

PART ONE: ORMUS' INCANTATION

I. The Mage Ormus

After the stifling heat of summer, the month of September is perhaps the one, in New York, whose weather is the most disconcerting. In winter, the temperature sometimes descends as far as twenty degrees below zero, while in summer one is positively grilled there. In July and August the dwellings are no longer habitable, and the unfortunate citizens sleep in parks and on the roofs of their buildings. September and October finally become tolerable—the two most agreeable months of the year in Fifth Avenue, where the billionaires of a city constructed for commercial and financial establishments have their splendid town houses.

From Brooklyn Bridge, which overlooks the city from its forty-meter height, eyes considering New York by day see nothing but a mass of brick and iron buildings, in which the skyscrapers look like enormous towers—but at night, the décor changes. Among millions of electrically-lighted windows, the strings of high street-lights in the avenues, intersecting at right-angles, design an enormous sparkling chessboard of stars. Mirrored in the river, the formidable bridge, two kilometers long and twenty-six meters wide, with its eight tracks for trains and trams, two roads for automobiles and a pedestrian footpath, is brilliantly illuminated, in flowing streaks of fire endlessly repeated by the water, resembling a fairyland of light.

While everywhere else in the city is feverishly crowded and agitated, Fifth Avenue enjoys a relative calm, an oasis in the movement of business and unrelenting work. The façades of the big houses have a rich and monumental appearance, but that is not where there is life and movement. The real luxury and intimate life is hidden behind them; it is in the gardens that everything is disposed for the pleasure of the inhabitants. The most opulent are, in any case, not content with these splendid dwellings; on Long Island, the large isle that borders the Atlantic outside New York, there are veritable palaces whose grounds strive to outdo Versailles.

Such was the case with Diana, Duchess of Rutland, who, in addition to her magnificent house in Fifth Avenue, had a mansion on the island whose magnificence and comfort eclipsed the most beautiful properties of the Old World.

Diana Bering, the daughter of the billionaire Nathan Bering, a king of Industry, had been able to satisfy her every desire and whim since early childhood. After a very complete education she had entered social life at the age of eighteen. Diana's colossal fortune put her beyond compare, but the daughters of plutocrats are not much sought-after by Yankees. It being usual in the United States not to provide daughters with dowries, dollar millionaires marry for love; they espouse young women who, if not poor, are at least less well-off than they are, rather than heiresses whose wealth overshadows their own. Because of that, a certain number of more fortunate young women remain spinsters, or fall back on the nobility of old Europe, where they also find a satisfaction of their vanity. It was thus that Diana Bering had become the Duchess of Rutland.

The Duke, an English gentleman, bore one of the oldest British names; there had been a Rutland in the reign of Richard II, which is to say, around 1400: Duke Aumerle of Rutland, the son of the Duke of York.¹ The Duke had an illustrious name, and also debts of four million, which Nathan Bering paid in full. Once married, Diana led the life she wanted, traveling alone or with her husband. More often, she was alone; Rutland would have been considered absolutely lacking in good taste had he not let the Duchess do as she wished. The latter, for her part, scarcely paid any heed to her husband, who enjoyed the same liberty. It was, therefore, a society marriage of the best kind, and never, in the

¹ The Duke of Rutland is a real English title and was in use when Champsaur wrote the novel; if the ninth duke, John Henry Montagu Manners (1886-1940), was aware of his fictional counterpart he evidently made no complaint. The additional title created for Edward of Norwich, Duke of Aumerle by Richard II was actually Earl of Rutland, but that title fell into disuse after his death until its recreation in the 16th century, when it became the prerogative of the Manners family.

twelve years that it had been contracted, had the slightest cloud appeared in the sky of the two spouses' bed, each of them having had the tact not to be too attached to it.

In her adolescence, Diana, like all girls, had followed the program of physical education practiced in the New World. Scarcely sensual then, her amorous fantasies had been rare. The Duke had certainly not had the same temperament, but in the United States, gallant life is rather limited. It required the Great War for male youth to acquire a taste for pleasure in Europe and bring back more dissolute mores.

When she was not traveling—and she traveled a great deal, having two yachts and a number of automobiles—the Duchess lived in her mansion on Long Island, Redge House. On the fifth of September 1927, however, she had gone to New York, attracted by the arrival in the city of the Mage Ormus, who was all the rage among the city's female population—and in her small drawing-room with authentic Louis XV furniture, there were five pretty female visitors in animated conversation with the Duchess.

"The Mage is astonishing," said Ame Love, the daughter of Mordant Love. For one thing, he's too handsome. He reminds me of a god. A contemporary of anterior lives, which he remembers, he talks about the past with a disconcerting authority."

"Has he been in New York long?" asked the Duchess.

"Only three weeks. It's Countess Olivani-Sforza who knew him. It was at her house that I saw him for the first time, four days ago. He's an amazing thought-reader."

"Really?" exclaimed Betty Herald, a magnificent blonde, the wife of the celebrated engineering genius Pall Herald, the constructor of the Great Lakes ferry. "What was he able to tell you? I didn't think you were very sensitive to suggestion."

"I'd like to see you resist, when his great yellow eyes stare you in the face."

"And he told you what you were thinking?"

"Exactly—me and the others."

"It's diabolical," said Mary O'Brien, crossing herself. She was an extremely Catholic Irishwoman who lived in Diana's house. "This Ormus is an incarnation of the Evil Spirit."

"Shut up, Mary," said the Duchess. "You're being silly, my dear."

Her situation in Diana's house put Mary O'Brien completely under the Duchess's domination, and in spite of her revolutionary spirit, the Irishwoman, an exile without resources, was obliged to submit to her meekly. She dared not make any reply.

Mary was a very unusual individual: the last descendant of a family of Irish patriots, her extreme feminism had, in a way, had her ostracized from all the small political groups, and since Ireland had become independent she had left the country in order to travel the world preaching female emancipation. Unfortunately, she had no money and could only support herself on the fruits of her efforts, political pamphlets bringing in very little and lectures not much more. She had been lucky enough to meet Diana in Canada. The latter had been enthused by the young evangelist's ideas, had offered her a refuge in her home and gave her funds for an active propaganda.

Mary was a tall, thin woman twenty-five years of age, with strongly-accentuated masculine features, black hair cut very short, a round face, and keen and luminous eyes. Her great charm was her clear, definite and seductive voice. The five women visiting Diana were all converts to her cause and gave her the aid of their considerable influence—and the five women gathered at that moment in the Duchess of Rutland's home were incontestably among the richest and most beautiful in America.

The Duchess was in the splendor of maturity. Tall and admirably composed, only a slight creasing in the corners of her eyes denounced the wrinkles to come. Bright chestnut-colored hair framed a face slightly sun-bronzed by habitual traveling, firm and full and a trifle highly-colored, illuminated by magnificent jet-black eyes.

By contrast, Ame Love was a dainty blonde; her hair surrounded her face, like that of a little eighteenth-century doll, with a fleecy cloud. Her eyes were periwinkle blue. She was as lively as a bird, a delicate little thing, a Greuze of the prettiest sort.²

Kate Souvermann, the daughter of the multimillionaire Karl Souvermann, the director of the Old Silver Bank, retained from her German origins the slightly exaggerated plenitude of the daughters of

² The painter Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805) was famous for sentimental family scenes and rather sickly portraits.

that nation, but she was certainly one of its finest specimens. Tall, with superb arms and shoulders, perhaps a little too muscular, but very pale, blue eyes, and a complexion, not of lilies and roses but strawberries and cream, she had a beauty that created an appetite—for kisses and caresses, that is.

Betty Herald was a very American beauty: sturdy, molded in the flesh of a Greek goddess, coiffed in bronze-red, with fiery green eyes beneath her marble forehead. Athletic, skilled in all sports, she was capable of carrying her husband, the engineer of the Great Lakes, with her arms at full stretch.

The Margrave Oswald von Weringen was also a pure-blooded American, but from the South, born in New Orleans. She had the liveness of her native land and a Spanish slenderness, with profound dark eyes and dark hair that almost had a tint of blue. Always smiling, amiable and cordial, one sensed a pure descendant of the Latin race in her. She had married Von Weringen, a Viennese resident in North America for twenty years, initially as a Klondike gold-pro prospector; he had founded a fur company with the precious metal recovered from placers, which had made him a millionaire several times over, and he was still working. At present, he had a monopoly on all the large reserves of furs and was centralizing his stocks.

The conversation continued.

“Mary’s not entirely wrong,” said Ame Love. “A man like that scares me. Anything out of the ordinary makes me shiver. Isn’t it enough to live our lives?”

“What’s the point of living,” Kate, exclaimed, “if we can’t understand the enigma of life? Do we have an afterlife? That would be interesting to know. Must we disappear without that hope?”

“Kate’s right,” said Diana. “Have we arrived at the summit of civilization only for our intelligence to expire like a blown-out match? Is that possible? So, I’m passionate about everything that touches on matters of the beyond. There’s an impenetrable mystery in death, and it’s necessary to search for the key by any means possible. I want to see this Mage Ormus.”

“He’ll astonish you,” said Ame Love. “He didn’t say a word about the future life, but for the transmigration of souls in the past he’s astonishing. Listen to this! People were talking about the excavations undertaken in Egypt by Lord Carnarvon, and he smiled ironically. ‘Lord Carnarvon,’ he said, ‘was on the wrong track. The tombs he excavated had already been visited. In 942 B.C.—which is to say, in 4223 of the Memphic era, I was a servant of a priest of Helios³ named Phi-Zouma. Hating the rites of the priests of Amon, he took a malign pleasure—which was also very fruitful—in excavating and robbing the tombs erected under the old religion. It was at his instigation, and on his orders, that I, the humble Levite Omsrah, visited the tomb excavated by Lord Carnarvon five thousand years ago. I can, in consequence, assure you that he has only found what I left for him to find.’

“‘You’ve lived in those fabulous epochs, then?’ I asked. ‘Life then must have had a grandeur and a majesty far above that of our vulgar epoch?’

“‘That depends on the manner in which one understands human existence and antiquity,’ Ormus replied. ‘The Pharaoh was forced, in public life, always to maintain a hieratic attitude and a grandiose appearance, making him seem like a god to the populace—immobile, his eyes fixed in an impassive stare, indifferently—which demanded an attitude and behavior that had nothing agreeable about it for the sovereign. We priests, who were the principal scene-dressers of those absolute despots, were able to laugh at them in private. Worshipers of Helios, we were scornful of those fanatical idolaters, the priests of Amon,⁴ who, after having banished our master Osiris, had instituted the cult of Pharaoh as man and god by means of base flattery. But away from the external pomp, he became simply human again. How many times have I heard Pharaoh Amaris III, who was then our sovereign, laughing and joking with Phi-Zouma, and even, with me, the poor Levite? He was only a man then, and very glad to dispose of his mask of quasi-divinity.’

³ Helios was, of course, a Greek sun god, but French writers of the 19th and early 20th centuries often used Greek names for their “equivalent” Egyptian gods—as, of course, the Greeks had when they ruled Egypt; thus the Greeks named an important Egyptian city Heliopolis because it seemed to have been the center of worship of the Egyptian sun god, usually known as Amon-Ra or Amun-Re.

⁴ Whether accidentally or deliberately, Ormus appears to be confusing Amon/Amun, who was the equivalent of Helios, with Aten, whose worship displaced that of Amun-Re for a while during the eighteenth dynasty. Both were sun gods, but the one whose monotheistic worship was instituted by the Pharaoh Akhenaten was his personal deity. Osiris, on the other hand, was not a sun god at all but the god of the afterlife. Akhenaten’s son Tutankhamun was originally named Tutankhaten, but Amun’s name was substituted for Aten’s, reflecting the reversion to older rites that Ormus draws upon in his fictitious account of Tutankhamun’s life.

“‘It’s necessary to conserve our illusions,’ someone put in. ‘I picture the men of ancient Egypt in accordance the scale and grandeur of their monuments.’

“‘They had the nobility, at least, if not the height,’ the Mage replied. ‘The costumes and traditions of that epoch imposed a certain majesty of gesture and language.’

“Then, for more than an hour, ladies, Ormus told us mummified anecdotes, like memories of yesterday, describing the customs of very remote times in the manner of a man who had lived in them—times so ancient that they’ve fallen into eternal dust.”

A man had come into the room a few moments before, and, in order not to interrupt the speaker, had remained near the door. He came forward and bowed, shook some hands and kissed others, and sat down with the lovely women. It was Lord Rutland. Short, slim, elegant to the point of affectation, he had more natural wit than education. A good conversationalist, rather skeptical and mocking, he was a trifle arrogant but avoided insolence. The proud possessor of a long line of ancestors, he glorified himself in numbering among them the illustrious supposed author of the works of William Shakespeare, and when his intellect was clouded by slight intoxication he would start reminiscing about the works of his ancestor Roger Manners, Earl of Rutland, born at Belvoir Castle in Leicestershire in 1576.⁵

The Duchess’s vanity had latched on to that idea and she had sponsored research by an erudite bibliomaniac on the origin of the famous dramatist’s works. He had battled with many contradictory texts, after which he had given birth to an enormous volume concluding that William Shakespeare of Stratford-on-Avon, who had held gentlemen’s horses at theater doors in his youth, was merely a man of straw, paid and maintained to mask Roger Manners, Lord Rutland, a gentleman of the court, whose satirical portraits of the great might have won him many enemies, especially the disfavor of Queen Elizabeth.

The present Duke, whom literary polemics and that legend decorated with a certain distinction, had met a fifth-year student at the Harvard University named William Shakespeare; in order to give the legend even more vigor and further emphasis, it had amused him to befriend that Bohemian, who corresponded well enough to the character of one of Shakespeare’s heroes, Sir John Falstaff. Since then, William had gone everywhere with Lord Rutland, lived largely at his expense, without a care in the world and with complete freedom of speech. People even made jokes behind their backs about their uncertain amity. Diana liked the buffoon well enough, and helped him to personify her husband’s illustrious ancestry. Furthermore, the Duke, in his aristocratic pride, shared his wife’s ideas regarding survival after death. Can one, when one is a Duke, disappear like some obscure manual laborer or animal? In other matters, George Manners, Duke of Rutland was a philosopher and a mocker, but without overmuch acidity.

“Astonishing, astonishing, what you just said, my dear Lady Love! I think there’s a lot of charlatanry in it, but this Mage Ormus must be amusing to listen to. We must have him. He’ll give us a rest from all this spiritualist nonsense, which has given us a veritable indigestion.”

“At the Duchess’s instigation,” said the Margrave von Weringen, “I’ve read all the occult authors: Allan Kardec, Colonel Rochas, Stanislas de Guaita, Léon Denis, Thomas Lake Harris, Madame Blavatsky, D. D. Home, Henry Slade and others, but I’m confused by all their theories, which are totally lacking in detail. At least Mage Ormus has the advantage of being precise—and then again, one can see him.”

“One might perhaps even be able to touch him,” sniggered the Duke. “Women need prophets who are palpable, who need to eat, drink and...”

“Duke, Duke!” said Mary O’Brien, scandalized.

“Forgive me, Miss Ireland! I forgot that your democratic feminism is coupled with a rather old-fashioned severity.”

“Why are you always teasing poor Mary?” said the Duchess.

“Let’s not get off the subject,” said Kate Souvermann. “Mage Ormus has promised to come to my soirée tomorrow. Would you all like to come?”

“Are men admitted?” asked the Duke.

⁵ Roger Manners, the fifth Earl of Rutland (after the recreation of the title) married the daughter of Sir Philip Sidney, the author of *Arcadia*. He was suggested as a possible author of Shakespeare’s plays by Karl Bleibtreu in *Der Wahre Shakespeare* (1907), but the briefly fashionable theory soon fell out of favor.

“Certainly. Bring your husbands and admirers. After the sorcerer, there’ll be dancing.”

“Bravo! There’ll be resistance to suggestion, then.”

“On which note I’ll leave you,” Kate said. “I have preparations to make.”

“Can I bring Shakespeare?” asked the Duke.

“Yes—what would you do without your Double? You’d be like a body without a soul.”