville understands of course that I have not accepted the mission with which you have entrusted me on account of the money?’

‘Quite,’ replied R. gravely, looking him straight in the eyes.

‘I am with the Allies body and soul, I cannot forgive the Germans for outraging the neutrality of Belgium, and if I accept the money that you have offered me it is because I am first and foremost a patriot. I can trust Mr. Somerville implicitly, I suppose?’

R. nodded. The Mexican turned to Ashenden.

‘An expedition is being arranged to free my unhappy country from the tyrants that exploit and ruin it and every penny that I receive will go on guns and cartridges. For myself I have no need of money; I am a soldier and I can live on a crust and a few olives. There are only three occupations that befit a gentleman, war, cards and women; it costs nothing to sling a rifle over your shoulder and take to the mountains – and that is real warfare, not this manoeuvring of battalions and firing of great guns – women love me for myself, and I generally win at cards.’

Ashenden found the flamboyance of this strange creature, with his scented handkerchief and his gold bracelet, very much to his taste. This was far from being just the man in the street (whose tyranny we rail at but in the end submit to) and to the amateur of the baroque in human nature he was a rarity to be considered with delight. He was a purple patch on two legs. Notwithstanding his wig and his hairless big face, he had undoubtedly an air; he was absurd, but he did not give you the impression that he was a man to be trifled with. His self-complacency was magnificent.

‘Where is your kit, Manuel?’ asked R.

It was possible that a frown for an instant darkened the Mexican’s brow at the abrupt question that seemed a little contemptuously to brush to one side his eloquent statement, but he gave no other sign of displeasure. Ashenden suspected that he thought the Colonel a barbarian insensitive to the finer emotions.

‘I left it at the station.’

‘Mr. Somerville has a diplomatic passport so that he can get it through with his own things at the frontier without examination if you like.’

‘I have very little, a few suits and some linen, but perhaps it would be as well if Mr. Somerville would take charge of it. I bought half a dozen suits of silk pyjamas before I left Paris.’

‘And what about you?’ asked R., turning to Ashenden.

‘I’ve only got one bag. It’s in my room.’

‘You’d better have it taken to the station while there’s someone about. Your train goes at one ten.’

‘Oh?’

That was the first Ashenden had heard that they were to start that night.

‘I think you’d better get down to Naples as soon as possible.’

‘Very well.’

R. got up.

‘I’m going to bed. I don’t know what you fellows want to do.’

‘I shall take a walk about Lyons,’ said the Hairless Mexican. ‘I am interested in life. Lend me a hundred francs, Colonel, will you? I have no change on me.’

R. took out his pocket-book and gave the General the note he asked for. Then to Ashenden:

‘What are you going to do? Wait here?’

‘No,’ said Ashenden, ‘I shall go to the station and read.’

‘You’d both of you better have a whisky and soda before you go, hadn’t you? What about it, Manuel?’

‘It is very kind of you, but I never drink anything but champagne and brandy.’

‘Mixed?’ asked R. dryly.

‘Not necessarily,’ returned the other with gravity.

R. ordered brandy and soda and when it came, whereas he and Ashenden helped themselves to both, the Hairless Mexican poured himself out three parts of a tumbler of neat brandy and swallowed it in two noisy gulps. He rose to his feet and put on his coat with the astrakhan collar, seized in one hand his bold black hat and, with the gesture of a romantic actor giving up the girl he loved to one more worthy of her, held out the other to R.

‘Well, Colonel, I will bid you good night and pleasant dreams. I do not expect that we shall meet again so soon.’

‘Don’t make a hash of things, Manuel, and if you do keep your mouth shut.’

‘They tell me that in one of your collegues where the sons of gentlemen are trained to become naval officers it is written in letters of gold: there is no such word as impossible in the British Navy. I do not know the meaning of the word failure.’

‘It has a good many synonyms,’ retorted R.

‘I will meet you at the station, Mr. Somerville,’ said the Hairless Mexican, and with a flourish left them.

R. looked at Ashenden with that little smile of his that always made his face look so dangerously shrewd.

‘Well, what d’you think of him?’

‘You’ve got me beat,’ said Ashenden. ‘Is he a mountebank? He seems as vain as a peacock. And with that frightful appearance can he really be the lady’s man he pretends? What makes you think you can trust him?’

R. gave a low chuckle and he washed his thin, old hands with imaginary soap.

‘I thought you’d like him. He’s quite a character, isn’t he? I think we can trust him.’ R.’s eyes suddenly grew opaque. ‘I don’t believe it would pay him to double-cross us.’ He paused for a moment. ‘Anyhow, we’ve got to risk it. I’ll give you the tickets and the money and then you can take yourself off; I’m all in and I want to go to bed.’

Ten minutes later Ashenden set out for the station with his bag on a porter’s shoulder.

Having nearly two hours to wait he made himself comfortable in the waiting-room. The light was good and he read a novel. When the time drew near for the arrival of the train from Paris that was to take them direct to Rome and the Hairless Mexican did not appear Ashenden, beginning to grow a trifle anxious, went out on the platform to look for him. Ashenden suffered from that distressing malady known as train fever: an hour before his train was due he began to have apprehensions lest he should miss it; he was impatient with the porters who would never bring his luggage down from his room in time and he could not understand why the hotel bus cut it so fine; a block in the street would drive him to frenzy and the languid movements of the station porters infuriate him. The whole world seemed in a horrid plot to delay him; people got in his way as he passed through the barriers; others, a long string of them, were at the ticket-office getting tickets for other trains than his and they counted their change with exasperating care; his luggage took an interminable time to register; and then if he was travelling with friends they would go to buy newspapers, or would take a walk along the platform, and he was certain they would be left behind, they would stop to talk to a casual stranger or suddenly be seized with a desire to telephone and disappear at a run. In fact the universe conspired to make him miss every train he wanted to take and he was not happy unless he was settled in his corner, his things on the rack above him, with a good half-hour to spare. Sometimes by arriving at the station too soon he had caught an earlier train than the one he had meant to, but that was nerve-racking and caused him all the anguish of very nearly missing it.

The Rome express was signalled and there was no sign of the Hairless Mexican, it came in and he was not to be seen. Ashenden became more and more harassed. He walked quickly up and down the platform, looked in all the waiting-rooms, went to the consigne where the luggage was left; he could not find him. There were no sleeping-cars, but a number of people got out and he took two seats in a first-class carriage. He stood at the door, looking up and down the platform and up at the clock; it was useless to go if his travelling companion did not turn up, and Ashenden made up his mind to take his things out of the carriage as the porter cried en voiture: but, by George! he would give the brute hell when he found him. There were three minutes more, then two minutes, then one; at that late hour there were few persons about and all who were travelling had taken their seats. Then he saw the Hairless Mexican, followed by two porters with his luggage and accompanied by a man in a bowler-hat, walk leisurely on to the platform. He caught sight of Ashenden and waved to him.

‘Ah, my dear fellow, there you are. I wondered what had become of you.’

‘Good God, man, hurry up or we shall miss the train.’

‘I never miss a train. Have you got good seats? The chef de gare has gone for the night; this is his assistant.’

The man in the bowler-hat took it off when Ashenden nodded to him.

‘But this is an ordinary carriage. I am afraid I could not travel in that.’ He turned to the stationmaster’s assistant with an affable smile. ‘You must do better for me than that, mon cher.’

‘Certainement, mon général, I will put you into a salon-lit. Of course.’

The assistant stationmaster led them along the train and put them in an empty compartment where there were two beds. The Mexican eyed it with satisfaction and watched the porters arrange the luggage.

‘That will do very well. I am much obliged to you.’ He held out his hand to the man in the bowler-hat. ‘I shall not forget you and next time I see the Minister I will tell him with what civility you have treated me.’

‘You are too good, General. I shall be very grateful.’

A whistle was blown and the train started.

‘This is better than an ordinary first-class carriage, I think, Mr. Somerville,’ said the Mexican. ‘A good traveller should learn how to make the best of things.’

But Ashenden was still extremely cross.

‘I don’t know why the devil you wanted to cut it so fine. We should have looked a pair of damned fools if we’d missed the train.’

‘My dear fellow, there was never the smallest chance of that. When I arrived I told the stationmaster that I was General Carmona, Commander-in-Chief of the Mexican Army, and that I had to stop off in Lyons for a few hours to hold a conference with the British Field-Marshal. I asked him to hold the train for me if I was delayed and suggested that my government might see its way to conferring an order on him. I have been to Lyons before, I like the girls here; they have not the chic of the Parisians, but they have something, there is no denying that they have something. Will you have a mouthful of brandy before you go to sleep?’

‘No, thank you,’ said Ashenden morosely.

‘I always drink a glass before going to bed, it settles the nerves.’

He looked in his suit-case and without difficulty found a bottle. He put it to his lips and had a long drink, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and lit a cigarette. Then he took off his boots and lay down. Ashenden dimmed the light.

‘I have never yet made up my mind,’ said the Hairless Mexican reflectively, ‘whether it is pleasanter to go to sleep with the kisses of a beautiful woman on your mouth or with a cigarette between your lips. Have you ever been to Mexico? I will tell you about Mexico to-morrow. Good night.’

Presently Ashenden heard from his steady breathing that he was asleep and in a little while himself dozed off. Presently he woke. The Mexican, deep in slumber, lay motionless; he had taken off his fur coat and was using it as a blanket; he still wore his wig. Suddenly there was a jolt and the train with a noisy grinding of brakes stopped; in the twinkling of an eye, before Ashenden could realise that anything had happened, the Mexican was on his feet with his hand to his hip.

‘What is it?’ he cried.

‘Nothing. Probably only a signal against us.’

The Mexican sat down heavily on his bed. Ashenden turned on the light.

‘You wake quickly for such a sound sleeper,’ he said.

‘You have to in my profession.’

Ashenden would have liked to ask him whether this was murder, conspiracy or commanding armies, but was not sure that it would be discreet. The General opened his bag and took out the bottle.

‘Will you have a nip?’ he asked. ‘There is nothing like it when you wake suddenly in the night.’

When Ashenden refused he put the bottle once more to his lips and poured a considerable quantity of liquor down his throat. He sighed and lit a cigarette. Although Ashenden had seen him now drink nearly a bottle of brandy, and it was probable that he had had a good deal more when he was going about the town, he was certainly quite sober. Neither in his manner nor in his speech was there any indication that he had drunk during the evening anything but lemonade.

The train started and soon Ashenden fell asleep. When he awoke it was morning and turning round lazily he saw that the Mexican was awake too. He was smoking a cigarette. The floor by his side was strewn with burnt-out butts and the air was thick and grey. He had begged Ashenden not to insist on opening a window, for he said the night air was dangerous.

‘I did not get up, because I was afraid of waking you. Will you do your toilet first or shall I?’

‘I’m in no hurry,’ said Ashenden.

‘I am an old campaigner, it will not take me long. Do you wash your teeth every day?’

‘Yes,’ said Ashenden.

‘So do I. It is a habit I learned in New York. I always think that a fine set of teeth are an adornment to a man.’

There was a wash-basin in the compartment and the General scrubbed his teeth, with gurglings and garglings, energetically. Then he got a bottle of eau-de-Cologne from his bag, poured some of it on a towel and rubbed it over his face and hands. He took a comb and carefully arranged his wig; either it had not moved in the night or else he had set it straight before Ashenden awoke. He got another bottle out of his bag, with a spray attached to it, and squeezing a bulb covered his shirt and coat with a fine cloud of scent, did the same to his handkerchief, and then with a beaming face, like a man who has done his duty by the world and is well pleased, turned to Ashenden and said:

‘Now I am ready to brave the day. I will leave my things for you, you need not be afraid of the eau-de-Cologne, it is the best you can get in Paris.’

‘Thank you very much,’ said Ashenden. ‘All I want is soap and water.’

‘Water? I never use water except when I have a bath. Nothing can be worse for the skin.’

When they approached the frontier, Ashenden, remembering the General’s instructive gesture when he was suddenly awakened in the night, said to him:

‘If you’ve got a revolver on you I think you’d better give it to me. With my diplomatic passport they’re not likely to search me, but they might take it into their heads to go through you and we don’t want to have any bothers.’

‘It is hardly a weapon, it is only a toy,’ returned the Mexican, taking out of his hip-pocket a fully loaded revolver of formidable dimensions. ‘I do not like parting with it even for an hour, it gives me the feeling that I am not fully dressed. But you are quite right, we do not want to take any risks; I will give you my knife as well. I would always rather use a knife than a revolver; I think it is a more elegant weapon.’

‘I daresay it is only a matter of habit,’ answered Ashenden. ‘Perhaps you are more at home with a knife.’

‘Anyone can pull a trigger, but it needs a man to use a knife.’

To Ashenden it looked as though it were in a single movement that he tore open his waistcoat and from his belt snatched and opened a long knife of murderous aspect. He handed it to Ashenden with a pleased smile on his large, ugly and naked face.

‘There’s a pretty piece of work for you, Mr. Somerville. I’ve never seen a better bit of steel in my life, it takes an edge like a razor and it’s strong; you can cut a cigarette-paper with it and you can hew down an oak. There is nothing to get out of order and when it is closed it might be the knife a schoolboy uses to cut notches in his desk.’

He shut it with a click and Ashenden put it along with the revolver in his pocket.

‘Have you anything else?’

‘My hands,’ replied the Mexican with arrogance, ‘but those I daresay the custom officials will not make trouble about.’

Ashenden remembered the iron grip he had given him when they shook hands and slightly shuddered. They were large and long and smooth; there was not a hair on them or on the wrists, and with the pointed, rosy, manicured nails there was really something sinister about them.