**The Voice of the Turtle**

W. Somerset Maugham

For some time I could not make up my mind if I liked Peter Melrose or not. He had had a novel pub­lished that had caused some stir among the rather dreary but worthy people who are always on the look­out for new talent. Elderly gentlemen with nothing much to do but go to luncheon parties praised it with girlish enthusiasm, and wiry little women who didn’t get on with their husbands thought it showed prom­ise. I read a few reviews. They contradicted one an­other freely. Some of the critics claimed that with this first novel the author had sprung into the front rank of English novelists: others reviled it. I did not read it. I have learnt by experience that when a book makes a sensation it is just as well to wait a year be­fore you read it. It is astonishing how many books then you need not read at all. But it chanced that one day I met Peter Melrose. With some misgiving I had accepted an invitation to a sherry party. It was in the top flat of a converted house in Bloomsbury, and I was a trifle out of breath when I had climbed four flights of stairs. My hostesses were two women, much over life size, in early middle life, the sort of women who know all about the insides of motor cars and like a good tramp in the rain, but very feminine for all that, fond of eating out of paper bags. The drawing room, which they called “our workshop,” though being of independent means neither had ever done a stroke of work in her life, was large and bare, fur­nished with rustless-steel chairs, which looked as though they could with difficulty support the very substantial weight of their owners, glass-topped tables and a vast divan covered with zebra skin. On the walls were bookshelves, and pictures by the better- known English imitators of Cézanne, Braque and Picasso. In the shelves, besides a number of “curious” books of the eighteenth century (for pornography is ageless) there were only the works of living authors, mostly first editions, and it was indeed to sign some of my own that I had been asked to the party.

It was quite small. There was but one other woman, who might have been a younger sister of my host­esses, for, though stout, she was not quite so stout, though tall, not quite so tall, and though hearty, not quite so hearty. I did not catch her name, but she answered to that of Boofuls. The only man besides myself was Peter Melrose. He was quite young, twenty-two or twenty-three, of the middle height, but with an ungainly figure that made him look squat. He had a reddish skin that seemed to fit over the bones of his face too tightly, a rather large Semitic nose, though he was not a Jew, and alert green eyes under bushy eyebrows. His brown hair, cut very short, was scurfy. He was dressed in the brown Nor­folk jacket and grey flannel trousers that are worn by the art students who wander hatless along King’s Road, Chelsea. An uncouth young man. Nor was there much to attract in his manner. He was self- assertive, disputatious and intolerant. He had a hearty contempt for his fellow writers which he ex­pressed with zest. The satisfaction he gave me by his breezy attacks on reputations which for my part I considered exaggerated, but prudently held my tongue about, was only lessened by the conviction that no sooner would my back be turned than he would tear my own to shreds. He talked well. He was amusing and sometimes witty. I should have laughed at his sallies more easily if those three ladies had not been so unreasonably convulsed by them. They roared with laughter at what he said, whether it was funny or whether it was inept. He said many silly things, for he talked without stopping, but he also said some very clever ones. He had a point of view, crude and not so original as he thought, but sincere. But the most striking thing about him was his eager, im­petuous vitality; it was like a hot flame that burnt him with an unendurable fury. It even shed a glow on those about him. He had something, if only that, and when I left it was with a slight sense of curiosity at what would come of him. I did not know if he had talent; so many young things can write a clever novel —that means nothing; but it seemed to me that as a man he was not quite like everybody else. He was the sort of person who at thirty, when time had softened his asperity and experience had taught him that he was not quite so intelligent as he thought, would turn into an interesting and agreeable fellow. But I never expected to see him again.

It was with surprise that I received two or three days later a copy of his novel with a very flattering dedication. I read it. It was obviously autobiographi­cal. The scene was a small town in Sussex, and the characters of the upper middle class that strives to keep up appearances on an inadequate income. The humour was rather brutal and rather vulgar. It grated on me, for it consisted chiefly of mockery at people because they were old and poor. Peter Melrose did not know how hard those misfortunes are to bear, and that the efforts made to cope with them are more deserving of sympathy than of derision. But there were descriptions of places, little pictures of a room or impressions of the countryside, which were ex­cellently done. They showed tenderness and a sense of the spiritual beauty of material things. The book was written easily, without affectation, and with a pleasant feeling for the sound of words. But what made it indeed somewhat remarkable, so that I understood why it had attracted attention, was the passion that quivered in the love story of which the plot, such as it was, consisted. It was, as is the modern fashion, more than a trifle coarse and, again in the modern fashion, it tailed off vaguely, without any particular result, so that everything was left in the end pretty much as it had been in the beginning; but you did get the impression of young love, idealistic and yet vehemently sexual; it was so vivid and so deeply felt that it took your breath away. It seemed to throb on the printed page like the pulse of life. It had no reticence. It was absurd, scandalous and beautiful. It was like a force of nature. That was passion all right. There is nothing, anywhere, so moving and so awe-inspiring.

I wrote to Peter Melrose and told him what I thought of his book, then suggested that w'e might lunch together. He rang me up next day, and we made a date.

I found him unaccountably shy when we sat down opposite one another at a table in a restaurant. I gave him a cocktail. He talked glibly enough, but I could not help seeing that he was ill at ease. I gained the impression that his self-assurance was a pose assumed to conceal, from himself maybe, a diffidence that tor­tured him. His manners were brusque and awkward. He would say a rude thing and then laugh nervously to cover his own embarrassment. Though he pre­tended to be so sure of himself, he wanted all the time to be reassured by you. By irritating you, by saying the things he thought would annoy, he tried to force from you some admission, tacit it might be, that he was as wonderful as he longed to think himself. He wanted to despise the opinion of his fellows, and noth­ing was more important to him. I thought him rather an odious young man, but I did not mind that. It is very natural that clever young men should be rather odious. They are conscious of gifts that they do not know how to use. They are exasperated with the world that will not recognize their merit. They have something to give, and no hand is stretched out to receive it. They are impatient for the fame they re­gard as their due. No, I do not mind odious young men; it is when they are charming that I button up the pockets of my sympathy.

Peter Melrose was extremely modest about his book. He blushed through his reddish skin when I praised what I liked in it, and accepted my strictures with a humility that was almost embarrassing. He had made very little money out of it, and his pub­lishers were giving him a small monthly allowance in advance of royalties on the next one. This he had just started, but he wanted to get away to write it in peace, and knowing I lived on the Riviera he asked me if I could tell him of a quiet place where he could bathe and live cheaply. I suggested that he should come and spend a few days with me so that he could look about till he found something to suit him. His green eyes sparkled when I proposed this, and he flushed.

“Shouldn’t I be an awful nuisance?”

“No. I shall be working. All I can offer you is three meals a day and a room to sleep in. It’ll be very dull, but you can do exactly what you like.”

“It sounds grand. May I let you know' if I decide to come?”

“Of course.”

We separated, and a week or two later I went home. This was in May. Early in June I received a letter from Peter Melrose asking, if I had really meant what I said when I invited him to spend a few days with me, whether he might arrive on such and such a date. Well, at the time I had meant it, but now, a month later, I remembered that he was an arrogant and ill- bred youth, whom I had seen but twice and wasn’t in the least interested in, and I didn’t mean it any longer. It seemed to me very likely that he would be bored stiff. I lived a very quiet life and saw few people. And I thought it would be a great strain on my nerves if he were as rude as I knew he could be and I as his host felt it behooved me to keep my temper. I saw myself driven beyond endurance and ringing the bell to have his clothes packed and the car brought round to take him away within half an hour. But there was nothing to do about it. It would save him the cost of board and lodging to spend a short period with me, and if he was tired and unhappy, as he said in his letter, it might be that it would do him good. I sent him a wire, and shortly afterwards he arrived.

He looked very hot and grubby in his grey flannel trousers and brown tweed coat when I met him at the station, but after a swim in the pool he changed into white shorts and a Cochet shirt. He looked then quite absurdly young. He had never been out of England before. He was excited. It was touching to see his delight. He seemed, amid those unaccustomed sur­roundings, to lose his sense of himself, and he was simple, boyish and modest. I was agreeably surprised. In the evening, after dinner, sitting in the garden, with only the croaking of the little green frogs to break the silence, he began talking to me of his novel. It was a romantic story about a young writer and a celebrated prima donna. The theme was reminiscent of Ouida, the last thing I should have expected this hard-boiled youth to write, and I was tickled; it was odd how the fashion completed the circle and returned generation after generation to the same themes. I had no doubt that Peter Melrose would treat it in a very modern way, but there it was, the same old story as had entranced sentimental readers in the three- volume novels *of* the eighties. He proposed to set it in the beginning of the Edwardian era, which to the young has already acquired the fantastic, far-away feeling of a past age. He talked and talked. He was not unpleasant to listen to. He had no notion that he was putting into fiction his own daydreams, the comic and touching daydreams of a rather unattractive, obscure young man who sees himself beloved, to the admiration of the whole world, by an incredibly beau­tiful, celebrated and magnificent woman. I always enjoyed the novels of Ouida, and Peter’s idea did not at all displease me. With his charming gift of descrip­tion, his vivid, ingenuous way of looking at material things, fabrics, pieces of furniture, walls, trees, flow­ers, and his power of representing the passion of life, the passion of love, that thrilled every fibre of his own uncouth body, I had a notion that he might well pro­duce something exuberant, absurd and poetical. But I asked him a question.

“Have you ever known a prima donna?”

“No, but I’ve read all the autobiographies and memoirs that I could find. I’ve gone into it pretty thoroughly. Not only the obvious things, you know, but I’ve hunted around in all sorts of byways to get the revealing touch or the suggestive anecdote.”

“And have you got what you wanted?”

“I think so.”

He began to describe his heroine to me. She was young and beautiful, wilful it is true and with a quick temper, but magnanimous. A woman on the grand scale. Music was her passion; there was music not only in her voice, but in her gestures and in her in­most thoughts. She was devoid of envy, and her appreciation of art was such that when another singer had done her an injury she forgave her when she heard her sing a role beautifully. She was of a wonder­ful generosity, and would give away everything she possessed when a story of misfortune touched her soft heart. She was a great lover, prepared to sacrifice the world for the man she loved. She was intelligent and well read. She was tender, unselfish and disinterested. In fact she was much too good to be true.

“I think you’d better meet a prima donna,” I said at last.

“How can I ?”

“Have you ever heard of La Falterona?”

“Of course I have. I’ve read her memoirs.”

“She lives just along the coast. I’ll ring her up and ask her to dinner.”

“Will you really? It would be wonderful.”

“Don’t blame me if you don’t find her quite what you expect.”

“It’s the truth I want.”

Everyone has heard *of* La Falterona. Not even Melba had a greater reputation. She had ceased now to sing in opera, but her voice was still lovely, and she could fill a concert hall in any part of the world. She went for long tours every winter, and in summer rested in a villa by the sea. On the Riviera people are neighbours if they live thirty miles from one another, and for some years I had seen a good deal of La Fal- terona. She was a woman of ardent temperament, and she was celebrated not only for her singing, but for her love affairs: she never minded talking about them, and I had often sat entranced for hours while, with the humour which to me was her most astonishing characteristic, she regaled me with lurid tales of royal or very opulent adorers. I was satisfied that there was at least a measure of truth in them. She had been married, for short periods, three or four times, and in one of these unions had annexed a Neapolitan prince. Thinking that to be known as La Falterona was grander than any title, she did not use his name (to which indeed she had no right, since after divorcing him she had married somebody else); but her silver, her cutlery and her dinner service were heavily deco­rated with a coat of arms and a crown, and her servants invariably addressed her as *madame la prin­cesse.* She claimed to be a Hungarian, but her English was perfect, she spoke it with a slight accent (when she remembered), but with an intonation suggestive, I had been told, of Kansas City. This she explained by saying that her father was a political exile who had fled to America when she was no more than a child; but she did not seem quite sure whether he was a distinguished scientist who had got into trouble for his liberal views, or a Magyar of high rank who had brought down on his head the imperial wrath because he had had a love affair with an archduchess. It de­pended on whether she was just an artist among artists, or a great lady among persons of noble birth.

With me she was, not natural, for that she could never have been if she had tried, but franker than with anyone else. She had a natural and healthy con­tempt for the arts. She genuinely looked upon the whole thing as a gigantic bluff, and deep down in her heart was an amused sympathy for all the people who were able to put it over on the public. I will admit that I looked forward to the encounter between Peter Melrose and La Falterona with a good deal of sar­donic amusement.

She liked coming to dine with me because she knew the food was good. It was the only meal she ate in the day, for she took great care of her figure, but she liked that one to be succulent and ample. I asked her to come at nine, knowing that was the earliest hour she dreamt of eating, and ordered dinner for half past. She turned up at a quarter to ten. She was dressed in apple-green satin, cut very low in front, with no back at all, and she wore a string of huge pearls, a number of expensive-looking rings, and on her left arm dia­mond and emerald bracelets from the wrist to the elbow. Two or three of them were certainly real. On her raven black hair was a thin circlet of diamonds. She could not have looked more splendid if she had been going to a ball at Stafford House in the old days. We were in white ducks.

“How grand you are,” I said. “I told you it wasn’t a party.”

She flashed a look of her magnificent black eyes at Peter.

“Of course it’s a party. You told me your friend was a writer of talent. I am only an interpreter.” She ran one finger down her flashing bracelets. “This is the homage I pay to the creative artist.”

I did not utter the vulgar monosyllable that rose to my lips, but offered her what I knew was her favourite cocktail. I was privileged to call her Maria, and she always called me Master. This she did, first because she knew it made me feel a perfect fool, and secondly because, though she was in point of fact not more than two or three years younger than me, it made it quite clear that we belonged to different generations. Sometimes, however, she also called me “you dirty swine.” This evening she certainly might very well have passed for thirty-five. She had those rather large features which somehow do not seem to betray age. On the stage she was a beautiful woman, and even in private life, notwithstanding her big nose, large mouth and fleshy face, a good-looking one. She wore a brown make-up, with dark rouge, and her lips were vividly scarlet. She looked very Spanish and, I suspected, felt it, for her accent at the beginning of dinner was quite Sevillian. I wanted her to talk so that Peter should get his money’s worth, and I knew there was but one subject in the world that she could talk about. She was in point of fact a stupid woman who had acquired a line of glib chatter which made people on first meet­ing her think she was as brilliant as she looked; but it was merely a performance she gave, and you soon dis­covered that she not only did not know what she was talking about, but was not in the least interested in it. I do not think she had ever read a book in her life. Her knowledge of what was going on in the world was confined to what she was able to gather by looking at the pictures in the illustrated press. Her passion for music was complete bunkum. Once at a concert to which I went with her she slept all through the Fifth Symphony, and I was charmed to hear her during the interval telling people that Beethoven stirred her so much that she hesitated to come and hear him, for with those glorious themes singing through her head, it meant that she wouldn’t sleep a wink all night. I could well believe she would lie awake, for she had had so sound a nap during the Symphony that it could not but interfere with her night’s rest.

But there was one subject in which her interest never failed. She pursued it with indefatigable energy. No obstacle prevented her from returning to it; no chance word was so remote that she could not use it as a stepping-stone to come back to it, and in effecting this she displayed a cleverness of which one would never have thought her capable. On this subject she could be witty, vivacious, philosophic, tragic and in­ventive. It enabled her to exhibit all the resources of her ingenuity. There was no end to its ramifications, and no limit to its variety. This subject was herself. I gave her an opening at once, and then all I had to do was to make suitable interjections. She was in great form. We were dining on the terrace, and a full moon was obligingly shining on the sea in front of us. Nature, as though she knew what was proper to the occasion, had set just the right scene. The view was framed by two tall black cypresses, and all round us on the terrace the orange trees in full flower exhaled their heady perfume. There was no wind, and the candles on the table flamed with a steady softness. It was a light that exactly suited La Falterona. She sat between us, eating heartily and thoroughly appre­ciating the champagne, and she was enjoying herself. She gave the moon a glance. On the sea was a broad pathway of silver.

“How beautiful nature is,” she said. “My God, the scenery one has to play in. How can they expect one to sing? You know, really, the sets at Covent Garden are a disgrace. The last time I sang Juliet I just told them I wouldn’t go on unless they did something about the moon.”

Peter listened to her in silence. He ate her words. She was better value than I had dared to hope. She got a little tight not only on the champagne but on her own loquaciousness. To listen to her you would have thought she was a meek and docile creature against whom the whole world was in conspiracy. Her life had been one long bitter struggle against desper­ate odds. Managers treated her vilely, impresarios played foul tricks on her, singers combined to ruin her, critics bought by the money of her enemies wrote scandalous things about her, lovers for whom she had sacrificed everything used her with base ingratitude; and yet, by the miracle of her genius and her quick wits, she had discomfited them all. With joyous glee, her eyes flashing, she told us how she had defeated their machinations and what disaster had befallen the wretches who had stood in her way. I wondered how she had the nerve to tell the disgraceful stories she told. Without the smallest consciousness of what she was doing she showed herself vindictive and envious, hard as nails, incredibly vain, cruel, selfish, scheming and mercenary. I stole a glance now and then at Peter. I was tickled at the confusion he must be ex­periencing when he compared his ideal picture of the prima donna with the ruthless reality. She was a woman without a heart. When at last she left us, I turned to Peter with a smile.

“Well,” I said, “at all events you’ve got some good material.”

“I know, and it all fits in so beautifully,” he said with enthusiasm.

“Does it?” I exclaimed, taken aback.

“She’s exactly like my woman. She’ll never believe that I’d sketched out the main lines of the character before I’d ever seen her.”

I stared at him in amazement.

“The passion for art. The disinterestedness. She has that same nobility of soul that I saw in my mind’s eye. The small-minded, the curious, the vulgar put every obstacle in her way, and she sweeps them all aside by the greatness of her purpose and the purity of her ends.” He gave a little happy laugh. “Isn’t it wonderful how nature copies art? I swear to you, I’ve got her to the life.”

I was about to speak; I held my tongue; though I shrugged a spiritual shoulder, I was touched. Peter had seen in her what he was determined to see. There was something very like beauty in his illusion. In his own way he was a poet. We went to bed, and two or three days later, having found a pension to his liking, he left me.

In course of time his book appeared, and like most second novels by young people it had but a very moderate success. The critics had overpraised his first effort and now were unduly censorious. It is of course a very different thing to write a novel about yourself and the people you have known from childhood and to write one about persons of your own invention. Peter’s was too long. He had allowed his gift for word painting to run away with him, the humour was still rather vulgar; but he had reconstructed the period with skill, and the romantic story had that same thrill of real passion which in his first book had so much impressed me.

After the dinner at my house I did not see La Fal- terona for more than a year. She went for a long tour in South America and did not come down to the Riviera till late in the summer. One night she asked me to dine with her. We were alone but for her companion-secretary, an Englishwoman, Miss Glaser by name, whom La Falterona bullied and ill treated, hit and swore at, but whom she could not do without. Miss Glaser was a haggard person of fifty, with grey hair and a sallow, wrinkled face. She was a queer creature. She knew everything there was to be known about La Falterona. She both adored and hated her. Behind her back she could be extremely funny at her expense, and the imitation she gave in secret of the great singer with her admirers was the most richly comic thing I have ever heard. But she watched over her like a mother. It was she who, sometimes by wheedling, sometimes by sheer plainness of speech, caused La Falterona to behave herself something like a human being. It was she who had written the sing­er’s exceedingly inaccurate memoirs.

La Falterona wore pale blue satin pyjamas (she liked satin) and, presumably to rest her hair, a green silk wig; except for a few rings, a pearl necklace, a couple of bracelets and a diamond brooch at her waist, she wore no jewelry. She had much to tell me of her triumphs in South America. She talked on and on. She had never been in more superb voice, and the ovations she had received were unparalleled. The con­cert halls were sold out for every performance, and she had made a packet.

“Is it true or it it not true, Glaser?” cried Maria with a strong South American accent.

“Most of it,” said Miss Glaser.

La Falterona had the objectionable habit *of* ad­dressing her companion by her surname. But it must long since have ceased to annoy the poor woman, so there was not much point in it.

“Who was that man we met in Buenos Aires?” “Which man?”

“You fool, Glaser. You remember perfectly. The man I was married to once.”

“Pepe Zapata,” Miss Glaser replied without a smile.

“He was broke. He had the impudence to ask me to give him back a diamond necklace he’d given me. He said it had belonged to his mother.”

“It wouldn’t have hurt you to give it him,” said Miss Glaser. “You never wear it.”

“Give it him back?” cried La Falterona, and her astonishment was such that she spoke the purest English. “Give it him back? You’re crazy.”

She looked at Miss Glaser as though she expected her there and then to have an attack of acute mania. She got up from the table, for we had finished our dinner.

“Let us go outside,” she said. “If I hadn’t the patience of an angel I’d have sacked that woman long ago.”

La Falterona and I went out, but Miss Glaser did not come with us. We sat on the veranda. There was a magnificent cedar in the garden, and its dark branches were silhouetted against the starry sky. The sea, al­most at our feet, was marvellously still. Suddenly La Falterona gave a start.

“I almost forgot. Glaser, you fool,” she shouted, “why didn’t you remind me?” And then again to me: “I’m furious with you.”

“I’m glad you didn’t remember till after dinner,” I answered.

“That friend of yours and his book.”

I didn’t immediately grasp what she was talking about.

“What friend and what book?”

“Don’t be so stupid. An ugly little man with a shiny face and a bad figure. He wrote a book about me.”

“Oh! Peter Melrose. But it’s not about you.”

“Of course it is. Do you take me for a fool? He had the impudence to send it me.”

“I hope you had the decency to acknowledge it.”

“Do you think I have the time to acknowledge all the books twopenny-halfpenny authors send me? I expect Glaser wrote to him. You had no right to ask me to dinner to meet him. I came to oblige you, be­cause I thought you liked me for myself, I didn’t know I was just being made use of. It’s awful that one can’t trust one’s oldest friends to behave like gentlemen. I’ll never dine with you again so long as I live. Never, never, never.”

She was working herself into one of her tantrums, so I interrupted her before it was too late.

“Come off it, my dear,” I said. “In the first place the character of the singer in that book, which I sup­pose is the one you’re referring to—”

“You don’t suppose I’m referring to the char­woman, do you?”

“Well, the character *of* the singer was roughed out before he’d even seen you, and besides it isn’t in the least like you.”

“How d’you mean, it’s not like me? All my friends have recognized me. I mean, it’s the most obvious portrait.”

“Mary,” I expostulated.

“My name is Maria, and no one knows it better than you, and if you can’t call me Maria you can call me Madame Falterona or Princess.”

I paid no attention to this.

“Did you read the book?”

“Of course I read it. When everyone told me it was about me.”

“But the boy’s heroine, the prima donna, is twenty- five.”

“A woman like me is ageless.”

“She’s musical to her finger tips, gentle as a dove, and a miracle of unselfishness; she’s frank, loyal and disinterested. Is that the opinion you have of your­self?”

“And what is *your* opinion of me?”

“Hard as nails, absolutely ruthless, a born in­triguer and as self-centred as they make ’em.”

She then called me a name which a lady does not habitually apply to a gentleman who, whatever his faults, has never had his legitimacy called in question. But though her eyes flashed I could see that she was not in the least angry. She accepted my description of her as complimentary.

“And what about the emerald ring? Are you going to deny that I told him that?”

The story of the emerald ring was this: La Falte- rona was having a passionate love affair with the Crown Prince of a powerful state, and he had made her a present of an emerald of immense value. One night they had a quarrel, high words passed, and some reference being made to the ring she tore it off her finger and flung it in the fire. The Crown Prince, being a man of thrifty habit, with a cry of consterna­tion, threw himself on his knees and began raking out the coals till he recovered the ring. The Falterona watched him scornfully as he grovelled on the floor. She didn’t give much away herself, but she could not bear economy in others. She finished the story with these splendid words:

“After that I *couldn't* love him.”

The incident was picturesque and had taken Peter’s fancy. He had used it very neatly.

“I told you both about that in the greatest confi­dence and I’ve never told it to a soul before. It’s a scandalous breach of confidence to have put it into a book. There are no excuses either for him or for you.”

“But I’ve heard you tell the story dozens of times. And it was told me by Florence Montgomerie about herself and the Crown Prince Rudolf. It was one of her favourite stories, too. Lola Montez used to tell it about herself and the King of Bavaria. I have little doubt that Nell Gwyn told it about herself and Charles II. It’ s one of the oldest stories in the world.”

She was taken aback, but only for an instant.

“I don’t see anything strange in its having hap­pened more than once. Everyone knows that women are passionate and that men are as mean as cat’s meat. I could show you the emerald if you liked. I had to have it reset of course.”

“With Lola Montez it was pearls,” I said ironically. “I believe they were considerably damaged.”

“Pearls?” She gave that brilliant smile of hers. “Have I ever told you about Benjy Riesenbaum and the pearls? You might make a story out of it.”

Benjy Riesenbaum was a person of great wealth, and it was common knowledge that for a long time he had been the Falterona’s lover. In fact it was he who had bought her the luxurious little villa in which we were now sitting.

“He’d given me a very handsome string in New York. I was singing at the Metropolitan, and at the end of the season we travelled back to Europe to­gether. You never knew him, did you?”

“No.”

“Well, he wasn’t bad in some ways, but he was insanely jealous. We had a row on the boat because a young Italian officer was paying me a good deal of attention. Heaven knows, I’m the easiest woman in the world to get on with, but I will not be bullied by any man. After all, I have my self-respect to think of. I told him where he got off, if you understand what I mean, and he slapped my face. On deck if you please. I don’t mind telling you I was mad. I tore the string of pearls off my neck and flung it in the sea. ‘They cost fifty thousand dollars,’ he gasped. He went white. I drew myself up to my full height. ‘I only valued them because I loved you,’ I said. And I turned on my heel.”

“You were a fool,” I said.

“I wouldn’t speak to him for twenty-four hours. At the end of that time I had him eating out of my hand. When we got to Paris the first thing he did was to go to Cartier’s and buy me another just as good.”

She began to giggle.

“Did you say I was a fool? I’d left the real string in the bank in New York, because I knew I was going back next season. It was an imitation one that I threw in the sea.”

She started to laugh, and her laugh was rich and joy­ous and like a child’s. That was the sort of trick that thoroughly appealed to her. She chortled with glee.

“What fools men are,” she gasped. “And you, you thought I’d throw a real string into the sea.”

She laughed and laughed. At last she stopped. She was excited.

“I want to sing. Glaser, play an accompaniment.” A voice came from the drawing room.

“You can’t sing after all that food you walloped down.”

“Shut up, you old cow. Play something, I tell you.”

There was no reply, but in a moment Miss Glaser began to play the opening bars of one of Schumann’s songs. It was no strain on the voice, and I guessed that Miss Glaser knew what she was doing when she chose it. La Falterona began to sing, in an undertone, but as she heard the sounds come from her lips and found that they were clear and pure, she let herself go. The song finished. There was silence. Miss Glaser had heard that La Falterona was in magnificent voice, and she sensed that she wished to sing again. The prima donna was standing in the window, with her back to the lighted room, and she looked out at the darkly shining sea. The cedar made a lovely pattern against the sky. The night was soft and balmy. Miss Glaser played a couple of bars. A cold shiver ran down my spine. La Falterona gave a little start as she recognized the music, and I felt her gather herself together.

*“Mild und leise wie er lächelt*

*Wie das Auge hold er öffnet.”*

It was Isolde’s death song. She had never sung in Wagner, fearing the strain on her voice, but this, I suppose, she had often sung in concerts. It did not matter now that instead *of* an orchestral accompani­ment she had only the thin tinkle of a piano. The notes of the heavenly melody fell upon the still air and travelled over the water. In that too-romantic scene, in that lovely night, the effect was shattering. La Falterona’s voice, even now, was exquisite in its quality, mellow and crystalline; and she sang with wonderful emotion, so tenderly, with such tragic, beautiful anguish that my heart melted within me. I had a most awkward lump in my throat when she finished, and looking at her I saw that tears were streaming down her face. I did not want to speak. She stood quite still, looking out at that ageless sea.

What a strange woman! I thought then that I would sooner have her as she was, with her monstrous faults, than as Peter Melrose saw her, a pattern of all the virtues. But then people blame me because I rather like people who are a little worse than is reason­able. She was hateful, of course, but she was ir­resistible.