

The Dream
of a
Nigerian Girl

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Nigerian Girl

**It happens that a number of young women in Nigeria, moved
by the hope of receiving more attention, respect and
lovey-dovey by men and by the desire of acquiring due freedom
from African traditional female submission,
dream
of marrying an “oyinbo” (a white man)**

A Novel

Umberto Cordero di Montezemolo



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This is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to living people
is purely fortuitous.

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DEDICATION

To Princess Grace Mandu Patrick Bassey Akpan, a fascinating young Ibibio lady from Uyo (Akwa Ibom State), my most beloved friend, who through her passionate appreciation for my first novel “Living in the Land of Love”, pushed me to endeavour the publication of this second narration that is similarly meant to be a due vivid hymn and a devoted tribute to the many praises of Nigeria; a wonderful land, which – though once dreaded as “the white man’s grave” – has always generously gifted him, in the past, as well as nowadays, with the attractive and seducing black women’s love.

*To my wife and to my mother’s memory
who were always so patient with me.*

*To my good African friends who are very dear to my heart;
among whom, in particular and above all, the superbly lovable
Lucy Amueyomo Iseghosimeh, my precious inspiring Muse for the
first novel I wrote, and the very kind and delightful Florence, Buki
and Mimi Salisu, as well as the nice and passionate
Ebele Okolo and her kids.*

To another person

Niña morena y ágil

Niña morena y ágil, el sol que hace las frutas,
el que cuaja los trigos, el que tuerce las algas,
hizo tu cuerpo alegre, tus luminosos ojos
y tu boca que tiene la sonrisa del agua.

Un sol negro y ansioso se te arrolla en las hebras
de la negra melena, cuando estiras los brazos.
Tú juegas con el sol como un estero
y él te deja en los ojos dos oscuros remansos.

Niña morena y ágil, nada hacia ti me acerca.
Todo de ti me aleja, como del mediodía.
Eres la delirante juventud de la abeja,
la embriaguez de la ola, la fuerza de la espiga.

Mi corazón sombrío te busca, sin embargo,
y amo tu cuerpo alegre, tu voz suelta y delgada.
Mariposa morena dulce y definitiva
como el trival y el sol, la amapola y el agua.

[Excerpt from the book of poems
«Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada
(Twenty poems of love and one desperate song) »
written by the Chilean poet and writer Pablo Neruda
(Parral, 1904 - Santiago de Chile, 1973)]

Brown and nimble Maiden

Brown and nimble maiden, the sun that creates fruit,
The one which fills up wheat, which bends seaweeds,
Made your gay body, your bright eyes,
And your mouth that has the smile of water.

A black and anxious sun twines round each single hair
Of your black head, when you stretch your arms out.
You play with the sun as with a stream
And it leaves in your eyes two dark stagnations.

Brown and nimble maiden, nothing brings me near to you.
Everything moves me away from you, as well as from
midday.
You are the frenetic youth of the bee,
The inebriety of the wave, the strength of the ear.

Yet my sullen heart is in search of you,
And I love your gay body, your loose and delicate voice.
Dark butterfly, sweet and ultimate,
Like the cornfield and the sun, the poppy and the water.

[Translation into English of *Niña morena y ágil* by
Umberto Cordero di Montezemolo]

Élégie pour la Reine de Saba

V

Or notre attente fut encore de neuf nuits et neuf jours pour nous
entrer au Royaume de l'Enfance.
Mais nous voici tout neufs, ressuscités au jardin de l'enfance.
Te voici sous la lampe, sous ta peau qui se moire
Moi à tes pieds, dans la ferveur de mes genoux, devant ma statue de
basalte noir, mais de grès rouge:
Ta peau de bronze bleu de nuit bleu sous la lune, ta peau couleur
odeur d'huile de palme
Tes aisselles de broussailles qui fument, où je brûle l'encens de mon
amour.
Je me rappelle ton corps de sourire et de soie aux caresses de la
tendresse
Hâ! aux abîmes de l'extase, ton corps de velours de fourrure, la
toison de ton vallon sombre à l'ombre du tertre sacré.
Si elle me sourit, je sens fondre mes neiges au soleil d'avril
M'ouvre son cœur, je tombe droit dedans comme l'aigle sur l'agneau
tendre.
Tu es mon bois sacré, mon temple tabernacle, tu es mon pont de
lianes mon palmier.
Ta taille entre mes coudes, je contemple j'ai traversé mon pont de
courbes harmonieuses
Je monte cueillir les fruits fabuleux de mon jardin, car tu es mon
échelle de Jacob.
Quand ta bouche odeur de goyave mûre, tes bras boas
m'emprisonnent contre ton cœur et ton râle rythmé
Lors je crée le poème: le monde nouveau dans la joie pascale.
Oui! elle m'a baisé du baiser de sa bouche
La noire et belle, parmi les filles de Jérusalem.

[Excerpt from the book of poems «Œuvre poétique (Poetical work)»
written by Mr. Léopold Sédar Senghor (Joal, 1906 - Verson,
Normandie, 2001), member of the Académie Française and ex-
President of Senegal.]

Elegy for the Queen of Sheba

V

Now our wait was yet of nine nights and nine days to be admitted into the Kingdom of Childhood.

But here we are all new, rescued to the garden of childhood.

You are here under the lamp, under your skin which becomes like veined marble

I am at your feet, in the ardour of my knees, before my statue of black basalt, but of red sandstone:

Your skin of blue bronze of a blue night under the moon, your skin colour scent of palm oil

Your armpits of steaming tufts, where I burn the incense of my love.

I remember your body of smile and of silk under the caresses of tenderness

Ha! in the abysses of ecstasy, your body of fur's velvet, the fleece of your dark dale in the shadow of the sacred hillock.

If she smiles at me, I feel my snows melt in the April sun

She opens her heart to me, I fall straight inside like an eagle on the tender lamb.

You are my sacred wood, my shrine tabernacle, you are my bridge of lianas my palm-tree.

Your waist between my elbows, I contemplate I crossed my bridge of harmonious curves

I climb gathering the fabulous fruits of my garden, since you are my Jacob's ladder.

When your mouth smells of ripe guava, your arms boas make me prisoner against your heart and your rhythmical panting

Then I create the poem: the new world in the paschal joy.

Yes! she kissed me with the kiss of her mouth

The black and beautiful [one] among the daughters of Jerusalem.

[Translation into English by
Umberto Cordero di Montezemolo]

Afrique

Afrique mon Afrique
Afrique des fiers guerriers dans les savanes ancestrales
Afrique que chante ma grand-Mère
Au bord de son fleuve lointain
Je ne t'ai jamais connue
Mais mon regard est plein de ton sang
Ton beau sang noir à travers les champs répandu
Le sang de ta sueur
La sueur de ton travail
Le travail de l'esclavage
L'esclavage de tes enfants
Afrique dis-moi Afrique
Est-ce donc toi ce dos qui se courbe
Et se couche sous le poids de l'humilité
Ce dos tremblant à zébrures rouges
Qui dit oui au fouet sur les routes de midi
Alors gravement une voix me répondit
Fils impétueux cet arbre robuste et jeune
Cet arbre là-bas
Splendidement seul au milieu de fleurs blanches et fanées
C'est l'Afrique ton Afrique qui repousse
Qui repousse patiemment obstinément
Et dont les fruits ont peu à peu
L'amère saveur de la liberté.

[Excerpt from the book of poems
«Coups de pilon (Hammer Blows) »
by the Senegalese poet and writer David Mandessi Diop
(Bordeaux, 1927 - aerial disaster, 1960)]

Africa

Africa my Africa
Africa of the bold warriors in the ancestral savannahs
Africa sung by my grandmother
At the edge of her far river
I never knew you
But my gaze is full of your blood
Your beautiful black blood poured across the meadows
The blood of your sweat
The sweat of your work
The work of slavery
The slavery of your children
Africa tell me Africa
Is-it then you that leaning back
Leaning under the weight of submission
That trembling back with red zebra-stripes
Which says yes to the whip on the roads of midday
Then gravely a voice answers me
Impetuous son that robust and young tree
That tree over there
Splendidly alone amidst white and withered flowers
It is Africa your Africa that grows again
That patiently obstinately grows again
And whose fruits little by little have
The bitter taste of freedom.

[Translation into English by
Umberto Cordero di Montezemolo]

Vamo-nos Amar

Amemo-nos
envolvidos nos lençois da noite
Do parto das estrelas
amemo-nos
nos lençois quentes
de um leito todo de amor

Amemo-nos
nos ardentes gemidos
dos nossos corpos unidos numa única
e eterna poesia de amor
Amemo-nos
na eternidade
das notas mágicas
das arpas de nossos corações

Amemo-nos nas estrelas
sob as asas azuis
dos céus
sob os brilhantes olhares da lua
nos braços dos ventos
nesta eterna
poesia
de amor

Amemo-nos
na eternidade
das horas quentes do amor
estendidos nos tapetes azuis
dos céus da tua alma
Amemo-nos
eternamente !

[Excerpt from the book of poems «Oceano de Amor (Ocean of Love) » written by the Angolan poet and writer Alvaro Santo (born in Kalandula of Malanje, in year 1971), collaborator of the Group “Solidarietà Come” of Milan (Italy)]

Let's love

Let's love
enveloped in the blankets of night
of the birth of stars
let's love
in the warm blankets
of a bed all of love

Let's love
in the hot groans
of our bodies united in a sole
and eternal poem of love
Let's love
in the eternity
of the magic notes
of the harps of our hearts

Let's love in the stars
under the blue wings
of the skies
under the bright gazes of the moon
in the arms of winds
in this eternal
poem
of love

Let's love
in the eternity
of the warm hours of love
stretched on the blue carpets
of the skies of your soul
Let's love
eternally!

[Translation into English by
Umberto Cordero di Montezemolo]

S'i' fosse foco, ardere' il mondo

S'i' fosse foco, ardere' il mondo;
s'i' fosse vento, lo tempestarei;
s'i' fosse acqua, i' l'annegherei;
s'i' fosse Dio, mandereil' en profondo;

s'i' fosse Papa, allor sarei giocondo,
ché tutti cristiani embrigarei;
s'i' fosse 'mperator, sa' che farei?
A tutti mozzarei lo capo a tondo.

S'i' fosse morte, andarei da mi' padre;
s'i' fosse vita, non starei con lui:
similmente faria da mi' madre.

S'i' fosse Cecco, com'i' sono e fui,
torrei le donne giovani e leggiadre:
le vecchie e laide lasserei altrui.

[Excerpt from the book of poems «Canzoniere (Song-book) »,
written by the Italian poet Cecco Angiolieri (Siena, ca. 1260 - ca.
1312), duly considered as a primary exponent of the popular
comic poetry flourishing at that time in Siena, Central Italy]

If I were fire, I would set the world alight

If I were fire, I would set the world alight;
if I were wind, I would pound it with storms;
if I were water, I would drown it in;
if I were God, I would sink it in the depth;

if I were [the] Pope, then I would be cheerful,
since I would put all Christians in troubles;
if I were Emperor, do you know what I would do?
I would cut everybody's head 'round their neck.

If I were [the] death, I would go to my father;
if I were [the] life, I would not stay with him:
similarly, I would do with my mother.

If I were Cecco, as I am and was,
I would take [for myself] the young and graceful women:
the old and ugly [ones] I would leave to others.

[Translation into English by
Umberto Cordero di Montezemolo]

The Passionate Pilgrim

19

Live with me, and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That hills and valleys, dales and fields,
And all the craggy mountains yields.

There will we sit upon the rocks,
And see the shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow rivers, by whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.

There will I make thee a bed of roses,
With a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle;

A belt of straw and ivy buds,
With coral clasps and amber studs.
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Then live with me and be my love.

Love's answer

If that the world and love were young,
And truth in every shepherd's tongue,
These pretty pleasures might me move,
To live with thee and be thy love.

[Excerpt from "The Complete Works"
written by the English poet and playwright William Shakespeare
(Stratford-on-Avon, 1564 - 1616)]

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

My first book «Living in the Land of Love» terminated with the sentence: 'But this is another story'. Well, the present novel's scope is to narrate this other story and can therefore be rightly considered as its most obvious continuation: it is indeed the story of Catherine Izu, the Nigerian girl belonging to the Edo ethnic group who appeared as second protagonist in the former novel (whilst this dealt mainly with the love story of Edima Essien, who had instead issued from the Efik ethnic group).

In both cases, the male protagonist is Ricardo de Cortes y Montero, a Spanish gentleman who got in love formerly with Edima (up to the tragic conclusion of their bond, willed and imposed by Edima herself, as narrated therein) and then with Catherine. Although Nigeria, in this second novel, might appear as having a marginal, secondary role, since the action mainly takes place in other countries, such as Spain, the USA and other African nations, rather than in Nigeria itself and no particular facts and events happened in that country are narrated therein, I want to point out that this is not true at all: the role of Nigeria is in fact still very important, absolutely determinant and in the foreground. Nigeria is fully and duly present, indeed! The five main female protagonists of this book, Catherine Izu, Sissy Etim-Etim, Jennifer Ameche, Funke Akinyemi and Meme Kanu, all come from Nigeria whilst the other three young ladies mentioned in the novel, the Tuareg women Aysha and Dessine and the Gabonese Nadine Missongo, play an undoubtedly secondary role in the economy of the whole narration.

My beloved Nigeria is therefore highly and devotedly praised here too, as it fully deserves! And this book, like the first one, is also intended as a hymn to its mysterious charms and potent seductive powers, as well as a homage to its beauty and to its lovely and fascinating daughters, wonderful women provided with a marvellous velvet-like brown or black skin, fabulous face features and magnificent praiseworthy bodies – oh, how desirable is the splendid body of a naked African woman! Which man is able to resist its seduction and ignore its charms? – and capable of giving a man profound and sincere love and immense delightful physical pleasure.

With this second book the whole cycle of Ricardo's life in Nigeria is completed and I can assure the patient reader who willingly agreed to follow me up to this point of the narration that there will not be a further book to form a trilogy: Ricardo's saga, incessantly pursuing love in that blessed country, is accomplished forever and therefore definitively closed! That's why, to keep off and avoid any possible change of mind, I narrate here his death.

Just as in the first book, all the characters depicted in this second novel, though they might resemble persons of the common real every-day life, are on the contrary totally fictitious, being originated by the fervid imagination of the author. Every resemblance that might be found with existing persons is therefore purely fortuitous and it is a futile, absurd and time-wasting exercise, believe me, to try to discover who is concealed under this or that of the characters mentioned in the book.

All I ask the reader to do is therefore to go patiently through these pages, bearing in mind that it is simply a fiction and in fiction everything can happen, even things that at first glance might appear unrealistic and absurd or fantastically fancy. I do hope that he/she will appreciate the narration and the various adventures I invented for the depicted characters in order to attract the reader's attention.

Also here, as in the first novel, the real and indisputable protagonists are love, this potent seducer, the delightful sentiment that is likely to fill the heart of human beings with immense, sincere happiness and joy and luckily does not look at all at the colour of the skin of people, as well as the profound admiration and liking for the intrinsic beauty of the woman, the real queen and "best piece" of the whole creation, who is here – as in the first book – put on a pedestal and worshiped as she fully deserves.

Milan, 2006

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Love is a wild force.
When we try to control it,
it destroys us.
When we try to imprison it,
it makes us slaves.
When we try to understand it,
it leaves us bewildered and blurred.

Paulo Coelho

And I was without words, before the golden enigma of your smile.
A brief twilight fell on your face, a divine caprice.

Léopold Sédar Senghor

Dear white brother,
When I'm born I'm black, when I grow up I'm black,
when I'm in the sun I'm black, when I'm sick I'm black and when I
die I'm black.
Whereas you, white man,
when you're born you're pink, when you grow up you're white,
when you're cold you're blue,
when you're afraid you're green, when you're sick you're yellow,
when you die you're grey.
Who among us, then, is the man of colour?

African oral tradition

1. *Reminiscences*

Catherine Izu was a very lovely and pretty, but rather lonely girl who, being an orphan, was living idly, together with her brother Alfred, in the care of an uncle and aunt in Gerald Road, Ikoyi, when she first met Ricardo de Cortes y Montero at the Maison de France, the French Cultural Centre of Lagos.^(*)

Ikoyi is one of the old residential districts of Lagos, especially developed as a garden island and enjoyably inhabited in particular by Britons before Nigeria acquired its rightful independence. The birth of the new independent nation was proclaimed on 1st October 1960 - hence the instauration of the national festival for every successive anniversary of that date. After the attainment of independence, a strong creative impulse was instead given to the exploitation of the seafront bar island called Victoria Island. This exploitation still continues nowadays very intensely and new buildings are rising every day everywhere on the island. At present, it has, in particular, become a real bank district. Apart from newly constituted mega department stores, new bank buildings in various fancy architectural styles are springing up all over the island like mushrooms.

Catherine was only 21 and, since the end of her secondary school education, had had nothing to do. Her aunt in fact had not let her go to University, in spite of her bright intelligence, because she did not want to pay for further studies for her. She therefore led a rather mean and meaningless life, mainly going out with girlfriends, visiting her other aunt or her cousin, both living too in Ikoyi, sometimes enjoying having a party somewhere. As a matter of fact, parties, being the only occasion she had of meeting new and at times

* See the author's previous novel, *Living in the Land of Love*

interesting people, were for her an important moment of thoughtless joy and fun. Although in the course of her yet short life she had had sexual experiences with three or four young men, included the schoolmate who had deflowered her at the age of 16, she had no real boyfriend. That's why, when Ricardo, that evening at the music festival organized by the Maison de France, suggested to her and her friend Gladys that he take one of them to a party the following day, she had immediately replied she would like to go with him.

Though he was rather handsome and of agreeable aspect, she had not paid much attention to him and could therefore not yet say whether she would really enjoy being with him: she was only thinking that being taken to a party organized by white people might be different from the parties among 'blacks' she was used to (where people mainly cared for eating and drinking as much as possible and, after a while, as everyone became full of food, overheated and a little tipsy, intelligent and interesting conversation usually became impossible) and, as a consequence, there might be more fun for her.

In the event, once there at the party, the food turned out to be good and attractive; moreover, she met nice and interesting people and nobody seemed to care about the fact that she was one of the few black ladies attending it – only four or five African women, including her, were indeed present that evening in Ricardo's friend, Antonio Mendoza's, house. She was in fact totally accepted as a fully honourable and praised representative of the so-called gentle sex, no distinction being made by the host himself or by his friends about the guests' skin colour.

The arrival, at a certain moment of the feast, of the renowned Nigerian musician Femi Kuti (the son of the worldwide-famous artiste, music composer and singer, Fela Anikulapo Kuti) and the photograph that she had taken with him, thanks to Ricardo's care for her enjoyment,^(*) gave even further interest to this agreeable party. But Catherine's eyes were all for Ricardo: he was kind, humorous, full of attention for her, chatted about everything with great competence and grace; furthermore, he danced smoothly and admirably, which was an important aspect of a man's personality in Catherine's eyes.

When, while dancing, he suddenly and unexpectedly kissed her gently on her lips, she couldn't but respond to him with maximum

tenderness and ardour. In spite of her strong desire, nurtured in her mind for a long time, to meet and, possibly, have a serious relationship with a white man, Ricardo was the very first 'oyinbo' (literally: man without skin, hence: white man) she had become acquainted with.

Now she discovered that he had all the good qualities that she had always sought for in a man and had long since been convinced were essential and specific prerogatives of 'the whites'. From where she drew this firm conviction it is not given to know: perhaps, it was a simple conjecture of her fervid imagination and fantasy or the dreamy and cherished result of her strong wish to get acquainted with an 'oyimbo' and, possibly, start a sweet romance with him. She then felt strongly attracted to Ricardo and fascinated by his aristocratic manners.

She started liking him very much. What a disappointment therefore when he told her that he had a girlfriend who lived with him and was only absent for few more days, while paying a visit to her mother in Calabar! She had indeed already thought that he might take *her* as his girlfriend and she would have been so *happy to devote herself* to such a delightful man! The news that he was already living a love story with a young Nigerian woman, although convincing her furthermore that he was a right man, not affected either by stupid provincial taboos or by silly and awkward racial prejudices – as, on the contrary, were many of these haughty 'oyinbos' –, was a bad shock for her secretly cherished expectations.

Learning how important for him was this other young woman, Grace (Edima Essien), an Efik girl, and how much he loved her embittered Catherine's heart very much and made her develop and suffer a strong jealousy towards this girl. That's why, when she was made aware that Grace too would be with them, she refused to go with him to the restaurant on her birthday.^(*) Catherine however wanted with all her strength to maintain a tight relationship with Ricardo, based on pure and fond friendship: how lovely and stimulating were their encounters, where she could widely open her heart to him and tell him all that had happened to her and her most intimate wishes and hopes! He was a really marvellous listener and conversationalist and accepted willingly all the confidences she shared with him, being always ready to give her his best advice on how she had to behave with her relatives or in respect of the various

aspects and events of life. Their friendship and intimacy had grown deeper and deeper and she appreciated that to the utmost. She was literally enchanted to have such a precious and unequalled friend! She liked him more and more and little by little a sweet and more profound feeling for him generated in her heart until she became totally crazy about him. She practically lived waiting only for the opportunity to have those short, but intense moments of sane and platonic intimacy with him. Catherine had to admit it to herself: Ricardo had become her idol and she, totally subjugated by his extremely nice and attractive personality, had secretly fallen fond of him.

At that time, although she had always longed for a stable relationship with a man of her choice, she really had no idea of how important and significant this new acquaintance would become for her and what an impressive turmoil and changes Ricardo would actually bring in her life: they would in fact later on fall deeply in love for one another and remain bound to each other all through their lives! She could not even imagine that her love for this man would become so intense and profound as to make her live only in his perspective, with the mere intent to dedicate herself entirely to him. She could not know yet that she would happily have two beautiful children by him (plus three others by another man, Pedro Gutierrez, her first husband). Because of the thinness of her face and the severe slenderness of her body, he had gracefully nicknamed her 'My Sylph' or 'Sweet Sylph'. She appreciated his clever interpretation of her real essence and her natural physical attributes and was delighted to get this nickname that she accepted, with joy, as an evident sign of his consideration and care for her; afterwards, she made ample use of it, even gladly using it to sign her letters to him, cheerfully writing: '*Your Sweet Sylph*'.^(*)

When at last they made love for the first time, after the departure to Europe and the settling there of his girlfriend Grace (alias Edima),^(*) it seemed to Catherine that it was the natural evolution and the happy, absolutely obvious conclusion of their tight and exclusive bond. Thereafter, during their so frequent sexual interludes, although – to her greatest sorrow and pain – he never revealed to her whether he really loved her, she was so happy to make love to him; he was a talented, fanciful and exciting lover who

specially sought – and cared – for her own enjoyment and gave her all the pleasure and happiness she could expect to receive from such an enticing and impetuous relationship. Indeed as soon as she was introduced into his bedroom she used to quickly undress and stretch herself on the bed, totally naked, with parted legs, waiting for his vigorous, but gentle assault (even in those moments of lust and thoughtlessness, he always cared to behave as the perfect gentleman he was). How tantalizing and suavely inebriating it was for her to be hugged in his tender embrace! How many hundreds of exciting and soft caresses did he lavish on her! How deliciously and stimulatingly could he lick her face and her entire gleaming body: her thin long neck, her delicate lovely breasts – titillating and biting gently their small nipples –, her flat belly, her soft but firm thighs and her delightful pubis! How could she resist such lustful fondling action and deny him her glowing lithe body and, especially, her intimate parts, so eager to receive delicately voluptuous attention?

Ricardo always put maximum care into performing this act and seemed as if paying a real homage to her sex organ, as nearly worshiping it. He felt for her a sort of literal deep adoration and deemed that not only her whole body, but, in particular, this specific part of her abdomen – the forbidden (luckily, however, not to him!) magic entrance to the enchantment of the secret ‘Garden of Delights’ – was beautiful and exceedingly attractive and entirely deserved his most tender and enticing kisses. She liked very much the way he licked her; it maddened her, with his tongue all flat to delicately caress – and, consequently, arouse – her body. Under such lovely actions, she easily attained fantastic, quite sweetly dragging out orgasms, making her body quiver and tremble violently from head to foot as if being shaken by the effect of a devastating earthquake or as being a prey to powerful, irresistible convulsions provoked by an epileptic attack. How delightful and sweet it was then eventually to be penetrated by him, to have him inside her and feel herself filled with a part of his own body! Frankly, no other man had ever given her such marvellous sensations of pleasure! She judged that Ricardo, as a lover, was not only powerful and perfect, but also doubtlessly enthralling.

Catherine therefore quickly developed a really strong passion for him. He was *the* man. The only *true man* existing on the entire planet. The man she loved with all her heart, the man she dreamed she

could sooner or later *marry*; though, she knew anyhow very well that *he*, being already married (moreover in Europe, alas!, where the law permitted only one wife, not in the permissive Africa where, according to local native customs, more wives are allowed), could *not* marry her. After the departure for good of Ricardo's number one girlfriend, Edima, she would have liked him to take *her* to live with *him* in his house. However, she did not dare ask him to do it and he, at the beginning at least, deemed it impossible that another girl could take Edima's place in a house where every passage, every room, every object, every single piece of furniture (especially the bed, of course) reminded him so clearly of his beloved sweetheart's now unluckily lost presence.

But when, years later, Catherine learnt from Ricardo's own verbal account that another young woman, Vivian Isakyio Odali,^(*) had then been accepted into his house to live with him, she was caught by strong retrospective jealousy and wept disconsolately. Ricardo, who now loved Catherine very much and was living a nice romance with her, felt very guilty towards her for having misjudged her true sentiments towards him and not having been able to guess her inner desires. He clearly understood he had treated her miserably and unfairly, for certain not in the right way she amply deserved. He therefore vividly apologized, trying to console her by protesting to her all his new-born intense and sincere love for her. When Ricardo left Nigeria for good, it had been exceedingly painful for Catherine to accept this awful separation from him, her unique true love. She wept for days. Nobody and nothing could console her.

When his departure for good from Nigeria approached, Catherine had asked Ricardo to introduce her to a friend of his, so that she could have some other European acquaintance and, possibly, seek for the birth of a new romance with a white man. Ricardo therefore, before leaving, gave her the telephone number of a friend, Alonso Lattes, who had asked him many times to let him know some of the many young women Ricardo had become acquainted with. Alonso was however not a young, but a ripe man, of the same age as Ricardo or perhaps even older, and rather corpulent and strongly built. Certainly Ricardo feared he was not really the type of man Catherine could easily like and possibly become fond of. Catherine anyhow shyly called him and they arranged to meet at 'Frenchies',

the French pâtisserie on Akin Adesola Street. Alonso however was evidently a silly man blessed with very poor knowledge or capability of guessing the feminine psychology. He said immediately to Catherine that he was against any firm bond with an African woman and did not want to be sentimentally involved, preferring to have many girlfriends to simply take, in turn, to bed, when he felt the need. Catherine, who was a romantic girl and eager to construe a sincere and affectionate privileged relationship with a serious and sentimental man, did not like at all this open declaration of unsound feelings – which clearly demonstrated lack of sensibility – and decided not to continue in an unpleasant and unsatisfactory acquaintance; she therefore did not want to meet him again. She candidly revealed all that in a letter she wrote to Ricardo. Ricardo rejoiced very much at the announcement that no relationship had been established between Catherine and Alonso; he had in fact hesitated at length before giving her Alonso's telephone number, because of a strong jealousy regarding her. He did not like the idea of sharing with another man a woman he had made love to and was subsequently nurturing a sincere strong affection for, and he had only consented to give her his number just to please her – and then rather unwillingly. The failed instauration of a tight relationship between them therefore filled Ricardo with sincere joy as this could only mean that, comparing the two men's behaviour and feelings, Catherine had perceived which were the better, and her preference was still for him.

Fully sensing that Ricardo was the only man who had engendered in her true love feelings, Catherine felt alone and forsaken after his departure for good and the unlucky failure met with Alonso. She therefore did the only thing that was in her power to do: since Ricardo had left her his address in Spain, she kept writing him letters. Passionate letters of love.^(*) The very first letter she wrote to him never reached its destination and therefore he never read it, but the following ones (except one) all attained their goal, once she started sending them as registered mail, and made him well aware of her deep passion for him. Ricardo was surprised at the beginning as he did not suspect that she was so hopelessly fond of him, but then accepted willingly such manifestation of unbridled love. He happily answered her on the same exalted tone, declaring to her that he was now ready to give her his heart entirely and unconditionally, and a

serious epistolary bond was thus established between them. The explicit wording used in their respective letters, clearly recalling with abundance of details the passionate and delightful hours of love they had had in Lagos during his sojourn in Nigeria, opened the way to a passionate romance. For the moment, however, it resided entirely and uniquely on paper, since no possible meeting was in view.

When, after a while, she got a job in a children's school, she was able to send him the telephone number of the school so he could call her from time to time. It was not easy at all to get her there. Many times, his calls did not connect with her school, but some other enterprise where the telephone operators, evidently stupid talkative persons who, at his request to be allowed to talk to Catherine, instead of answering that there was no Catherine there, would ask him who he was, where he was calling from and – despite his statement that he was calling from abroad – also a series of other time-wasting questions, after which, eventually, they would admit that it was the wrong number.

Other times, after many such unsuccessful trials undergone, he would find children answering the telephone, who luckily understood English well, but then, while running to call Catherine, hung the receiver back, instead of simply putting it down on the table near the telephone set. And it was always very hard to get the line again. But what a great joy it was for both of them to hear each other's voice whenever he did succeed in getting her to the phone! Especially the very first time she heard him, Catherine was frenetically mad with happiness. When she changed her job and joined a medical centre, it became much easier to talk to her through the phone: here, the operator, a kind lady, after a while would recognize him immediately and was very concerned about connecting him with Catherine as quickly as she could.

After a certain time, one day, when he called, the operator told him that Catherine had resigned and was no longer working there, as she had been admitted to the University. She had in fact successfully passed the admission exam, which Ricardo had feared could be a rather serious obstacle for her, since she still made too many spelling mistakes or errors in writing English: for this reason, he had strongly recommended her to remain calm, not to give free rein to a frenzy for finishing and to reread and reread again her manuscript before

giving it to the examiners. Ricardo felt very happy to learn that she was thus able to pursue her studies and graduate in some discipline (she, at last, chose Italian language and literature), but obviously was sorry that because of this he was not able to talk to her any more: it had been such a feast to talk directly to her, instead of always being compelled to communicate only through cold and dumb letters!

But Catherine reserved a pleasant surprise for her beloved Ricardo: she bought a mobile cellular phone in order to receive his calls! She called once, immediately after its purchase and, not finding him in, left the number of her cellular on his answering machine, but he could not catch some of the digits, then it turned out that she had also made errors in communicating it, so he could not get in touch with her. Luckily, after some days, seeing that no calls arrived from Ricardo, she called again while he was at home and gave him the exact number; at last, they were able to talk to one another very easily, depending on the state of the line, of course, which occasionally, for no obvious reason, became absolutely impossible to go through.

In the meantime, Ricardo, having reached retirement age, was dismissed by his company, the renowned world-active drilling Company Santa Fe. For a couple of years he remained idle, without anything to do. Then, just by chance, he met an old friend, the ex-managing director of a construction company he had known many years before in Nigeria, who, having also retired, had founded a small engineering consultancy and asked him whether he would like to join him as associate in this enterprise. He accepted with joy, pleased to be busy again. Also because he would have to deal with Africa again and, in particular, with his beloved Nigeria.

* See *Living in the Land of Love*

2.

Renewing delightful love bonds

The decision Ricardo had taken, to join the little engineering consultants firm of his friend, turned out to be a very good one and exceedingly beneficial for him and for his love bond with Catherine. As a matter of fact, more or less one year after the beginning of his new activity, he was requested to travel to Zimbabwe, to meet the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Works in order to arrange the payment of money due to the construction company, of which his boss was formerly the managing director, for the construction in Abuja, the newly selected capital of Nigeria, of a new chancery for the local Zimbabwean High Commission. He was very happy to have this opportunity to travel to Zimbabwe again, where he had been on missions several times more than twenty years ago but not since then. He therefore flew to that African country with very light heart and was glad to recognize and see again the places he had been acquainted with in the past. He met the person he had the task to interview, who was a jovial and very kind ex-colonel of the army and who, while having dinner together, also introduced him to two interesting and really fascinating first class ladies (one was an illustrious Ambassador of Zimbabwe and the other was the executive director of an agricultural firm, but, mainly, the person in charge of supervising all governmental projects before the delivery of approvals for financing). He could definitively settle the payment of the due amount, but could not collect the money, since the actual payment itself had to be done by the Zimbabwean High Commission in Nigeria, as the recipient of the works carried out.

To this end, around two months later, Ricardo had to travel to Nigeria. To have the opportunity to go back to his cherished Nigeria, after almost five years far away from that country, was really at the top of all his aspirations! He loved Nigeria, a country where

he had lived so merrily for many years, endowed with true profound love and nice manifestations of affection and friendship, and for which he nurtured in his heart the sweetest nostalgic memories. Notwithstanding the fact that his mission would last only few days, from one Sunday to the following Thursday, he therefore prepared himself to live a brief period of very intense emotions. He hurried to advise Catherine that, if she wanted, they might enjoy the opportunity of meeting again on the occasion of this trip. It is superfluous to say that Catherine was in her seventh heaven: the news that she could have the possibility of meeting him again, of hugging him in her arms, of caressing him, of loving him as her heart dictated her she should, was really magnificent and thrilled her to the maximum. She lived those days in a frenzied expectation. They planned carefully how and where to meet, since it was envisaged that he would not be at a hotel (where their meeting and their staying together, obviously, would be unquestionably simpler and without hurdles or problems), but was to be hosted in the guest house or at the camp of a friend's company.

At the very beginning, it seemed that he would have to spend only one day in Abuja, before moving to Lagos and therefore – since the travel between Lagos and Abuja was rather expensive even by bus – they decided she would stay in Lagos and wait for his arrival there. It was indeed not worth spending so much money for enjoying a sweet togetherness for only one night that could be spent together there. But then, just on the eve of his departure, it became evident that it was necessary for him to spend two days there, for the appropriate meetings – one fully technical about the works yet to be done for the full completion of the contractual engagements and one to be dedicated entirely to the financial aspects of the transaction – with the Zimbabwean High Commissioner and his staff, before transferring, on Wednesday morning, to Lagos. At this point the time they could spend together in Lagos became noticeably shortened, being limited to Wednesday and Thursday (though he had other frantic business meetings to carry out there during those two days), and to the night in between. Ricardo therefore immediately called Catherine that same Saturday and asked her whether she was willing to travel to Abuja the following day, Sunday, so that they could meet that evening, on his arrival from Spain. She sounded exceedingly excited and happy in her joyful

reply:

“Ricardo, my dear love, do you mean that we are going to meet *right tomorrow evening?*”

“Yes, my Sweet Sylph, I expect to hug you tight in my arms *right tomorrow evening!*”

“That’s fabulous! Of course I am willing, ... no need to question me! Don’t worry, then: *tomorrow, early in the morning*, I’ll certainly travel to Abuja and I’ll be there waiting for your arrival. That’s fantastic news, darling, which fills me with happiness!”

He gave her all the instructions necessary to enable her to join him: the office address and telephone numbers of the company hosting him, the name of the person, Mr. Nadim Khamal, to contact to know where he was going to be lodged, the number of this gentleman’s cellular phone, the time at which to call him, how to move around in Abuja, etc., but was anxious to see whether she would be able to do it properly.

She managed perfectly to get to the compound of Ricardo’s friend’s Company and when the driver who had come to fetch him at the airport deposited him in front of his friend’s flat and he wanted to let the watchman at the main gate know that a lady would be asking for him, he was told:

“Who? ... What is she like? ... A white or a black lady? A black young woman, who arrived here about a couple of hours ago, is already there, inside the house, with your friend, Mr. Khamal. Maybe she is the lady you are expecting to meet.”

His heart leapt. He hurried to his friend’s flat door and rang the bell. He heard a noise of excited voices inside and when his friend Nadim opened the door, he was literally assaulted and crushed by Catherine who flung herself into his arms laughing and shouting aloud howls and cheers for the immense happiness she was feeling at seeing him. Nearly five long years had elapsed since the last time they had met, during which they were far from one another. It was really a great joy for both at meeting again, a moment to live intensely and cheerfully.

She could not take her eyes off him for a single second; she hardly realized that this was no more one of her usual dreams of her lonely nights, it was reality: Ricardo, the man who had become her idol, the man who had been capable of engendering in her sentiments that she had never felt before for any other man in her whole life, the

man who was the target of her most intimate and sweet thoughts and desires, as well as of her passion, was there again in flesh and bones before her, with her, for her and her alone.

He was older, of course, but reasonably: although his hair had now partly put on a greyish colour – shining as silver when just washed, but then, during the next day, becoming sensibly darker – and the wrinkles on his rather bony face had grown deeper, as well as his stomach and belly had inflated a bit (just a bit; he surely could still be considered a rather slender man), he had always his so agreeable and attractive appearance. With that lean face (oh, how attractive for her were his broad forehead and his long nose!) she literally adored, he appeared even now in her eyes as the handsomest man she had ever known! The only ‘oyinbo’ she had had a sweet love story and an intimate relationship with. She felt that she still liked him enormously and was still terribly fond of him. Oh, how much she loved him! How much had she missed him and his warm and tender embrace during these long – far too long – years of separation! Her love for him was surely immense and she felt a great tenderness for him flooding her heart. For five long years, thanks to their passionate epistolary exchange of sweetness and tenderness, at first, as well as to their letters and, mainly, to his telephone calls, afterwards, she had been able to resist and react to the sad tragedy of his departure from Nigeria for good and to the awful sense of solitude and abandonment in which he had left her. Now her reward, an infinite happiness and an incommensurable joy, was there, in front of her, within her reach: ‘Oh, Ricardo, my sole love, my unique man, you can’t even imagine how your simple presence here can cheer my heart up and make me happy!’

On her side, she was still the charming, beautiful young woman he had known many years before; her face, though showing more maturity, was yet as pretty as in the old times and her body was still slender, attractive and extremely desirable; only her buttocks had grown a little bigger, being now more round and, consequently, slightly more prominent than they were in the past. Ricardo noticed immediately that she had decided not to wear all that series of little rings in her right ear she used to have in the past (it had maybe become out of fashion) and now only one ear-ring per side hung from her ears. Her nails however were perhaps too long, with a square cut that she probably thought to be very smart, but Ricardo

did not really approve. Later on, when they were in lonely and happy intimacy, he kindly advised her that, if she really wanted to be considered an elegant woman, both to African and European (or, at least, to his own) approval, she should cut her nails a bit shorter.

Just after Ricardo had entered into his friend's house, Catherine told him at once – and Ricardo's friend cheerfully confirmed it – that she would have liked to go to the airport to fetch him and thus give him a totally unexpected surprise (though Ricardo had hoped in his heart that it could have been possible). However, when she expressed this desire of hers to Ricardo's friend, the driver who had been given the task to fetch him had – to her great disappointment and sorrow – already left, for fear of being late.

When, after a certain time spent in delightful chattering, they left Nadim's house and went to the small flat that had been assigned to him, they were very happily clasped in one another's arms, mad with happiness and eager to give each other tenderness and affection and, especially, to make love. To be enabled to make love to one another again, was for them like having and enjoying Paradise on earth!

Catherine hurriedly whispered to him:

“Ricardo, I missed you tremendously. These years far from you were the worst I ever had in my whole life. I never lived, before, such a dreadful experience, never! I felt I was living in a perennial night, as the sun had totally disappeared from my days. To be far from you was a constant awful nightmare! Only by receiving your letters or your phone calls could they be somehow a bit enlightened. Not for a single minute did I stop thinking of you and desiring you inside me: I desperately love you with all my heart!”

Touched by her declaration, Ricardo joyfully replied:

“Cathy, my beloved, it was extremely painful to stay away from you. I too suffered a lot not to be able, because of the distance separating us, to take you in my arms, to hug you, to caress and kiss you as I at the utmost wished and every night dreamt of doing. I too love you, immensely! You are a rare and delicious bonbon, really *the dream* of my life come true!”

But at this point, when they were giving free expression to their love, they involuntarily provoked in each other, reciprocally, a big disappointment. Catherine did not in fact kiss Ricardo in the way she used to do in the past, arousing him so marvellously, with her mouth wide open to capture his lips inside it and her tongue

stretched in his own,^(*) and Ricardo clearly revealed himself as no longer the powerful lover she had known and loved so passionately: he had unfortunately become unable to attain a full stiff erection and maintain it at length. Notwithstanding this, they enjoyed a lot hugging and caressing each other tenderly and they abandoned themselves to fine and thrilling erotic games. They were both so keen to give one another, reciprocally, the highest pleasure and satisfaction, especially performing oral sex on each other: the desire they felt for one another had indeed remained totally unaltered and was still very strong. To better demonstrate to her his sincere and unconditional love for her, as well as to sing an hymn to the praises of her body, that he liked so much, he kissed her feet with extra passion and also feverishly kissed and licked all her body at length. Apart from the physical pleasure she felt from this passionate and sensual act he lavished on her, she rejoiced at the evident fondness for her that he clearly showed in behaving in this manner towards her. Especially when he told her that before, in his whole life, he had never done that so openly with any other woman. To be the only woman with whom he dared do such uncommon and extreme sexual act filled her with joy and pride. *He* certainly was *her* man, the only man she had entirely dedicated her heart to.

This time however something strange and totally unexpected happened: whilst she attained – trembling from head to foot, like a leaf shaken by a furious wind – a truly gorgeous delightful orgasm, which sent her into ecstasy, he was unable to reach the climax necessary for attaining it and his own sexual satisfaction thus remained incomplete.

The following morning, when, after washing, Ricardo came naked out of the shower, Catherine tenderly stared at him intensely and then exclaimed with a hint of astounded appreciation in her voice:

“How big!”

She was evidently referring to his masculine attributes; strangely, she expressed herself exactly in the same terms that had been used by his former girlfriend Edima Essien in similar circumstances many years before.^(*) He was surprised that such astonishment for the size of his male organ could come from black ladies who, in his opinion, ought to be well acquainted with the dimensions of those of African men, which are notoriously not small (as fully demonstrated in German film-director Leni Riefensthal’s photographic reportages

showing the totally naked Nuba's sculptural bodies out of the Sudanese Nubians – unless it is a particular physical characteristic of these people not shared by the rest of Africa's male populations). He therefore could not expect that a statement of that sort on his physique should come from an African woman. Concerning his own genitals, by the way, he had always thought himself to be in the absolutely normal average range (though perhaps on its upper side) rather than exceeding it. He smiled anyhow at her, proud and pleased for having engendered in this marvellous young woman such open admiration and liking for the features of his body.

Ricardo also snapped many photographs of Catherine, finishing up one half-used roll film he had in his camera, plus devoting an entire new one to portraying her. She wanted to be portrayed wearing different clothes (some of them were the dresses he had sent her as gifts for Christmas or for her birthdays), as if she were showing off garments in a private fashion show. But he also asked her to pose for him totally naked and she consented to appear as her mother had made her in an ample number of those pictures. She was in fact for him as beautiful as Artemis, the goddess of hunting in the ancient Greek mythology (Diana for Romans), and as such, in his eyes, she fully deserved to be immortalized in her magnificent nudeness. Actually, he had always considered her as one of the 'three Graces' (Edima, the most beloved woman among all the women he had known in his whole life, the charming and lovely Catherine, so intriguingly fascinating, and Vivian, the real Nigerian glamorous beauty) who had made his life happy in that Garden of Eden that Nigeria represented for him.^(*) Ricardo considered Catherine's body to be of great value and attraction, so exceedingly beautiful and regal, certainly worth receiving everybody's (and, obviously, especially his own) admiration; he liked it enormously and was therefore very happy to have the possibility of continuing to admire her and to enjoy the sight of her in her so attractive nudity also after having left her and returned home.

On Monday and Tuesday, he spent the full day discussing with the Zimbabwean High Commissioner and his staff, who complained about the non-completion of their chancery and requested a substantial reduction in the amount to be paid. They did that under the pretext that such a sum had been decided in Zimbabwe without involving the High Commission in Nigeria which was the real

recipient of the works and the sole governmental agency to know exactly about their performance. At the end of a lengthy discussion and bargaining, he at last succeeded in getting a conspicuous cheque from the Zimbabwean High Commissioner. On Wednesday morning, the day Ricardo had to transfer to Lagos (but only in the afternoon, by plane), Catherine woke up very early and went to the bus station to get a bus to Lagos. Whilst Ricardo would be there in less than one hour, her travel would take about ten hours. He had given her ample information on how to go to the friend's flat in Oju Olobun Close on Victoria Island where he was going to be put up, so that she could join him there. In this way she could arrive there in the evening, without difficulty, after his arrival by plane and the first business meeting he had in that town. She knew well where Oju Olobun Close was, since a cousin of her lived in that same street, and had therefore no problem in joining Ricardo in that residence.

In his friend's flat, Ricardo was assigned the so-called 'children's room', which was a twin-bed room, but only one bed had been prepared, since his friend had thought he would be alone. When Ricardo asked him to put up Catherine also, he was not very happy and tried to dissuade him from taking her with him, giving the reason that his neighbours might see her and start evil gossip, which would pass to his wife on her return from Europe, that he was receiving black ladies in his house during her absence from Lagos. Ricardo however was very determined to spend those too few days in Lagos with Catherine and he forced him to accept, albeit very reluctantly, her presence with him. When she arrived, his friend therefore proposed to him that the second bed should be prepared, but Ricardo, being unwilling to give too much trouble, said to him that they would be able to sleep both in the same bed (thus letting him also well understand that there was a very deep sweet intimacy between them).

The bed was however rather narrow and Ricardo found great difficulty in getting to sleep, at least for the first two or three nights. He was in fact used to sleeping on his side, folding one of his legs up to his belly level. But he tried not to disturb Catherine – being delightfully glued to her and softly enlacing her in his arms while his cupped hands held nicely her lovely, so attractive and arousing small breasts – and to give her all the room she needed. But then it happened that on Thursday, the day he had been supposed to travel

back to Spain – after they had enjoyably spent together the only night planned to be at their disposal in Lagos – he was requested by his friend, the boss of his firm, from Spain, to delay his departure to the following Monday. He now had to go back to the Zimbabwean High Commission in Abuja for some further clarifications. Catherine, like Ricardo, was exceedingly happy at this announcement, coming just when she was already sadly preparing herself to a gloomy and sorrowful farewell, since in this way she could on the contrary enjoy his presence and his love for some more days.

Then on Monday another delay was decided to allow him to perform further transactions considered to be indispensable by his boss. He had to deposit the cheque received by the Zimbabwean High Commission in the bank which had issued it, and ascertain its full and easy transferability abroad. Moreover, he had also to ascertain the capability – and the possibility of a quick mobilization – of the construction Company his own firm was supporting for the completion of the necessary works at the Zimbabwean new chancery and for other works at a Lagos bank. Ricardo's travel to return to Spain was thus reprogrammed for the following Thursday, which allowed him to stay in total twelve days (compared with the four initially planned) in Nigeria, to Catherine's obvious highest pleasure and joy.

He also took the opportunity to visit some of his old friends; first of all, of course, the Kanu family:^(*) Floss, her daughter Dakky with her three children, and her son Miles; the only absent member of the family was her youngest daughter, Meme. He went to their flat with Catherine, without having advised them of his arrival in Nigeria, though they now communicated regularly via e-mails, in order to make greater and totally unexpected the obvious surprise of his sudden appearance. At first, in fact, when they saw him behind the framed anti-mosquito net of their counter-door, after he had knocked at their door, they couldn't believe their eyes, it must have been a spell, or a ghostly vision; then they realized that it really was him, in flesh and bones, and they launched high cries and howls of irrepressible joy: Floss was wild with the great happiness she felt at seeing him! Dakky's little daughters were, absolutely, among the nicest children he had ever seen, of an unspeakable attractiveness.

He thought that it was a real pity that they were the daughters of such a brutal man who dared insult and beat poor Dakky, who was still a very beautiful, attractive and desirable young woman. She did not look at all as if she had already carried and delivered three children. As he had gone to see them with Catherine, they understood that he must have had a strong love bond with her. It was indeed the very first time that they had seen him with an indigenous girl. Ricardo wanted them to know that he was in love with a Nigerian young lady also to further increase their already sound belief that he was a real good friend of Africans, not harbouring in his heart any racist feeling. He protested anyhow all his support and love to Dakky and made her promise that she would resume her studies at the University, despite the presence now of her three children. Two days before his departure Ricardo went to meet them a second time, this time without Catherine, and renewed to them, with tender words for all of them, all his friendship and affection, which was cordially returned by them. They liked him very much and considered him their very best friend, knowing that they could openly and easily apply to him for help without shame in case of necessity.

One afternoon, though it was right in the middle of a serious fuel crisis gripping Nigeria, so that Ricardo could not ask his friend to lend him his car, Ricardo and Catherine decided to pay together a courtesy visit to her aunt in Ipaja. They went on foot to Adeola Odeku Street, where Catherine stopped a taxi and – whilst Ricardo stayed hidden nearby – bargained with its driver the fee to be paid for the transportation, to and fro, which was at last agreed in the order of 300 Naira. Ricardo was really astonished to hear how low the price was that she had succeeded in agreeing upon in arranging transportation to that distant locality. Had he been compelled to take a taxi alone to such a distant place, he – being he an ‘oyinbo’, and therefore considered as a rich man to be duly scrounged off – certainly would not have been able to get it for less than 3,000 Naira, ten times more than her. Especially in those days of fuel crisis. On the way to Ipaja, they also collected from the vicinity of Tejuosho Market one of Catherine’s cousins who was sick, with high fever, and needed help to go back home. It was the girl that he had helped to do her school drawing exercises many years ago (Ricardo was indeed a good draftsman and, in his youth, used to draw a lot).

Being however in a state of semi-consciousness, this girl hardly recognised him and went straight to bed as soon as they arrived at her mother's house. Catherine's aunt, on the contrary, was very happy to see Ricardo again, since she liked that 'oyinbo' who had in the past clearly demonstrated to be so friendly and antiracist, but was surprised to hear that he had had an opportunity to return, even though briefly, to Nigeria. She embraced him cheerfully and asked him news of his family and of his life after retirement. Obviously, she felt also very happy for Catherine because her dear niece had thus found her beloved man again. Ricardo as well was happy to meet this lady again, because he sincerely liked and admired her. She was in fact a brilliant woman, a teacher and writer of children's stories, with whom Ricardo had had in the past very interesting talks, really enjoying the jovial and friendly long conversation he had the opportunity to exchange with her.

The third visit he paid to old friends was to Mr. Luigi Forte, an Italian gentleman, head of NAOC Ltd.'s workshop.^(*) Luigi was not a very expansive man, so he took quite well and nearly imperturbably the surprise of seeing him around. Under his rough skin and gruff temper, he was however happy to see Ricardo again. They went back together to all the nice memories of the old times. When his wife Graciela, a much jollier and more amicable Argentinian lady, joined them, there was a real burst of happiness. They decided to go together to get a drink at the Megaplaza bar, which was owned by Elda Locatelli, an Italian lady Ricardo had known in the past, although he knew much better, being a golf player, her sister, Giovanna, who now, he learnt, lived in Abuja. Elda was there with an astonishingly beautiful mixed race girl, whom she introduced to Ricardo as her daughter (Elda had indeed married a Nigerian man). The light brown colour of this fascinating girl was really superb and her hairless skin was even and glowing in a very particular way that Ricardo deemed absolutely splendid. Unexpectedly, he met there also Alfredo Lopez,^(*) who was surprised but happy to see him. They exchanged addresses and telephone numbers promising each other to call one another when both were back in Europe.

Alfredo knew Vivian, the very beautiful young Ijaw woman who had lived with Ricardo during the last eight months of his long sojourn in Nigeria,^(*) and of whom Ricardo had had no news since

his departure. He and Vivian had once been invited together to a dinner in his house, Ricardo remembered it well. Ricardo therefore asked him whether he had any news about her. Alfredo replied that he had met her six months ago in Warri where she was now living with another boyfriend, an Italian this time. Learning that she was living with another man provoked in Ricardo a hint of jealousy. Vivian was in fact an exceedingly charming and fascinating woman, a surpassing and rare beauty for whom he felt a great nostalgic affection. He had not forgotten (how could he?) the lovely hours of tender lovemaking spent with her, for so many months, during his stay in Nigeria. Now, apparently, she had totally forgotten him – and this was confirmed by the fact that she had never written to him, not even to answer to his warmly affectionate Christmas greetings – and had started a new life, with a new companion.

It always amazed Ricardo how, particularly in poor African and Asian countries, these indigenous women, often ablaze with incomparable beauty, are able to forget easily and quickly a love relationship they have entertained with a man, especially a European one – however strong it might have been! –, and start a new one within a very short lapse of time, sometimes even in a twinkling of an eye. This reflection saddened him considerably. But Ricardo thought: 'Let's hope, for her sake, that she is happy with this man! What are Italian men like? As kind and considerate towards their women as we Spaniards are? Vivian is a gentle and delightful woman very eager of receiving tenderness and nice thoughts. She needs and deserves attention and care. In any case, in this way, she will at least be able to exercise her self-learnt Italian and to improve her knowledge of this foreign language.'

Then he questioned Alfredo:

"How old is this man? Is he young enough to match with her age? She must be about 33, by now. Is he a bachelor who can eventually decide to marry her, as she would certainly like to and she is absolutely worthy of, or is he yet another married man unfortunately bound, he too, to leave her sooner or later? Frankly, all I hope and want for her is that she is happy and no further disappointment can affect her!"

Alfredo answered he had the impression that Vivian's man was over 45, but he did not know whether or not he had family ties. Ricardo then asked him to transmit his best regards to her, as well as

his ardent desire to hear from her, in case he had the chance of meeting her again.

Then, since it was already late and the driver was waiting to take him back to his friend's house and then go in search of fuel, which would not be easy at all, as the shortage of it in those days was really very serious (and only very few filling stations were able to deliver fuel), he greeted everybody and left the company. Ricardo did not see other friends on that occasion, because most of his old friends had themselves left the country in the meantime and others had moved to different towns, especially to Abuja and Port Harcourt or were on holiday in Europe at the time. He was however happy to have had the opportunity to see at least some of them and recall with them the old merry times.

On two or three occasions, Catherine and Ricardo tried to pay a courtesy visit to her cousin who, as mentioned earlier, lived in the same street, Oju Olobun Close, as his friend's house. They walked cheerfully along the street up to her gate keeping close, hand in hand, to one another under the astonished and amused eyes of the various African gatemen and passers-by, but on all such occasions Catherine's cousin was not at home; they therefore could not meet her. Catherine had therefore to give up her cherished hope to show her cousin that Ricardo was back and still deeply in love with her.

Having completed all formal engagements, Ricardo had then a lot of time at his disposal both for reading his cherished Nigerian writers' books and for talking extensively with Catherine. After having read in the past the lovely works by Messrs. Wole Soyinka, Ben Okri, Amos Tutuola, Ogali A. Ogali and Mrs. Buchi Emecheta, there were still plenty of Nigerian authors he could now intensely immerse himself in reading: the interesting and attractive novels written by Prof. Chinua Achebe ('Anthills of the Savannah', 'Things Fall Apart', 'No Longer At Ease', 'Arrow of God', 'A Man of the People' and 'Girls at war'), Messrs. Ken Saro-Wiwa ('Sozaboy' and 'A Forest of Flowers', this book of short stories however not in its original language, English, but in Spanish, since he had found a Spanish edition) and Amos Tutuola ('Pauper, Brawler and Slanderer'), Mrs. Buchi Emecheta ('The Rape of Shavi'), Miss Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie ('Purple Hibiscus'), Mrs. Sefi Atta ('Everything Good Will Come'), Mrs. Simi Bedford ('Yoruba Girl Dancing'), Miss Helen

Oyeyemi ('The Icarus Girl'). Apart from being written by a 16 year-old girl, he deemed however this last book less interesting, at least for his own tastes, to a certain extent boring and rather a too often repetitive tale for children, more than a real novel for adults. Frankly speaking, he wondered how the publisher could pay the author 400,000 pounds for such insignificant literary work.

So far as talking with Catherine was concerned, there were indeed lots of things to be carefully examined. Of course, they had to talk about themselves, their respective lives vis-à-vis one another, their plans for the future, their most intimate hopes and wishes. Ricardo, wishing to know exactly what Catherine's current feelings towards him were, asked eagerly her:

"Darling, do you still want to marry me?"

She answered with infatuation:

"Yes, Ricardo; with all my heart, I want to become your wife. This indeed is my most cherished desire. You are the only man I want as a husband for myself."

"Cathy, my lovely Sweet Sylph, though I love you desperately and, believe me, would be not only pleased, but also highly honoured to be your husband, unfortunately I really can't marry you. I am already married, as you know, and, given the laws of my country and my religious belief, may not take a second wife."

"But, Ricardo, a possibility does exist for us to get married in spite of your old marital bond: divorce can provide a remedy for the situation and allow us to unite our lives forever."

He replied hurriedly:

"No, darling, I can't use divorce to separate from my wife, for two reasons: the first is that – although I am a sinner (and my relationship with you, being an evident adultery, is certainly a clear demonstration of sinful behaviour) – I am a practicing Catholic and, as a consequence, my personal principles and convictions are against the increasingly common practice of divorce; the second is that I frankly have no reason to divorce my wife, apart from this passion and deep love that I now unequivocally nurture for you. She has no real fault that I can reproach her for; it would therefore be a too hard blow and an undue shock for her, should I ask her for divorce. I know it is hard for you to bear, it is also hard for me as well, believe me, but it is always better to let us suffer from the impossibility of happily concluding our love bond than to unduly

strike and harm a third party, a totally innocent person! Though I would be exceedingly happy to share my life with you, there is therefore nothing I can do, I am compelled to give up this wonderful dream! But believe me, please, my sole Love, it is really an immense sacrifice for me, the greatest sacrifice of my whole life, to renounce binding myself to you forever with a formal and sacred bond, as I would at the utmost like to be able to do. All this is very unfortunate, indeed, because I willingly own up that I'm totally seduced by your beauty and your delightful personality – beloved African woman, I literally adore the brown, chocolate-like colour of your skin! – and *you are the only woman* that I dream to have beside me. Frankly, I would love to be your husband. *You* are my life, my entire existence is in *your* hands, in *your* power, it depends on *you!*” Then, changing slightly the topic of their conversation, he added softly: “Cathy, my dear and unique Love, you can't go on loving me as you do, with such great passion for me. I'm honoured and pleased, of course, that you nurture in your heart such sentiment in my regards, but it is absurd! I am too old for you.”

She was greatly surprised by the last part of his speech and replied impulsively:

“Ricardo, darling, it is *you who gave me* life: I depend totally on you, not vice versa! And I also wish to point out very clearly that you are not so old that you are not fit for me.”

But he insisted, determined to instil in her the idea he wanted her to grasp:

“Yes, darling, I am too old. Too old indeed for you, to my maximum sorrow and disappointment, alas! Don't you know how old I am? Do you want to know my exact age?”

“Yes, my dear, tell me.”

“I'll soon be 63. This means, since you are only 28, that there is a difference of 35 years between us. Though here in Africa you are used to quite frequent marriages between very elderly men and girls who, for their age, can be considered as simple adolescents (not only because polygamous men for their further marriages choose more and more young women, but also for the special conformation of your genitals that in West-African women are very often wide open, without the consistent protection of thick and fleshy lips, thus allowing the penetration into them of the not completely hardened or also semi-flaccid sexual organs of elderly men), this is alas! the

hard and cold indication that nearly two generations separate us from one another. Therefore, should we get married, if our marriage could be considered as normal here in Nigeria, I'm afraid it would provoke a real scandal and a hurly-burly in Europe, even if, I want to hope, the fact that you are an African girl, I mean a *black* woman, does not. Though, in reality, you are far from being under age, in Spain, I'm sure of it, my relatives and my friends, instead of congratulating me for my magnificent choice and my luck for having such a beautiful young bride, would blame me and take me as a sort of paedophile! Bear this in mind, my dearest and unique Love: at present, this difference in our ages might well appear insignificant to you, but you have to look at it with a critical eye, putting aside all sentiments and feelings and also to consider seriously this abnormal situation in a projection into the future. In sixteen years, just to pick on a date, when you will be 44 and therefore still a young, though mature, beautiful woman, rightly courted by men and full of life and eager to give and receive love, I shall be a very old man of nearly 80 years, undeniably incapable of giving you the satisfactions that I deem you fully deserve. How could you then be happy to have tied your life to such an old man? You see it, beloved Sweet Sylph? Even if I married you – and you know it is impossible, for the considerations I amply expressed to you earlier – it would not work and you would undoubtedly be unhappy!”

She promptly uttered:

“I was convinced that you were younger, only 53 or 54. You don't look that old at all, my dear. Your aspect is, of course, that of a mature man, but you look much younger than your real age. That's why I said that you were not unfit for me. But it does not really matter and I can still be living with you and loving you, in spite of your age: in your future old days, I can certainly take good care of you and nurse you in order to try to heal you, if you are sick.”

“No, darling, what you will still need is love, a lot of unequivocally seductive and wonderfully satisfying love, I mean making love physically, having sex, and I shall be totally unable to give this to you. I already suffer from poor performances now, despite my always strong desire of possessing you and being in you, inside your so delightful body, imagine what I shall be able to do at that age!”

On the verge of weeping, feeling outraged by his words, she uttered her disdainful response:

“Sex is not so important, it is not the main preoccupation I have in my heart! I don’t care about it at all.”

“Not now, of course, since you still have it frequently enough to satisfy you. But it may become important when you are without it for a long lapse of time, being still young and desirous of making love to a man you love. You’ll be in anguish for it! What will you do then with an old carcass as I certainly shall have become, alas, the ridiculous simulacrum of the once vigorous and powerful man, or, if you prefer, a simple piece of wood, good only to be thrown into a hearth to make a fire with or to be disposed of in a litter bin?”

Tears were about to well up in the corners of her enchanting fawnlike eyes and she exclaimed desperately:

“I will keep on loving you anyhow, darling! Please, realize that I literally adore you!”

In spite of her assurances and open declaration of endless love for Ricardo, Catherine had however to agree with him that he was right: the big difference in their respective ages was a serious obstacle to the pursuit of their love bond and would very possibly constitute an insurmountable hurdle against their so much desired marriage.

Their romance, though so delightful and delicately involving, could not go on indefinitely, all their lives long. It had to stop some day. At least, when she met a man, younger than Ricardo, worthy of receiving her affection. Besides, she felt – and told Ricardo – that the old flame, the terrible intoxication she had had for him, the overwhelming infatuation for his agreeable face, the great and unique passion for his person and, in particular, for his body, was slightly fading and had calmed down, especially now at learning his exact age:

“Ricardo, you were such a marvellous, powerful lover: how could I not harbour in my heart that great passion and desire for you? In my eyes, believe me, you were like *a god* or an invincible hero, the very best man existing on earth. I can even say: *the only man*. In absolute, in fact, no man could compete with you! Now that you have grown older and weaker, though I still love you intensely and am intimately convinced that it will be nearly impossible for me to find another man possessing the virtues I found in you, there is much less passion in my love for you than in the past. This might also be a reason why I did not kiss you as in the past, in the way you liked so much.” Then she added: “Darling, I can now agree with you

that you are right when you say that you are too old for me, you convinced me; I have therefore to stop hoping that *you* can marry me, it wouldn't perhaps be a suitable, very fortunate marriage. But I'm also persuaded that it will be exceedingly difficult for me to find a man who can rightly take your place in my heart. How can I devote myself to somebody else? I'll never be able to love another man as much as I love *you*."

"Give time to time and you will find this man, Cathy, sweetheart! I am pretty sure of it. You are such a delightful and charming young lady that I'm convinced men will fall at your feet in their hundreds and strenuously court you. You will see, men are simple beings and cannot resist the charms of a beautiful woman like you. So it happens, nearly always. They must be totally blind or idiots not to perceive what a magnificent, lovely woman you are! It will then be only a matter of picking out the right and fully worthy one."

"I want a white man as my companion in life, not an African one, you must know it, darling!"

"And you will certainly find a white man, especially when you can at last travel to Europe and settle and live there. But here is my fear and my big worry, my Sylph: that you might fall on the wrong man and get in love with him simply because he is white, without taking under serious consideration and careful examination his natural manners, the disposition of his heart and his overall behaviour! I frankly don't understand why, but I have the impression that you, marvellous black beauties, fall too easily in love with us white men, though we might not always be very trustworthy people who really deserve your love. Should it be due to your ancestral habit of feasting and happily welcoming foreigners, also of other races, or to the many decades of colonisation and subjugation by Europeans, you, delightful women of Africa, find that everything which comes from Europe – including people and, especially, men – is good, attractive and praiseworthy. It is not like that, alas! Unfortunately there are, even among the European populace, plenty of dishonourable and unworthy men who don't deserve at all to get even a small nail of a precious treasure like you, but are anyhow ready to make you their prey. Since, being African, you are used to customs and traditions totally different from European ones, it may be extremely difficult for you to recognize good men from bad ones in Europe. I assure you, it would give me enormous grief to learn

that you had fallen into the hands of an unworthy and undeserving man! It is my task, at present, to warn you severely against this danger. I therefore beg you warmly henceforth: be very careful when you are in Europe! Be hard, not easily accessible and don't let yourself be blinded by the white colour of European men's skin! If you meet a man who, in your view, can be chosen as a potential boyfriend and, eventually, as a future husband, it is important that you don't give yourself to him immediately: let him pine for you, turn him inside out like a glove and study deeply his soul and behaviour. Decide whether he is eligible as the good one to give yourself to only after a carefully detailed and meticulous examination. Promise me, please, that you will always bear in mind my recommendation and you will behave accordingly."

"Darling, in these years I have spent enveloped in your very supportive love, I have enjoyed the best example I could hope to have. I learnt a lot from you and from your behaviour: therefore, in order to find a good man, I only have to look for a man like you, a man with prerogatives and manners similar to yours, if another man like you can ever exist on earth. But I promise, my dear, I will take care always to mind your precious, really affectionate advice. I have not another friend who cares for me so much as you do. For sure, you are *the beloved man of my heart*, but also *my very best friend*, a talented guide and a potent protector. In one word, you really are my unique saviour, my sole *insuperable and invincible hero!*"

Ricardo then wanted to give Catherine sanitary advice, and recommended her very strongly always to use a condom when making love to a man, in order to avoid any risk of possible contamination by sexual diseases, especially with regard to the terrible and lethal AIDS. Catherine listened carefully to him, willingly accepting his clear explanation about the possibility of contracting venereal diseases by unsafe men perhaps affected by syphilis or by the fatal HIV infection, but afterwards reacted vividly:

"But you, darling, at least with me – to my greatest enjoyment and real pleasure, I must avow, because, when you are inside me, I like to feel direct contact with the bare skin of your beloved body, without an unpleasant and annoying septum separating us –, you never make use of condoms!"

"That's true, but I know for certain that I am perfectly healthy: I submitted myself to the HIV test and came out negative. And I have

maximum faith in you and am sure that you too are absolutely healthy. That's why I can make love to you bare, without any protective device – which, to be frank, I hate –, and feel perfectly confident that no harm can come to either me or you. But, you can't know whether a casual partner you may meet and find attractive is also totally healthy or not. To trust is good, but not to trust is better! So, please, my beloved Sweet Sylph, excluding me, if you are pushed by a sexual impulse and want to make love to any other man, protect yourself carefully and make him use a condom!"

Catherine smiled sweetly at him and calmed him, saying:

"OK, darling, don't worry for me: although I'm not eager at all to have an affair with other men, apart from you – who are my only true great love –, I will be careful, bearing always in mind your admonition!"

At this point however, Ricardo, after having managed so strenuously to push Catherine away from him, though he did that for her own happiness (which was always his main aim), panicked, fearing to lose *ipso facto* her love and to get a big black hole in his sentimental life, like that he had already suffered when he had been dumped by Edima.^(*) Catherine was his angel, a splendid glowing black angel who had brought him Paradise on earth: how could he now accept losing her? Surely, he would bitterly repent later on having worked against himself in that way. He then asked her:

"Cathy, what are actually your present feelings for me? You remember, you wrote to me that you will love me forever, all your life long, even if you get married!"

"That is so, darling. I love you, my dear Ricardo, I love you with all my heart and it will always be so as long as I live, whatever might happen to change and subvert my life!"

At this announcement, Ricardo felt as though he had thrown off a big and heavy weight from his stomach. He could be tranquil; he had not lost her, she had herself assured him that he still enjoyed her love and would endlessly enjoy it. This gave him an irresistible happiness. His sweet romance with Catherine had not yet come to its end and was still vigorously alive.

* See *Living in the Land of Love*

3. *A hard separation*

On the day Ricardo had to leave, in the afternoon, when the Company employee who had the task of going to the airport in advance to perform the check-in operations on Ricardo's behalf had already collected his passport and air ticket and had left for the airport, Catherine went into their room and lay on the bed. Ricardo had nothing to do, but to wait until it was time for an early dinner before going to the airport and taking his flight; he too then decided to rest a bit and stretched on the bed beside Catherine. He had however a very sad expression clearly depicted on his face. Although it was obvious that he was not glad at all to be compelled to part shortly from his beloved Catherine, the sadness he showed was too intense not to move Catherine, who for her part shared the same grief, to sympathy and, as a consequence, to try to console him gently. Caressing his face and chest tenderly, she therefore asked him what had he in his heart to be in such a depressed mood. He declared to her:

“Cathy, my dear, I'm awfully sorry I have to leave you. I wish I were able to stay here with you all my life long, because I love you beyond any possible description. My heart and my most intimate and cherished thoughts of love are totally yours.”

“Then remain here with me and do not go away. If you stay, you will have me forever. ”

“I would utterly like to do that, but I cannot, you know it. What could I do here and how should I maintain myself, as well as your good self, without an adequate job providing me with a good salary and a qualified house? I would need a house, adequate to my standard and my habits, not a hovel, but with the prices applied here in Lagos for good residences how could I pay for it? Normally, it is Companies that give houses to their employees, if they own any, or

who rent other accommodation in town for them. I could certainly not stay for years in a friend's house like this, especially with you, when you know well that he doesn't like you being here and has accepted your presence only because I forced him to?" Then he added, sadly: "But I am also so full of sorrow and regret because we did not make love this morning. Frankly, I really cannot stand the idea that I am now about to leave you without being accompanied by the nice memory of having been inside you up to the last day, inside your marvellous body, the splendid and unforgettable part of happiness and joy, of freedom and peace, of all the good which can come to humankind."

Catherine promptly said:

"But, darling, nothing can hinder us from making love right now! The time for dinner and leaving for the airport is still far in front of us; we therefore have plenty of time. Come on, then, let's make it and enjoy ourselves as usual when we make love to one another." and started immediately to undress. During their discussion on the matter, two days ago, she had in fact acknowledged that Ricardo was too old in relation to her, but she was not at all convinced that he was not fit for her. On the contrary, *he* was still the target of her most intimate desires, the cherished object of her most tender thoughts. Should he therefore now propose marriage to her, she would have accepted such a proposition immediately, happily, without the slightest hesitation, because she was sincerely fond of him and strongly deemed that *he* was the most desirable man existing on earth. *He* was the *only man* she deeply wanted, the *only man* she was exceedingly delighted to give herself to, the *only man* to whom she really enjoyed making love. Making love to him was for her absolutely great and sensational, not an act of common order, but something extraordinary and unrepeatable with any other man. That's why she suggested making love to him.

Ricardo felt an enormous wave of gratitude filling his heart for this wonderful creature, as gentle and thoughtful in his respect as to let him have the pleasure of possessing her once more, just before leaving. He was totally overwhelmed by her so kind thought and her dedication to him and couldn't but say to himself that she deserved entirely his most passionate love. She had just announced to him that she did not love him any more with the impetuous passion and intensity she did before, and here was she nevertheless ready to

make the incomparable gift of herself to him again. How exquisite and lovely was the offer she was making to Ricardo! It was not out of sex hunger, he was absolutely sure of it: Catherine was not that sort of woman, always in search of exciting sexual intercourse for her eager physical satisfaction. This was instead the most evident demonstration of the very particular affection she had for him. Ricardo felt as though he was living in a fantastic dream, where any true dimension of reality was completely lost and only forbidden love, sensuality and eroticism were present. The two of them were in the middle of a whirlpool of ecstatic sensations, of an immense unrepeatable love, of an oneiric life! With great enthusiasm and exuberance, he also undressed quickly and tenderly hugged her delightful naked body in his arms. He delicately caressed her at length with immense care – as was totally natural to him –, lingering voluptuously over the most sensitive parts of her body: her neck, her breasts, which he gently squeezed with great concern and maximum tenderness, her belly, the inner side of her thighs, her pubis. For a while, she remained still in expectation of the rising of most intense pleasure, like being sunk in a potent wave of bliss and overwhelming sensations: how smooth and softly exciting were his caresses! Subjugated and happy, she relished them intensely. Ricardo and Catherine were about to reach the very climax of their performance, mindless of the rest of the world, when the latter let them perceive that it was there, existing and active, just outside the room that, in that very moment, they had transformed into their love nest. A sudden heavy knocking at the door let them understand that Ricardo's friend was back home and wanted to talk to him. Ricardo jumped quickly from the bed and, concealing his naked body behind the door, unlocked it and put just his head outside it:

“What is the matter, Hugo?” he asked imperiously and almost brusquely, nearly forgetting that Hugo, *not he*, was the tenant of the house. His friend replied rather shamefully, understanding, by such unusual behaviour - and by Ricardo's naked shoulder that he could glimpse appearing at the corner of the door - that he had disturbed him at a very inopportune moment:

“I'm sorry I have distracted you from other, more engaging and probably sweeter intimate occupations. I was however anxious to know whether my man came to collect your passport and air ticket to take them to the airport for the check-in.”

Ricardo replied in a conciliatory tone, although still annoyed and upset for the undue interruption that risked causing him to lose the concentration necessary to attain his climax:

“Yes, Hugo, he came and went straight to the airport. He must be there, by now. Forgive me, please, for my roughness and lack of patience. Don’t be angry with me, I did not mean to be impolite to you, but I was doing something else, very pleasant and engaging, I assure you, and I realize now that I reacted too badly to the interruption.”

Wishing to be forgiven for interrupting a sweet interlude, Hugo said:

“Don’t worry, Ricardo, it is me who should apologize for being so thoughtless. I was very silly, indeed: I should have guessed that, since you were locked inside the room, it was because you wanted to say good-bye to your sweetheart before leaving Nigeria.”

This said, Ricardo went back to the bed where Catherine had remained still, naked and half-covered by the bed sheet, waiting for him. Ricardo and Catherine started their love talk again, giving each other ample demonstration of how powerful was the bond that tied them to one another. He caressed and licked her again with great, careful tenderness. Catherine could not resist his exciting movement: it was such a marvellous and enticing experience! The sensational contact with her body, the magic touch of her hands on him, the exciting kisses that she lavished on him madly aroused him and made him penetrate her with a joyous dynamic frenzy that he had rarely experienced before. How sweet and rapturous it was to be in her, inside her so enjoyable body! He relished ravishingly the splendid inebriating sensation as if he were under the effect of a spell.

He felt totally pervaded by an immense joy and had the impression that he would never experience again a happiness as great as that he was receiving from the delightful Catherine in that instant. It was a real enchantment! The only pity was that he came too quickly, with an ejaculation too fast, and couldn’t therefore enjoy entirely and as long as he would have liked this marvellous libidinous sensation. He had always suffered from premature ejaculations, it was alas his main, recurrent and often inhibiting sexual fault; in this particular case, however, the pleasure he felt by being inside her once again was really too intense and fulfilling – a magnificent experience he

would now unfortunately be unable to relive for a long while – to enable him to resist the impelling need to release his semen in her.

Catherine had nearly swooned from the intense pleasure, and was half-conscious. In this dreamy mood, she caressed his head fondly, but rather mechanically, not really realizing fully what she was doing, softly interlocking her fingers within his hair. She had fallen into deep ecstasy: her eyes were closed and turned upwards in their sockets and she felt as if being transported into a marvellous forest – or was it a large, wonderful garden, suddenly materialized from nowhere? – filled with exotic, unknown multi-coloured flowers spreading out finely hovering scent and magnificent, rich vegetation everywhere; a wonderful blue colour covered the entire landscape and a glowing golden light flared throughout the sky.

Seized by extraordinarily sweet, pleasant sensations, she was completely lost in wonderful thoughts hammering her brain: was *this* the Paradise so much claimed and sought for? A celestial, enthralling music was resounding in her ear, fully appeasing all her delightful person. Or was it simply Ricardo's cherished voice murmuring exceedingly nice and sweet words of love in it? Ricardo as well lost the sense of reality and fell prey to strong emotions. It was as if he were inebriated and totally seduced by the lovely natural scent of her skin: if he could have done it without any harm to her, he would have willingly detached her nipples from her magnificent body with his teeth and taken them with him as a tangible perennial souvenir of her. How delightful and arousing it was to hear her moaning louder and louder till the last wild cry when she eventually attained full orgasm! Her body started trembling unconsciously in his hands as though she had a series of strong convulsions and the feeling of how weak she was in that moment of passion, filled Ricardo with great tenderness for her. Ricardo had always demonstrated to her how fond he was of her as a person and how keen he was on her body, but not as a mean sexual symbol, rather because it was considered by him as an integral part of her being. She appreciated that at the utmost. In her eyes, he was really a *true man*. And, how lucky she was, he was *her* man! Undoubtedly, a man fully worthy of being loved and desired, as she did with all her heart and mind. When she had made his acquaintance and had had the first love effusions with him, she had immediately perceived that he behaved

in a totally different manner than the ways used by the African bed-partners she had previously met. His action was tender, altruistic, a continuous search for her enjoyment, for her personal involvement, for her pleasure, more than for his own. No egocentric desire of eroticism and search for personal physical satisfaction was shown in it. It did not really matter to him to come, provided that she attained a pleasant and fulfilling orgasm, that *she* came, potently and fully satisfactorily. *Her* pleasure was *his* aim; *her* pleasure was *his own* pleasure.

Catherine wondered why African men couldn't behave like white ones – Ricardo was the only 'oyinbo' she knew, but she presumed that his behaviour could not be the isolated action of a single individual; it had to be common to his entire race – and give their women a similar demonstration of fondness for them and for their bodies, instead of uniquely considering them as sex targets? Of course, their aggressive and powerful penetration action in her had sometimes (not always!) given her pleasure, but only strictly physically, without a real personal involvement in the act and, as a consequence, without emotion and mental pleasure.

And really great fulfilling emotions can only derive from mental pleasure; they cannot be disjointed from it. They can in no way be the consequence of a simple physical pleasure, which is bound to last only a few seconds. Only with Ricardo had Catherine experienced such gratifying emotions. That's why she rejected African men and refused to have a romance with them. Why had no African man ever given her the impression of being really and deeply interested in knowing what she had felt in making love to him? Why had none of the three or four African bed-partners she had had in the past ever shown profound admiration for her as a person and real sincere love for her body, as Ricardo on the contrary constantly manifested? Ricardo did not in fact lose any opportunity to demonstrate to her his high consideration and esteem, together with his profound devotion and his true adoration for her and her body! Why didn't African men show any appreciation for their women's cleverness – often higher and more brilliant than their own – and real admiration for their beauty, as well as deep fondness for their body, making their best efforts to engender sexual desire and pleasure in them? Why did they always have to exclude women from physical satisfaction?

Why should women be systematically hindered from getting sexually involved? Why did they have to be considered and praised only for their ability in housekeeping and cooking and for their fertility in giving birth to an entire brigade of children? Women are not asexual objects to ornament a house with; they too, whether bush-peasants or town-dwellers, are human beings harbouring feelings, desires, needs! Yes, also physical desires and needs! And with full rights to be eager to make love to a man of their choice and to get pleasure from it.

How could showing more interest for the enjoyment of their women diminish African men's dignity? What joy, what pleasure could they get from this selfish and unilateral search for simply physical satisfaction? Wasn't a woman's vulva a significant, honourable part of her body, of the same value and usefulness as her eyes, mouth and hands, and to have fondness demonstrated for it with soft caresses and kisses - instead of being sought for only to satisfy low instincts by penetrating as violently and rudely as possible inside it?

Why did a woman have to feel like being brutally raped every time she made love to an African man, because of the roughness and the carelessness demonstrated by him in regard to her, whilst she could feel, on the contrary, as a looked after and highly praised princess or even as a worshiped goddess every time she was tenderly and tightly kept in the soft hugging and welcoming arms of a white man? A sexual interlude and, mainly, the delightful penetration into a woman's body should be considered as the most precious gift a man can receive from that woman (the highly praisable and generous gift of *herself*, of *her own* body) and be the practical and most evident real conclusion and visible regal implementation of a sincere love sentiment: why then had this act to be so brutal and violent, often without any pleasure on the woman's side, when performed with an African man, whilst it was usually so generously enthralling and fascinatingly orgasms-rich - a real sublime exchange of sweet tenderness between man and woman - when fulfilled with a white man? Is there really no way that African men (as well as all Arabs, just to cite another male population that acts with exactly the same awful and odious behaviour in respect of their female counterparts) can sooner or later change their mentality and attitude vis-à-vis sex and sexual habits (and, obviously, women in general) and put

something else in an interlude, apart from their characteristic and undoubtedly extraordinary physical vigour and capability?

Ricardo remembered that one former mistress of his had accused him of being too rational and thoughtful and not capable of freeing the animal which exists in any man, at least in those moments of lust and libido.

He could however not help this, it was something stronger than him: tenderness and sweetness were systematic in him, were part of his most intimate nature and masculinity and he was unable to behave as a beast when making love to a woman. Certainly it was Ricardo's tender and sweet behaviour towards Catherine that had first attracted her stupefied attention towards him, then engendered in her a deep affection for him and induced her to select him as her true sweetheart, as her only man, as the man of her life.

That's why she was so hopelessly fond of him and loved him so much.

When the vibrant shaking of her body ceased and she seemed to be appeased and fully satisfied, he still showed openly his devoted, eager attention in her regards and gently asked her:

"Did you come, my Love? How was it, did you enjoy it?"

She crouched tightly to his body, clasping in his soft embrace and answered smiling at him tenderly and gratefully:

"Yes, darling, I came delightfully and enjoyed a fantastic orgasm. Everything was so sweet and totally involving! In my whole life, while making love to other men, I never had the incredible sensations you are always able to engender in me. You are the only man who can do that: Ricardo, you are a wonderful man and a fabulous lover. How is it possible? How can you let me touch the sky so easily with my finger, filling me with real happiness and joy? Certainly, there is no other man like you on this planet. My heart is totally yours, I love you and will never forget the immense pleasure that you gave me."

And, to show him all her gratitude for the pleasure he had given her, as well as her deep affection, she clung tightly to him and kissed him tenderly. Everything had been so sweet and enthralling that, had it not been for the dinner, which was soon to be served, they would have started their expressions of love once again, with great enthusiasm.

They knew in fact that for a long while now they would not have

any possibility of staying together and making love to one another.

When Ricardo left for the airport, Catherine wanted to accompany him. All along the trip they sat on the backseat of the car hand in hand, with their fingers tightly intertwined. Though shy of being seen by the driver (who, for the truth, did not pay much attention to them, but could see them when glancing in the rearview-mirror), from time to time they also exchanged a passionate kiss, full of love and of sadness for the imminent separation. A separation that terrorised them, since it would inevitably deprive them of their so sweet intimacy. They were both shocked and hated it deeply.

They relished gluttonously the last moments they could still be together, inhaling intensely each other's smell, so as to keep with them in the inmost corners of their hearts a little part of one another's being. Overcoming their bashfulness of being heard by the driver, they exchanged from time to time nice and affectionate words of love. Catherine was the first to cut the gloomy silence and reveal the soundness of her feelings. Tightening her grasp on his hand, she said:

"Darling, the thought that in a short while you'll be far from me is unbearable and is killing me. I am persuaded that this time, after having seen you again and having so enchantingly renewed our love bond, it will be even worse than the former occasion when you left Nigeria for good and left me so awfully alone. I will not be able to stand a second, years-long separation. I feel that I'm only yours and I wish I could live with you all my life. I love you so desperately much!"

Ricardo replied:

"Cathy, my beloved Sweet Sylph, I too feel that it is exceedingly painful to live far from you. I frankly wonder whether I'll be able to stand our separation and I wish with all my heart that this day had not come. I am totally crazy about you, my sweetheart. My love for you is undoubtedly immense and will last for ever!"

"Ricardo, destiny was very generous with us, putting us on one another's paths and letting us fall in love with each other; I am so grateful to it and thank God every day for this splendid gift we received."

"The merit, darling, goes to this marvellous country, Nigeria, a real Land of Love.^(*) It is absolutely fantastic, it made my dreams become true reality and it gave me the most precious gift I could dare desire

to receive: your love. Your love in fact makes me feel younger and gives me a powerful sprint, a new life. Please, Cathy dear, go on loving me, as long as you can!”

“I *love you* and will *always* love you, all my life long, up to my death, be sure of it, darling!”

When they arrived at the airport, the Company employee sent to make the check-in in advance was already there on the sidewalk outside the departure hall, waiting for Ricardo. He gave Ricardo his passport – already stamped with the immigration’s exit control stamp –, the air ticket and the boarding pass and recommended him to go straight to the inner departure hall. Ricardo gave him a tip for the service so well performed, consisting of two or three hundred Naira, keeping for himself, for the possible further cash he could be compelled to distribute to airport officials, only forty Naira. Fortunately, however, he was not requested to make any further payment and, as a consequence, he brought these forty Naira home (though absolutely unusable and unexchangeable abroad).

He kissed Catherine gently and passionately on her warm parted lips and, forgetting however completely to say to her a last “I love you!” (but she knew well enough how much he loved her), softly whispered to her:

“God bless you, Sweet Sylph. Take care of yourself, darling, please! You know well how much you count for me and how I always worry about you. So, don’t let me be paining for you. You know it well enough, I don’t like to panic for somebody I love!”

He then entered into the departure hall. Having the police stamp already on his passport, he proceeded speedily inside the departure sector of the airport, to the so-called airport terminal finger from which his flight was leaving.

Waiting for his flight to be called, he sat on the metallic bench beside a nice young Nigerian lady with a small infant. Perceiving that Ricardo was curious to see how this baby looked (quite often, African children are of a very rare and exquisite beauty) and therefore trying to peep out at it beyond her shoulder, she smiled at him and, opening widely the large shawl that covered it, showed the baby to him. It was in fact a very nice and attractive infant. He congratulated her for the beauty of her child, then asked her whether the child was her first baby, but she answered that it was her second one, having already had another child, who at the

moment was with her husband. She was travelling, alone with this lovely little child of hers, to join her husband in London.

When, at last, his embarkation was announced, he queued patiently for the usual hand-luggage control and, after a rather long while, finally boarded the plane. He was thus leaving Nigeria for the second time, without knowing if and when there could be another chance to come to that blessed land again. Obviously, he hoped with all his heart there could be at least another occasion to return to a country that had given him such great gifts^(*) and that he therefore loved so much.

It was true in fact that Catherine counted on being able to travel soon to Italy, where they could meet quite easily, or even to Spain, his homeland, but this wouldn't be possible before a couple of years, when she would have terminated her University courses. And to wait again for such a long time before being able to see each other was a burden too difficult to bear.

Ricardo's heart that night, during his flight back to Spain, was therefore very heavy and full of sorrow. Catherine's image, with her pretty face and her splendid body, was continuously materializing in his mind: she was there, in front of him, beautiful and superb and desirable as never before, nearly touchable; he had the impression he could easily reach for her and hug her tight in his arms, but alas!, it was only an impalpable ghostly vision; just a dream, an exceedingly enthralling dream, but nothing else than a dream, unfortunately! The flight was regular and plain and he arrived safely the following morning in Spain, without problems.

Once back at home, Ricardo felt immediately how sorrowful and hard was this new separation from the enchanting Catherine and rang her immediately, confiding in her all the pain he was harbouring in his heart. She replied in the same mournful tone, since she felt she had touched the sky with her finger while Ricardo was there in Lagos (especially the last day, before his departure, by so tenderly and enthusiastically making love to him) and now she missed enormously his sweet caresses and the tenderness that he amply lavished on her at any moment of their life together. Making love to him had in fact represented something new and totally different in her sexual life: it was so enthralling, so enrapturing, she had never felt such ecstatic sensations before. The few young African men she had made love to before meeting Ricardo were

only eager to find their own enjoyment in the act and cared very little or at all for hers. He, on the contrary, always had in mind the main aim – that he constantly kept as a compulsory task entrusted to him by Heaven – of letting her get the maximum pleasure even more than himself. After having enjoyed at the highest level those few days with him, she now felt desolately alone and nearly dead, forsaken, without the strength to react to such a horrible sensation of solitude.

Happily enough she could hear his voice through the so useful and blessed phone. But Ricardo, her beloved Ricardo, the only man capable of engendering in her the most tender sentiments of love, as well as the highest peaks of voluptuous bliss and happiness, was now so far away – several thousands miles far, alas! – that she could not reach for him just by stretching her arm out. She was so fond of him, he was everything for her, he had his reserved place at the very top of her thoughts and desires (no other man had ever occupied it so powerfully and exclusively): how could she now live without him? Ricardo was a very sensitive man and was highly moved at hearing her utter such tender expressions of love for him; if it were up to him, he would have flown back to Nigeria immediately, in order to hug her again in his warmest and most affectionate embrace!

He sent her a nice letter with copies of the entire set of photographs he had taken of her (including those where she appeared totally naked and this was not appreciated by her, since she opened the small parcel just in front of her aunt who was shocked at seeing her nude as her mother had made her; moreover, Catherine said she knew perfectly what her body was like, she could see herself naked every day in the mirror after showering, therefore she did not need to have photos of it to remind herself of how she was naturally. He however could not understand why her aunt was so astounded and angry at seeing photos where she appeared naked: by now, she must have well known or, at least, presumed that they were lovers so why then marvel and scandalize that they had snapped such photos, totally normal to their eyes between people in love?). In the letter he expressed to her all his disappointment for having been compelled to leave her once more and his great regret for not having been able to give her the best and highest satisfaction he deemed she was totally worth of. He protested his deepest love for her and the constant desire he had to be with her, making love to

her, as she was the only woman he really loved with all his heart and soul.

Knowing how eager she was to get plumper ‘boobs’, he also sent her a product, fabricated in the USA and bought via internet through his computer, said – at least, this was what the advertisements in the electronic information media affirmed – to be likely to enlarge a woman’s breasts. Catherine was literally delighted to receive something which – theoretically, at least – could comply entirely with her most intimate desire and immediately started taking a large number of the tablets.

When Ricardo discovered by phone how many capsules she was consuming per day, he warned her seriously to be more cautious and reduce drastically the daily dose, in order not to get any possible harm (intoxication or even worse side effects?) from this massive ingestion of the drug. She was so happy that Ricardo had demonstrated to her how much he cared for her welfare and in what consideration he kept her desires; she wrote to him a delightful letter, which filled Ricardo with enormous tenderness towards her and, if it was ever possible, made his love for her even stronger and fully dedicated.

Catherine was very important for Ricardo: she detained entirely the keys of his heart and was for him the image itself of joy and happiness. She had in fact replenished his life with wonderful sensations of unequalled delight. He felt that she was a woman really deserving his most tender and romantic love, the sun that had enlightened his days, the bright star that, glimmering throughout his nights, had brilliantly guided his steps on the path of life.

However, after two months treatment, her breasts were not visibly larger and she was very let down and disappointed. Ricardo tried to console her (her concern was, as always, also his own concern), saying:

“Don’t worry, my sweetheart, your breasts are exceedingly beautiful and delightful as they currently are. Though I admit that a plump, glamorous and luxuriant bosom may strongly embellish the body of a woman and make her more attractive and desirable to men’s eyes, it is not evident at all that a pretty woman with small breasts – provided that they are, like yours, harmoniously full, firm and high, not wrung, flabby or even dangling – is less fascinating and seductive. On the contrary, in my own opinion and taking into

account, for instance, your own features and how you look, she can absolutely be very charming! My dear adorable you, your breasts, in particular, do not need to be enlarged to become attractive. I deem that their present size is perfectly fitting. Moreover, they appear to be so delightfully delicate and desirable! That's why I like them as they are now and even more than if they were bigger, you must know it. I assure you, my Sylph, I am very fond of your breasts, they arouse in me great tenderness, pleasure and desire at seeing and touching them also because they are of such small size: they are in fact so delicious that I literally adore holding them in my hands, to caress them, to kiss them, to lick and suck them, filling my mouth with and biting their little nipples gently." After a very brief pause, not long enough to give her the chance to interrupt or the time and way to reply, he added tenderly: "Believe me, you have a perfect, very charming and lovely shape as you are, without any need to enlarge your bust: thousands of girls would like to enjoy a shape and a silhouette like yours and would be surely ready to pay any amount to get it! To say it in simple words, in my opinion, you are, as you presently are, really a perfect splendid and fascinating woman and I challenge everybody to give me the lie and deny it."

She replied excitedly:

"Darling, you are very kind, generous and too good and I am frankly grateful for your words of encouragement, but you say so, because you like and love me and your love blinds you and makes you see my body under a very particular light: you appreciate also what other people would maybe despise. Here in Africa, in particular in respect of the average Nigerian woman – who normally wears bra of the fourth or fifth or whatever is the largest size, while I'm wearing only the second (or the third with artificial pads inside) – other persons, especially men, would in fact find me rather flat. I can openly confess to you that I would hate such sort of nasty judgement expressed on the features of my body – even though formulated by African men and therefore rather insignificant for me who know their rudeness and am not interested in them at all – and I would feel terribly wounded. I would certainly be unable to accept and stand such criticism that would deeply hurt me. For this reason, I would appreciate it very much if I had bigger and plumper boobs!"

She then expressed to Ricardo her wish to punish the manufacturers, guilty, in her eyes, of raising false hopes in potential

ingenuous buyers:

“Since in their advertisement they announced that they were ready to refund the money to the unsatisfied customer, and I must say that I am this sort of totally unsatisfied and disappointed customer, you should ask them to give back the money they received from you for this ineffective product.”

Ricardo, in truth, had secretly feared in his heart that this could be the most probable unfortunate conclusion of what he considered nothing more than a simple trial, without great chances of attaining a success in the sense she was aiming for. He was actually a rather pragmatic man and did not believe much in products claimed to be miraculous: for if they were so portentous, why were they not more widely known and openly sold in any pharmacy or drugstore? He wanted her anyhow to be more persistent and try a longer treatment in order to verify completely and without any possible doubt the real ineffectiveness of that product.

He was however unable, despite his reiterated efforts, to open again the e-mail he had received through the internet a long time before, advertising the product, in order to be enabled to place a second order for a further dose (or, alternatively, to ask for a refund). To be able to place an order for another dose, he was therefore compelled to wait until another ad of the same nature arrived onto his PC.

But nothing of that sort had arrived for a long time, so he wondered whether the firm fabricating the product might have been compelled, for any reason, to stop production or had perhaps gone bankrupt.

She replied to Ricardo with a lovely letter full of passion that he, so eager to receive news from her, read hastily and with enormous pleasure. Apart from scolding him for having sent her the photos where she appeared totally naked, she confided in him her desire to go to Europe as soon as possible, whenever her current studies at the University and possible money allowance allowed it. She hoped indeed that this dream would be realizable next year, with the help of her University which would take care of finding a suitable placement, as her University course allowed for one year of practical work being performed abroad, possibly in Italy. In the worst case, the travel to Europe could take place in two years time, after the completion of her studies. Of course, she counted entirely on

Ricardo for getting the money necessary to make her dream come true. She assured him that, to this end, she was making great savings with the amounts he was regularly sending her every second month. She said she was exceedingly grateful to God for having permitted their encounter and having taken them together: what could she have done without him? He, only he, was the man sent from Heaven to rescue her, to give her the possibility of leaving the narrow, hard prison she felt Nigeria had become for her and travelling to the dreamed land, the fabulous Europe, and, possibly, settling there. She did not want to live in Nigeria any more, she dreamt of Europe every day, with open eyes. Europe, uniquely and always Europe, was the cherished target where she was aiming to live the rest of her days. She also asked Ricardo to put an ad for her, describing her physical characteristics, in some internet website for lonely persons looking for a mate, with the hope of finding a white man likely to be willing to meet her for establishing a relationship perhaps leading to marriage. She wanted to meet as soon as possible a man worthy of becoming her husband. She was very eager to have her own family and get children before it was too late. This, she explained, was the reason for her relative coldness towards Ricardo when they had met, since Ricardo – to her great regret, actually, because *he* was the only man she really loved – could no more represent a potential husband for her.

Then she tackled the topic of their own lovemaking and wrote: “I really appreciated your coming to Nigeria after five good years. I must confess that I enjoyed your stay and I really hope it can happen again. I’m glad you are so concerned about my welfare and my happiness. I appreciate completely the love you have for me, I thank you for loving me. Now, I am missing you very much, because I still love you. I love the way you made my body vibrate and shake, I really enjoyed it. I love the way you make love to me and I feel good whenever you are doing it. Anytime I think back to that act you performed on me, my body starts vibrating. I really want to be with you, so you can suck me in that enchanting way again, sending me into rapture. You are the *only man* who knows how to do it to me. Do not worry, we’ll be together again when I’ll go to Italy. You can fly down to Italy to see me or I’ll come to Spain to meet you. Keep your fingers crossed that we’ll see one another next year and next year is just around the corner. *I love you and I’m missing you.*” Then,

also to show him how profitable her studies were and, as a consequence, how much she had learnt of that foreign language, which would enable her to go to the cherished Europe and possibly settle there, she proudly added in Italian: “*Vorrei rivederti presto e ti amo moltissimo* (I would like to see you soonest and I love you very much).”

Ricardo knew well that Catherine had enjoyed very intense, exceedingly pleasant and fully satisfying orgasms with him, especially that afternoon before his departure for travelling back to Spain. He was perfectly conscious and aware of the big success he had attained by provoking in her a phenomenal physical cataclysm, with no doubt an immense pleasure of rare intensity and power. He knew it, not so much from her final loud cry when she came or from her revelatory words at the end of their interlude, but because he had felt it straight from her body. Her body had communicated it to him itself and transmitted to the smart receptors in his brain even better than if it could speak, through his hands, which were tenderly holding it by her waist. He had in fact fully perceived that the violent strokes, which her body had been unconsciously subjected to while vibrating from head to foot when she was coming, could only indicate the attainment of a particularly strong and fulfilling pleasure. He was absolutely convinced of it. He too had rejoiced together with her as though he had attained himself the same level of bliss – and even more – by coming, because *her* pleasure was entirely *his own* pleasure. He had felt happy and satisfied. But to read it now, frankly and openly avowed by her in writing, in very explicit and not cryptic words, left him pleasantly astonished and filled with great joy and happiness. Especially because she had written: “*You are the only man who knows how to do it to me.*” He was perfectly aware of the fact that everything he did to her came to his mind and was immediately translated into an act very naturally and simply and, especially, was not dictated by an egoistic search for eroticism and personal physical enjoyment. It derived indeed directly from the enormous love he felt for her, the very ample and free knowledge he had of her delightful body and its responses, the full constant dedication to her personal contentment and pleasure. It was therefore particularly enthralling to read such an avowal.

He did not know and was not interested to know about other men’s behaviour in making love to a woman. As far as he was

concerned, there was only one thing that he was looking for with all his heart and strength, in making love to that splendid black young lady. All that he personally wanted and strenuously sought for was to let her attain a very pleasant and totally satisfying orgasm. Her orgasm, her coming and therefore her physical satisfaction, *not his own*, was his sole aim in making love to her. For him, his own physical pleasure was not essential in an interlude: his full contentment and his most intense joy should derive from her pleasure and happiness.

In his eyes and heart, Catherine certainly was the nicest and most attractive creature existing on the whole planet, especially now that he had unfortunately lost Edima and Vivian forever and Catherine was therefore the only surviving one of the 'three Graces' – as he used to call the true 'regal' magic trio that he made love to in straight succession – who had, though not as an ensemble, but singularly and independently from one another, powerfully enlightened his life and made his stay in Nigeria so enjoyable and agreeable.

In his eyes, therefore, her sentence was certainly the best compliment and award he could receive from her, together with her gratitude and her love. She still loved him! He, only he, was the man she still had in her heart! This for him counted more than anything: to maintain his precious, cherished niche in her heart, not to be thrown away from it to give this place to another man, in spite of his age, in spite of all that had been said and discussed about between them, was absolutely sublime! Ricardo felt really happy: he was overwhelmed and as if sunk under an immense wave of intimate joy and delight. He liked Catherine, her splendid personality and her magnificent lithe body more than anything else on earth – 'oh what a wonderful woman she was!' he constantly thought, cheerfully singing her praises – and was completely crazy about her. He deeply and sincerely loved her and, undoubtedly, he could never erase this sentiment for her; now he was absolutely sure of that: up to the last days of his life, or up to when a man can still be fond of a woman, he would love her forever.

* See *Living in the Land of Love*

4.

Reveries and daydreams

Catherine was very conscious of the fact that her life had now come to a crossroad: either she would go on indefinitely with this fabulous and unrepeatable romance and the consequent sound love she felt for Ricardo, thoughtless of her own future, of her life, of her desire for motherhood or she had to distance herself from him and seriously look for another man, younger than Ricardo, likely to give her the joy of a family. Many times a day, for a rather long period after Ricardo's return to Spain, she suddenly became estranged from contingent events or needs of daily life and plunged herself deeply in her problematic dilemma: what should she do?

Ricardo in fact represented for her the greatest joy and happiness she had ever received from life. He was everything for her, first of all her beloved lover, but also the man who had convinced her, with gentle and patient insistence, to drag herself out of an idle and meaningless life, who had wisely and persuasively pushed her to go to University in order to continue her studies and aim at the attainment of a doctorate; for certain, the first and only man she had sincerely loved with all her heart and her soul since the very first day she had met him, her unique idol, the only one capable of giving her the highest and unspeakable peaks of pleasure and bliss in lovemaking, the man she absolutely adored with all her strength. She felt very grateful to him for what he had given her and for his financial help and loved him intensely. But, unfortunately, he was also a man who was not likely to give and guarantee to her a future, to form a family with her, since he had already one to care about. With the same strength that she loved Ricardo, she also longed for having a family of her own. She deeply craved for a family. She was totally ready for that aim, though she understood well that to be a wife and a mother was a difficult and demanding task, no longer

allowing a merrily thoughtless youth's life. She wanted to have children and it is good that children are procreated when the woman is still young enough to let them be formed well, without any sort of handicap, inside her womb and to offer them, after birth, a shelter capable of total dedication and generous sacrifice, if necessary. Since she was already 28, she felt that she had to hurry. She loved children and was tired of looking at other people's babies: she was very eager to have her own children to take care of. Even on this delicate topic her innermost, fondest thought was anyhow for her beloved Ricardo: 'Oh, Ricardo, if only you were not married and could marry *me* and give *me* the joy of motherhood! I would love to get pregnant by you, darling, and would like so much to have children from *you*. To carry *your* children in my womb is my most cherished desire. Children with *your* own features, to remind me forever of *your* fascinating face. I'm pretty sure that our babies, I mean babies conceived by you and me together – thanks to our great and unique love –, to whom, after carrying them inside me, I would happily give life, would certainly enjoy a rare indescribable beauty, marvellously likely to win a comparison with any other child on earth or heaven!' To get children from *him*: what an undisputable happiness it would be for her! 'Also in spite of your advanced age, also in spite of the discussion we had about this topic: you are in fact for me the ideal husband, the only one wholly worthy of becoming my companion for all my life.' She perceived that clearly.

Now, however, it had become absolutely evident that Ricardo could not marry her. It was therefore necessary to divert her target from him and aim at somebody else, to look for another man. OK, but which man? Apart from Ricardo and that stupid friend of his she had once met, the stocky Alonso, all the men she knew were African youngsters, absolutely not worthy or reliable for building a life with. Furthermore, she did not want a black man as husband, she did not intend to submit herself to an African man's usual tyrannical will and to his wild assault in lovemaking. She wanted tenderness and respect, amiable and gentle manners and kind, due consideration for her brilliant and vivid brain; all qualities that, in her opinion, after so many years spent getting accustomed to Ricardo's behaviour, only 'oyinbos', the white men, appear to possess entirely and are always ready to implement with the 'other half of the sky', their female partners. She therefore wanted to marry a white man,

possibly a European or, in the worst case, an American. Although there were many white men living and actively working in Lagos – she could see them here and there in the town nearly every day – she had no opportunity to make any acquaintance in the white community.

She therefore fervently and almost feverishly addressed a request to Ricardo:

“Darling, I know very well that you want to keep me for yourself – because of the deep love and the desire that you feel for me – and I am very happy to be yours, but, if you love me as you say, you must help me to form a family and have my own children. Since you cannot be my family yourself and marry me, as I at the utmost desire and would be so happy with, please help me to find a man worthy of becoming my husband! You promised me you would place an ad on the internet for me, but you never did it. Is it because you are jealous and you don’t want another man to have a relationship with me?”

Ricardo admitted that, although he had looked for it, he had not yet found how to place an ad in her favour in some ‘lonely souls’ website’, in order to find a man willing to correspond with her for a potential wedding purpose, but also owned up his personal guilt:

“My Sweet Sylph, beloved adorable Cathy, it is absolutely true that I am jealous. I love you so intensely that I want to keep you for myself, if not lifelong – as I would frankly wish –, at least as long as possible and I am for sure exceedingly jealous of any man who can take you away from me. But I reckon that this is a very selfish and egocentric feeling of mine and I, who so ardently wish for your good and your happiness, should not behave like that and deserve your blame for this. In spite of my enormous and inconsolable grief for losing you, I now promise you formally to try to comply with your request to put an ad on the internet illustrating your moral and physical characteristics and try to find a right man for you.”

Catherine was not satisfied by his formal promise; she therefore furthermore insisted:

“Help me, please, darling: find me a man likely to marry me! I need to marry very soon or I’ll get too old to have babies! I *want* to have children of my own, you know it well. Help me then, please!”

Ricardo felt deeply moved: her desire in fact sounded terribly natural and sweet. Fully convinced of the rightness of her request, he replied softly:

“Delightful Cathy, my love, I am in the habit of doing what I promise; so be sure that sooner or later I’ll be able to put an ad in your favour in some website for persons looking for a partner suitable for sharing their life with, though I cannot obviously swear that a worthy man will answer such an ad and write or telephone you.”

Thankful, Catherine kindly added:

“I am very grateful to you for the help you promised to give me, Ricardo. I am fully aware that you want my greatest good and my best satisfaction; therefore I know well that if, by chance, you will choose a man for me, he will certainly be worthy of becoming my husband. Even for this, I need you. I trust you and rely totally on you and on your love for me, darling!” then she further added, tenderly: “I love you so much, *my* Ricardo!”

Ricardo’s answer to this sweet avowal came immediately, without the slightest hesitation:

“I love you too, infinitely, and, believe me, adorable Sweet Sylph, I can’t stop desiring to have you beside me, only for me, fully providing me forever with joy and happiness by means of your cherished and precious life-giving love for me!”

Their reciprocal passionate declaration of love got, as usual, the upper hand of any other consideration; as a matter of fact, they never missed an occasion for manifesting tenderly and openly to each other their great affection and their fantastic unbridled passion for one another. No other relationship in the world could be as strong and firm as their love bond!

Though taking into right account Ricardo’s promise, Catherine thought that perhaps she ought to wait until she travelled to Italy or Spain in order to meet there or in the rest of Europe a man of her choice. In this case, then, it was totally useless and even self-injuring and criminal to drop Ricardo immediately: what good could come to her by stopping loving such wonderful man for no reason at all? A man, by the way, who was really the best partner she could ever desire to have: he and he alone had given her the greatest joys and pleasures of her whole life. Besides, Catherine intimately felt that now she had finally got Ricardo totally in her blood, flowing molten in it through her veins, giving her true life. He was an integral part of her, and he could not be separated from her any more.

She had to be practical; she therefore eventually made her

decision: until she was able to meet a worthy 'oyinbo', she would go on considering only Ricardo as her man and giving him all her love with unequivocal, unbridled joy, as she had done so happily up to now. Obviously, Catherine did not keep this nice thought as a secret for herself, but hurried to inform Ricardo of her decision, thereby giving him an immense happiness. He felt exceedingly grateful for the evolution in his favour of her sentiments. To still be loved by her was in fact the only grace he asked Heaven to grant him.

How difficult and painful it was however to live far from her; Ricardo was constantly haunted by the nice memory of her extraordinarily graceful figure: her pretty face was always before the eyes of his mind, he would have liked to be enabled to touch it, to caress and kiss it. He longed to see her again, to have the great pleasure of holding her enchanting body in his arms again, to hug her tightly (but as softly and tenderly as possible), to lick and suck her gently. He desired her intensely: he had the impression that she was the only woman he wanted to make love to and into whose body he would like to enter and stay, as well as from whom he might get physical pleasure and sentimental happiness. He thought of her day and night, every single day of the year; he often dreamt of her at night. How hard it was not to be able to follow his desire! He felt he could no longer live without her and her love; she was surely everything for him: his world, his Promised Land, a splendid treasure as precious as the light of his eyes.

Though he understood well that she needed a man to form a family with – and he was even ready to give his own full support to this righteous aim of hers, in spite of the enormous grief and pain that parting from her would cause to him – Ricardo had the firm impression that he would die the day she stopped loving him and gave her heart to another man. He was convinced that at that moment his life would become totally useless and he wouldn't have any further reason for living. His life in fact was totally dedicated to her: 'Sweet Sylph, I love and adore you with all my heart, my soul and my strengths; only *you*, Cathy, my beloved delightful Catherine, are at the real centre of all my thoughts and interests and can engender in me the will to live. But I'm desperate, because, though I'm really crazy about you, I may not live all my life with you, with you only, as I desire at the utmost.' Beyond her existed only gloomy emptiness and sad void.

He answered her letter, inundating his writing with sweet words of love, expressing to her all the most tender thoughts in her regards that came to his mind, reflecting his pain for being so far from her, for not being allowed to stay with her and make love to her. He loved indeed the plain, agreeable intimacy that had been engendered and existed between them, which was certainly unique and allowed them to act and talk totally freely vis-à-vis each other: everything could be said, everything could be done. There were no secrets, no controversy or hidden feelings between them. They knew each other so well that they could each even reciprocally foresee and predict what the other one would think, do or say. Basically, all this was made possible only by virtue of the great, sincere love and, consequently, the tight involving bond existing between them. Really a love without boundaries, immense and immeasurable, which was harboured in their hearts for one another. They were both convinced that a human love as intense and solid as their love did not exist on earth. Even love stories narrated in fairy-tales or by the biggest and most famous novelists could not stand a comparison with their own. Only their love, being based on truly fond sentiments and full dedication to each other, as well as on a perfect physical mutual understanding and sexual accord – where the desire for one another reigned as an absolute sovereign –, was so incredibly fantastic and unique! They felt it deeply and firmly in their souls. Their love reflected in fact a bond as tight as it is never given to see in this world, so full of divisions, of struggles, of disputes. Ricardo and Catherine seemed to belong to another world, as their union was on the contrary every day more cemented and strong and appeared to be absolutely indissoluble. It did not risk any failure. Even her righteous, deep desire to get married and form a family was not likely to destroy ipso facto their romance. For Ricardo, it was so exciting, so fulfilling, so enchanting to be in love with such a charming and fascinating young woman! It *really* gave him *life*.

Ricardo was in his seventh heaven whenever he thought about the great luck he had had to meet her. He often wondered why this luck had fallen to him: which were his merits, what was the reason that had made him deserve such an immense favour given by Heaven to him? Why him? Ricardo had always considered himself a very unlucky man: every time he played bingo or cards, even for small prizes of very low value, also with friends or relatives, he never won

anything. Now, this incredible chance to have Catherine's lasting deep and sincere love (and all the other nice gifts reserved to him by that wonderful Land of Love, the great and incomparable Nigeria) subverted all the usual behaviour of luck in his regards: it was in fact really an enormous, fabulous fortune! He could then start considering himself, contrary to any former assumption or conviction, the luckiest and the richest man living on the whole planet as if he had found an immense treasure! For sure, no other man on earth could indeed boast having such a precious love bond and, consequently, such a splendid romance as the one he was happily and serenely experiencing with Catherine. For how long however would this luck continue to be propitious to him? Up to when could he go on counting on Catherine's love for him? What sort of future had destiny in store for him and Catherine? Being together, in love all their life long? Separated, alas? In this last case, if no more as lovers, anyhow, at least, still on good terms as affectionate bosom friends forever, always cheerfully mindful of each other?

These thoughts were constantly and heavily hammering Ricardo's brain. He did not want to lose Catherine, he loved her too much indeed, but he strongly feared – with enormous grief and sorrow – that the end of their marvellous love relationship was inevitable. He even feared that she might soon meet another man, with whom she would fall in love, and he would, as a consequence, be compelled to renounce his marvellous dream – the wonderful bond existing between them – instantly, even within hours:

“May this happen as late as possible, to give me time to get over it,” was his constant prayer addressed to Heaven.

Unexpectedly, Catherine received a phone-call from Ricardo's friend, Nadim Khamal, that is the man who had welcomed her at the Company camp in Abuja the day of Ricardo's arrival in Nigeria for his mission to the Zimbabwean High Commission. At first, having completely forgotten his name, Catherine wondered who the man calling her was, and how he had got her cellular phone number. She even thought that the call might not be for her. She was about to hang up, but he identified himself by reminding her how they had waited together in his house for Ricardo's arrival in Abuja, slightly more than a couple of months ago. Nadim was a Lebanese, a rather

handsome man, tall and very slightly corpulent, educated, with a lot of interests, polite, courteous and good-mannered.

He gently asked her how she was and whether there was anything she might need or desire that he could help her with. Catherine was very surprised that he should call her, but also felt flattered by the interest in her person that he was so openly manifesting. She thought that he was really a kind man, very attached to his friend Ricardo and as a consequence wishing to help her in his absence, for friendship on Ricardo's behalf. She therefore thanked him very warmly for his kindness, but assured him that she did not need anything. After this call, there were other calls from Nadim, till one day he finally told her that he had to travel from Abuja to Lagos for some special business and, being dramatically eager to see her again, asked her for a date. Catherine laughed at the use he made of the adverb 'dramatically', but kindly condescended to meet him: she had in fact liked his nice manners and the gentle way he had behaved towards her in Abuja while she was waiting for Ricardo's arrival.

They arranged to meet at 'Shangri-La', the roof-restaurant of the Eko Hotel, where Nadim invited Catherine for dinner. The dinner was really delicious as always in that restaurant where so-called Chinese specialities were served. Nadim and Catherine chattered very pleasantly about a number of topics and Catherine felt happy to be so at ease to talk openly about her love for Ricardo and tell her host how much she was missing him. Nadim seemed to listen to her carefully and to agree with her that life far from one's lover is very hard to bear. He wanted to know some intimate particulars about Ricardo's and Catherine's life together and sexual habits: how they behaved in making love, how good and satisfactory for her was Ricardo's performance, what sexual act or position Catherine preferred, how easily and intensely she got orgasms when making love to Ricardo.

Under such a volley of intimate and awkward questions, Catherine felt very ashamed, but she did not want to appear rude and ungrateful towards her host and therefore tried to reply in a simple way, avoiding too delicate answers likely to make her and Ricardo's sexual behaviour public. She cared a lot, in fact, for their mutual intimate relationship that she wanted to maintain as a cherished secret between herself and Ricardo. How they used to make love to one another belonged entirely and only to them. Luckily, Nadim

understood that Catherine did not like this sort of question and stopped submitting her to what appeared as a torture in her eyes; he gently invited her to dance on the small dance floor.

Catherine adored ballroom dancing (she had done it so pleasantly so many times in the past, getting each time particularly involved, especially when dancing with Ricardo) and, to Nadim's astonished pleasure, gave a full proof of her dexterity and fine agility in this field. How lovely and admirable she was! It was not only extremely agreeable to dance with such an adroit partner, but also a great pleasure and a real joy for the eyes to rest on her panther-like moves. Nadim couldn't but silently contemplate and admire her unspeakable grace. She was in fact more sinuous than a snake in performing the dance steps, lovely and softly moving forward or backward and at the same time undulating her hips delightfully from one side to the other in perfect accord with the rhythm of the music. They enjoyed dancing at length, thus amusing them very much.

When she declared she was ready to go home, Nadim invited her again for the following day, the very last he had to spend in Lagos before travelling back to Abuja. Apart from those embarrassing questions that he had feverishly put forward (although rather inopportune, thought Catherine, it might have been a simple way to know her better and in a more detailed manner), she had nothing to reproach to him; on the contrary, she had felt homely and content: she therefore agreed to spend the whole afternoon of his last day in Lagos with him. Then he put his car at her disposal, giving orders to his driver to accompany her to her residence.

As agreed, they met at 'Frenchies' the following day, the same French pâtisserie where she had been given a date by Alonso, Ricardo's Spanish stocky friend. They had tea with cookies. They chatted very pleasantly. As said before, Nadim was a well educated man, with a lot of interests and, furthermore, was a particularly talented conversationalist; Catherine was nearly overwhelmed by his strong personality and liked him very much.

Then they went to Elda's bar at MegaPlaza in Idowu Martins Street to get an aperitif with appetizers. The mood established between them was particularly comfortable and successful: Nadim started saying to her how beautiful she was and how lucky Ricardo was to have such a pretty sweetheart like her for himself, as well as how unlucky she was to have devoted herself to a man who lived so

far from her. He then went on trying to instil in her the doubt that Ricardo, being not willing to finalise their relationship with a formal bond, did not deserve at all such an immense fortune as her precious total dedication to him. Finding a fertile ground as this was indeed Catherine's highest grief and she frankly stated that she was greatly missing a formal bond with her lover, Nadim got more and more galvanized; he suggested excitedly that Catherine give up her relationship with Ricardo and start a new romance with himself who lived just one hour flight apart and could often come to Lagos to meet her or let her easily travel to Abuja. He added that he liked her really very much and was ready to dedicate himself to her, taking good care of pleasing her. He tried to kiss Catherine on her mouth, but she, becoming suddenly herself again, as if awakening from a sound dreamy sleep, withdrew as quickly as she could letting him hit the back of her chair with his face quite harshly.

Though not wanting to offend him, Catherine burst into an open and frank laughter that shocked him much, since he was a rather touchy man who got easily offended for nothing.

Catherine in fact certainly liked Nadim, who was a handsome, polite and very agreeable man, but not so much as to be ready to betray Ricardo for him. She could not betray Ricardo, she felt she wanted to be absolutely faithful to him, she loved him more than her own life. Ricardo, and only Ricardo, was the unique everlasting love of her life.

Furthermore, she found Nadim's behaviour – trying to sneak surreptitiously and insidiously inside her heart at Ricardo's expenses, taking advantage of his absence – a real treachery, an infamous and unfair action carried out behind the shoulders of a friend, as Nadim himself proclaimed to be in Ricardo's respect. And this, for her inbred honesty and genuineness, was an act of cowardice and treachery absolutely unacceptable and shameful.

Catherine however gently said to him:

“Nadim, you know very well that Ricardo is my lover and we love each other very much: nobody and nothing can separate us from one another and I personally don't want to betray the cherished faith and trust he harbours in his heart for me! This is something that is absolutely essential and vital for me. I can't get fond of another man: I love only Ricardo!”

Nadim still wanted to try again:

“But this is not so important! I presume you feel the need to make love to a man while Ricardo is away! After all, he is thousands of miles from you, in Spain, whilst I am here and desire to make you happy and possess you: believe me, I can be at least as good a lover as he and I shall certainly take good care of you in all senses, especially financially, don’t worry.”

But Nadim’s proposals and promises could not affect Catherine’s resolute spirit and were totally meaningless to her ears. In her eyes, they were not worth a brass farthing. She added discouragingly:

“I am sorry, Nadim, but I literally adore Ricardo: no man can ever take his place in my heart, nobody can substitute him in my life and I don’t want another man for myself! Ricardo is everything for me and my dedication to him is simply a mirror-like reflection of his own dedication to me. He is my Prince Charming, my sole valorous knight in shining armour – in one word: my hero. He is the only man I long for and want to make love to.”

It was more than clear how Catherine felt vis-à-vis Nadim’s proposition. The Lebanese of course was let down and very unhappy with the bad turn taken by things.

The evening proved to be a real disaster for Nadim’s expectations and the desire he had conceived for Catherine and, as there was nothing more to do or say, and also because Catherine, at this point, had turned silent and impatient to leave, he instructed his driver to take her home.

Although Catherine had no real resentment against him and would therefore willingly meet him, should other occasions arise, Nadim, being too ashamed and disappointed, never called her again. She did not happen to see him alone again, but she did not care about that at all.

One day a large group of Catherine’s friends and University colleagues, both young girls and young men, suddenly milled around her with high shouts and cheerful yells of: “Catherine, *you are our Princess!* ... You are *our Princess!*” Someone even went further, bellowing: “You are our Queen!” But this was very evidently an exaggeration, if not a pure joke expressed with the mere intent to pull her leg. Catherine was flattered and rejoiced at such great attention raised in her respect by such a huge crowd, but was also very astonished and could not understand why they were behaving

in that strange way. She therefore wondered while blushing violently: 'What had happened to make them so crazy? What sort of foolishness had pervaded them? Was all that chaos the result of some typically goliardic joke?'

In reality, what had happened was that some student, studying the history of old Nigerian places and native reigns, had discovered that Catherine's great-great-grandfather, by the name of Izuagie, had been a famous 'Balogun' (Chief of warriors) in the old kingdom of Benin, where the Edo ethnic group originated. Izuagie was a very proud man and had bravely and victoriously fought for the safety of his king's reign against conspicuous enemies and powerful neighbours, as well as for its enlargement. Obviously, this student could not keep such astounding news to himself, but had immediately communicated his discovery to mates in the University and in this way the news had spread out and become known by everybody on the campus.

As Nigeria is a country where adults and elders have the real determinant power, and their advice only is kept in high consideration, whilst young people just have to listen to them and diligently obey, all these youths were now very happy to have something of their own to praise. Although the title of balogun is personally granted by the king to a specific individual and is not hereditary, they decided to reinstate Catherine as a real Princess in the land of her ancestors. They therefore took particular care in organizing a trip to Edo State in whose sacred forests, in the vicinity of Benin City, the State capital, the relevant ceremony ought to take place. The participants on the journey were very numerous, because nobody wanted to miss such an important event. There was a lot of enthusiasm among them and they sang aloud along the entire trip. Most of the young men drank avidly the much praised and beloved ogorogoro, but only a few of the girls joined them, whilst the great majority of them preferred to drink soft drinks. The obvious result was that many of these men became drunk and fell asleep for the rest of their journey.

On their arrival in Edo State, however, they had a very bad surprise: the news of the enthronement of a new Princess had already spread out widely all over the State and rival clans had organized themselves in order to prevent such a ceremony from taking place. Among these clans there were the supporters of the

descendants of an ancient 'Babalawo' (native divination priest) who had fiercely fought against Izuagie for the supremacy in the kingdom and even succeeded in ostracising him and letting him be condemned to exile (though this measure was later revoked, and Izuagie was reinstalled with great honour in his high office) on fake but strong accusations, which were afterwards revealed to be absolutely unjust and totally invented in order to be used as a pretext against him. For this reason, the babalawo, despite his undoubted power and the fear of a dreadful vengeance by the god (whose priest he was), was sentenced to death by the Oba (king) of Benin, Erediawa I.

But a ferocious feud spread out between the two families, with atrocious murders and immolations, especially of innocent youngsters, which finally had ended with the very unfortunate, ruthless and much mourned-about killing of Catherine's father. Catherine and her kin had a very mild temperament and good character and had therefore sworn they would not avenge themselves on the babalawo's family for her father's bloody death, and wanted the feud to end. They were in fact heartily convinced that it was absolutely incongruous and extremely deleterious to let it continue for more than three generations of their respective families.

But Catherine's opponents were evidently not of the same opinion and brought a fierce and sly blow to her party: with shrewdness, they succeeded in penetrating Catherine's supporters' camp by feigning to be villagers wanting to pay their homage to the new Princess. When they were inside it, they took out weapons – mostly batons, but also machetes, spears and arrows – from their wrappers and garments and started beating and even seriously wounding Catherine's friends and supporters.

A terrific tussle burst out in which Catherine's helpers let all their courage and dazzling bravery shine brilliantly. They fought like lions. But under such heavy and totally unexpected assault, and with only a small contingent present in the camp at that moment, their hopes of victory proved vain and they soon became unable to defend her. In spite of their acts of valour, Catherine's camp defenders were too few and were therefore doomed to succumb. And so it happened that she was indeed kidnapped by her enemies who, being very determined to hinder her enthronement by all means (even by killing her if deemed inevitable and necessary), treated her very rudely –

menacing and threatening her with death, should she try to escape or seek help – and shut her in a concealed hut in the forest, which was closely watched to defend it from intruders. Catherine's supporters started immediately to look for where she was hidden. They looked everywhere urgently, and finally found a villager who had stealthily witnessed her being taken to that secret prison while picking up wood for kitchen-fire in the distant forest. With his help, her friends were then able to discover the hidden site and, entering surreptitiously in the hut after bumping off her warders, rescued her and took her triumphantly back to the feasting and enthusiastic crowd of her supporters and followers.

Catherine happily embraced all her liberators one by one and told them that she had not doubted even for a single second their ability and that they would succeed in freeing her. They felt happy and rewarded by the kindness and friendliness of their Princess' behaviour towards them. If it is possible, they loved her even more for that and acclaimed her with high shouts of joy, proclaiming their faithfulness to her and wishing her a long and prosperous rule over her people. Their clamour and cheers attained the highest peaks of enthusiasm.

When they arrived at the site chosen for the ceremony, many other people gathering from the nearby villages and wanting to pay their homage to the enthroning Princess by prostrating flat on the ground in front of her, as well as many curious people, joined them, so that a huge crowd milled around Catherine and her closest friends. She felt dazed and bewildered, but happy. In her whole life she had never received such open and homage-full signs of high respect as prostration. They all went to a glade in the wood where it was supposed that the Juju resided. Priests of the Sango shrine had also joined them to witness and give their blessing to the coming important and impressive ceremony of Catherine's enthronement. Catherine was splendidly dressed with sumptuous old very rich and gaudy garments and was escorted by her best friend, Winifred Okafor, and by a lady coming from a near village, whose name was Agbosomero, who functioned as her patronesses and assistants.

The ceremonial practices required the ritual defloration and murder of a young virgin girl. The choice fell on the little sister of Winifred, Catherine's friend. This young girl, of about 15, whose name was Margaret, was endowed with an extraordinarily fascinating

beauty and a wonderful temper, but it had been necessary to drug her heavily in order not to let her understand what was going to happen to her. She was therefore nearly totally unconscious and was accompanied to the site by two other half-naked virgin girls who supported her to guide her properly and not let her fall down when walking, which in those circumstances was very difficult and painful for her. She was also escorted by a huge group of young men and women singing old traditional hymns, as well as Catherine's praises. Drums, as always in African traditional ceremonies, were playing incessantly.

The two virgin girls undressed her completely and Margaret therefore appeared quite nude to the amazed eyes of the onlookers in all her provocative attractiveness and splendid glamour: she had a lovely slender figure with very light brown complexion and extremely fine and gentle, elegant facial features; her breasts, despite her young age, were fully developed, nicely globular, plump and high, although her nipples, still immature and untouched, were quite microscopic and nearly invisible, since they had not yet been sucked or manipulated by anybody. A fine, lovely, very thin layer of down had just started covering her pubis; her thighs were round and well shaped, her buttock small and perfectly sized. Everybody was highly impressed by this magnificent scene and expressed the opinion that the delightful prettiness of her face and the marvellous perfection of her body overcame by far that of the two assisting ladies and of all the other women taking part in the prestigious and picturesque event. The sacrifice of such a beauty would certainly be appreciated by the gods who would in this way be appeased and become merciful towards all the attendees, granting them great prosperity and protection from evil forces.

A young man, who because of his renowned powerful sexual ability had been officially given by his comrades the task of deflowering the girl to be sacrificed, started undressing till he was totally naked, revealing why he was so famous: he was gifted with an enormous erect penis that he kept high, towards the sky, with both hands. It was so big that everybody thought also with a good dose of terror and anguish that he would certainly hurt the poor young girl while entering her, probably wounding and tearing her tiny unspoiled intimate parts. He masturbated himself a little in order to make his organ grow even more turgid and stiff amply showing how

monstrous it was – it must have been almost 10 to 11 inches long, with a girth of at least 7 inches – and then inserted it in the immolating girl's mouth to make it even more swollen and baton-hard. As said before, the girl was nearly totally unconscious, as in a trance, and was not in a position to perceive what the young man had pushed into her mouth and was doing to her. She thought it was something to eat (a banana or a big cucumber, perhaps, taking into account its tubular shape, or, given its consistency, one of those big African snails) and chewed it. He got mad with pleasure and desire and wanted to possess her immediately. However, when this youth tried to penetrate her, as soon as the tip of his cock's glans made contact with the outer lips of her vulva, she uttered a high painful cry and pushed him violently away from her. Her cry was full of evident horror and fear at what was going to happen to her, as she suddenly understood that she was the designated unwilling victim of a ritual sacrifice. In the twinkling of an eye, she became fully aware that after her deflowering (alas, not by a nice and kind lover selected by her, but by an unknown awful stud!) her premature death would also ensue. Not expecting at all her violent reaction and sudden shove, the young man reversed and fell on his back. He was very disconcerted and full of shame and rage.

All the onlookers had in fact burst into an open, very amused and loud laughter. High howls and happy handclaps emitted by many people among the assembled crowd ensued. He tried to lie on her again, keeping her arms firm on the ground but she was now too conscious of her bad fate to remain immobile and accept his odious wild assault: crying aloud, asking help from the assembled crowd, she revolted against her tormentor, kicking him violently in his belly. A strong kick reached his testicles thus giving him an enormous pain that left him breathless for several minutes. He had to release his hold and shamefully give up his desire of possessing the girl (also because his aching member was no longer in a condition to penetrate her). Margaret jumped quickly to her feet and flew in search of help right into Catherine's arms. She implored Catherine tearfully to save her virginity and her life.

At this point, Catherine, as awakening from a dreamy bad spell that had entirely mesmerized her up to that moment, suddenly realized that her enthronement implied the revival of ancient very wild ceremonies, which were perhaps meaningful in the past, but

had no more sense in the modern way of living now luckily acquired by Nigerians. The ritual sacrifice of a young girl, with her public defloration in front of an astounded meeting and subsequent ritual murder was a too cruel and insane act – a really horrible crime – to be agreed upon and accepted by her nice and kind spirit, when freed from a selfish and greedy desire of grandeur through the acquisition of an important traditional title, such as that of ‘Princess’. She felt very embarrassed that an awful and odious act of that gravity should be performed in her honour. In her eyes, peacefulness and friendship with the entire world, as well as happiness and pride for being an honest and trustworthy person, were more important than bearing that native title.

She therefore ordered the immediate termination of the ceremony and instantly took off the fancy dresses she was wearing, frankly and happily declaring aloud that, though everything had been splendid and captivating, she did not intend any more to become the Princess of her University colleagues, especially at the expenses of somebody else’s life.

The poor lovely Margaret was freed and it goes without saying how happy she was to have had a narrow squeak and to have survived a decreed end to her life. Catherine went peacefully back to her studies living in the campus happy and content to be one of the many students living and studying there, equal to all the others, without any sense or hint of a superior ranking. She could indeed praise her ancestor for what he was and what he did, but in her opinion past is past and should not be mingled with the present. Izuagie, her great-great-grandfather, was a man of an almost forgotten glorious past, whilst she, on the contrary, was a young woman of the present modern times and of the still unknown future: she had therefore to look ahead, not backwards.

When from time to time she was chatting with some of her most intimate friends and they chanced on the subject of her missed enthronement, they would all laughed amused. The most jocose of her colleagues continued however to address to her with a jolly ‘my Princess’ and, as a joke, they sometime feigned to pay her their homage by kneeling in front of her. She was the very first to laugh about the adventure she had experienced and even thought that all the facts connected to that pleasant episode of her life were unreal, that she had imagined and invented everything as in a dream.

One day, during one of his frequent phone calls to her to ascertain whether she was well and everything was going on peacefully without problems, and after they had cheerfully talked about various topics and had manifested to each other, as usual, all their reciprocal love, Catherine expressed to Ricardo her intention of giving up her studies and leaving the University. This was due, she explained, to the fact that the study of Italian – especially its grammar – was turning out to be too difficult for her and she felt she could not bear such a great effort any more. She seemed to be very determined to put this resolution into practice.

Ricardo was profoundly hit by this incredible initiative of hers and remained speechless for some 20 to 30 seconds; he had in fact thought that she was willingly and happily following her courses at the University with success. Then, recovering all his spirits, he exploded with an embittered heart and rather ferocious tone:

“Cathy, my beloved Sylph, what are you telling me! How can you think of doing this? To close your University studies, that’s simply awful and silly! You are already mid-way through and you want to abandon now, have you gone crazy, by chance? It is absolutely unbelievable! Darling, you cannot do that! You are bright, you are clever, you are too intelligent not to succeed in spite of all the difficulties, and not to understand that a bad decision like this would only paralyse all your expectations and frustrate your plans for the future. Your wish to come to Europe and settle here will certainly be negatively affected. If you want to go only to the U.K., then your current knowledge of English is sufficient, obviously. But if you’d like to settle in France, or in Spain, or in Italy, in this case it is good that you know at least one other language also, one of Latin origin. I fully understand and admit that learning one of the Latin languages, with their complicated grammar and special pronunciation, might present some difficulty to an English-speaking, i.e. an anglophone, person, but you are provided with means, your bright brain, to overcome all the intrinsic hardness. It is therefore not up to you to surrender in this way! Don’t give up, my dear; please, don’t let me down!”

Catherine tried to insist that she was experiencing too much difficulty, which required a great effort on her side to be carried on:

“But believe me, Ricardo, darling, it is really hard for me to study and learn such a difficult language! It doesn’t come out easily and

fluently!”

He explained patiently:

“Nothing is easy in life, my Love; you can’t expect that the brilliant future that you are envisaging for yourself will come to you served on a silver tray, without considerable effort on your side to get it! This will never happen, it is not that easy, believe me! Life is not simple at all and everybody has to work hard to get his (or her) fortune, remember it. Now you have the task to complete your studies and finish in the best possible way your University courses. Despite the difficulties, you can do it and can graduate brilliantly in this discipline, I’m sure of it. So, please, Sweet Sylph, take your burden on your shoulders and carry on, without fearing not to be able to succeed, because this sort of event absolutely cannot happen: you *will* certainly succeed, darling, I am pretty sure of it! It does not matter if it doesn’t come out fluently: from mistakes, you will progress.”

She was exceedingly happy to receive his trust and support: to enjoy his generous backing was very important for her; she therefore eagerly replied:

“OK, darling, if you so wish and since you are so confident in my ability and sure of my success, I may not withdraw from the University and I will try to go on with these studies that I now find such a heavy burden!”

Ricardo however was very concerned that Catherine continue to pursue her studies, despite the difficulty that she had found in learning Italian, and wanted to be of some concrete help to her himself; therefore, he suggested the only solution that came to his mind:

“Cathy, what you need is the chance to make pleasurable exercises - and when I say pleasurable I mean exercises which are not boring and tedious tasks given by the University which you are obviously compelled to perform more or less against your will in order to regularly follow your courses. I mean something that you might enjoy doing. To this purpose, since I have studied Italian and know it pretty well, I propose that henceforth all the conversations between us two, as well as the writing of letters, to and fro, should be conducted in Italian, rather than in English. Since I think you are happy to talk to me, as well as to read my letters and send me yours, this might be a pleasant way of getting some good practice. What do

you think about my proposal, isn't it a good one?"

Catherine was concerned that she might not be able to sustain a conversation suitably and to write properly in Italian:

"I only partially agree that it might work, but I worry: what happens if I don't understand you or am unable to express my thinking to you in Italian? I would really be in anguish about not being able to understand you or being unintelligible to you."

"If you don't understand what I say, you can ask me to repeat it in English and you can do the same when you do not find or you do not know the Italian words to express a thought or a concept in that language."

"OK, but what about the letters that you intend to write me in Italian? My dictionary is here in the district where I live when following my courses at the University, but I receive my mail in my aunt's post box in Ogun State, far from here. And I want to read your letters immediately, as soon as I receive them; I always long for them and I am usually too eager to know at once what you write me. I would be really sorry to have to wait until I got back to University in order to have my dictionary at hand."

To reduce her anxiety, Ricardo endeavoured to encourage her, bringing his own case to her attention as an example to be followed:

"You will certainly be able to understand the major part of my letters; I will not use in my writing rarely employed terms or obscure words; you can look in the dictionary later when you'll be back at Lagos University for those few words which you cannot understand. How do you think I learnt the foreign languages I know? I had a lot of pen-friends all over Europe, especially women and girls, of course, to whom I regularly wrote for years in their respective languages: this was an exceedingly good exercise that allowed me to practice those languages intensely and, as a consequence, I learnt them quite well."

"But for you, Ricardo, as a Spaniard, it was certainly much easier to learn French, Portuguese and Italian! So was it probably too for the other foreign languages you know, English and German."

"I do agree it was not difficult at all. Also because I have a special gift for learning foreign languages and I maybe enjoy a musical ear. What I do for certain is to listen carefully to foreigners when they are speaking in their own mother-tongue in order to catch their accent and tone in the pronunciation of it. But take Edi (my former

girlfriend who you know as Grace), for instance: though I admit that it is certainly much easier to learn a foreign language when you live in the country where that language is currently spoken, she went to Germany without knowing a single word of German and now she speaks this difficult language perfectly. And German is more complex and difficult than Italian by far, I assure you, my dear! So, do you want me to believe that you are less capable or less intelligent than Edima?”

“Perhaps”

“No, I don’t accept this, I challenge you! You certainly are at least as clever as she. Therefore, if she succeeded mastering German, you must succeed as well in Italian!”

They agreed that she would continue to attend her language courses at the University, intensifying her efforts to get positive results, whilst, on their side, they would make a trial, between them, to express themselves in Italian, both verbally and in writing, to give her useful practical exercise. Ricardo was very happy to have found an extremely clever and shrewd way to participate more actively in her life and give her a substantial and graceful concrete help.

To celebrate her twenty-ninth birthday, Ricardo sent her by mail, as his gift for the occasion: a nice white dress – although he feared it might not entirely meet her taste, being cut in a totally western European style –, a pair of military-style trousers (with a camouflage pattern), a small bag produced by the German-Italian stylist Egon Fürstenberg and, placed inside it, a 100 ml bottle of the ‘Elle’ perfume produced by the Emporio Armani Italian stylist house.

Like most educated girls in Nigeria, Catherine liked very much to sprinkle her body with perfume and she had herself indicated that specific perfume to Ricardo, who, if he had been given free choice, would have been more in favour of a French one (Christian Dior’s ‘Dune’ or ‘Poison’ were actually his favourite ones). He had bought the dress in a shop specialising in fashion for youngsters situated in one of the most popular commercial districts of the town, which was particularly frequented by foreigners (especially Central- and South-Americans) because of its good prices. He was however very afraid, taking into account postal workers’ poor care in dealing with mail (they would throw it heavily and carelessly into the special containers), that the bottle of perfume might break, thus spilling all the perfume to impregnate the dress and trousers. To prevent such

an inconvenience he would have preferred to send it to her later by means of somebody travelling to Nigeria, rather than by mail. But she was very eager to receive this perfume soon, since, as she said, she had run completely out of it; so he had been consequently compelled, despite his fear, to use the postal system. Alas, the parcel was never delivered to Catherine! Very probably it got stolen by some untrustworthy and dishonest post officer along the way from Spain to Nigeria – at least, so he had to presume – and all the nice items he had bought for his beloved sweetheart were lost.

Later on, for Christmas, he made another parcel containing an all black party dress (although Nigerians do not like much to wear this colour which they consider suitable only for mourning a death), a daytime white dress patterned with multicoloured flowers and another bottle (although smaller, this time being only a 50 ml one) of the same brand of perfume 'Elle'.

Luckily this time, Catherine advised him that a friend of her cousin who lived in London was about to travel to Nigeria for holidays and so Ricardo could send this parcel to her so that it could be safely brought by her straight to Catherine.

A friend of Catherine's uncle, a relatively young, prosperous, handsome and jovial man of 38 by the name of Adebayo Ochemgbe, started regularly visiting her relatives' house. On some occasions he had been warmly welcomed and very hospitably treated by Catherine, as usual extremely gentle towards her relatives' guests. He was struck by her exceptional adamant beauty and her undoubtedly lovely manners and felt an irresistible attraction for her growing up in him stronger every day. He soon decided that she was the right one to sate his wish for a young woman to make love to, but mainly to ornament his house with. Suddenly, one day, he asked Catherine's uncle and aunt to be accepted as their in-law and allowed to marry her: it was a great surprise for them, but as he was a good friend of theirs, they were happy to give Catherine the chance to form a family with a man who, in their opinion, was an honourable and good (and, especially, rich) man. Though modern, open-minded and liberal people, wishing all the best for their dear niece, they therefore discussed the matter with him and negotiated the dowry – or bride-price – that he would pay to get her as his wife, which was at last agreed on the basis of the gift of a second-hand

Peugeot 505 car, seven cows, five goats and a number of fowl, plus a reasonable amount of money and some jewels.

Catherine, to be true, was not happy at all with her relatives' decision, because she was neither fond of that man nor particularly attracted to him and, mainly, did not specifically desire to get married immediately to a man who was not the object of her own choice, also because she had yet to terminate her University studies; for these reasons, she considered a marriage as too premature for herself. She entered into a lengthy and at times also vibrant and even violent discussion with her relatives, trying to dissuade them from this action which, in her eyes, was an authoritarian, even dictatorial imposition. But she found them immovable, as their will was ultimate.

At last she accepted half-heartedly her in-laws' decision only because she had a good heart and temper and understood that she was somehow a burden for them and she wanted to relieve them of her presence in their house. Obviously, Catherine revealed all this in tears to Ricardo, though assuring him that her love for him would continue to exist, stronger than ever, in spite of her imminent marriage. She swore that he and he alone was her true love and she would love him forever. No other man – and less than ever this Adebayo to whom she had been promised – could have the slightest chance of replacing him in her heart:

“Ricardo, I can't stop considering myself uniquely as *your* Sylph and I do want you to consider me as such forever: in fact, in the very bottom of my heart, which is entirely dedicated to you, I will always belong *only to you!*”

On his side, Ricardo was desperate, because the news of her marriage, due shortly, was a terrible shock for his plans and hopes for the future and he clearly understood that – despite her promise of everlasting love – he was going to lose her forever.

The date of the wedding was decided and her relatives started preparing for the ceremony. Hundreds of guests would be called in to attend this important ceremony. Their beloved niece was about to get married to a highly ranked man, her wedding therefore would be pompously feasted with a really magnificent and superlative traditional ceremony to be remembered for a long time by relatives and friends!

A big dinner would be prepared and a specially delicious meal

served: pounded yam, garri, fufu, egusi soup, pepper soup, eba, moin moin, beef meat, pork chops, fowl, shrimps and many gourds and kegs of palm-wine, as well as of ogorogoro, plus hundreds cartons of beer and soft drinks ('minerals', as Nigerians were used to calling them). A conspicuous number of chairs to accommodate the huge crowd of invitees would be hired; plates, dishes and cutlery – though Nigerians prefer to eat pounded yam, egusi soup and garri with their hands straight from the service bowls or plates, since they find that sort of meal more tasty in that way – would be borrowed from the Evangelical parish church where the ceremony itself was taking place, since it stocked them for the use of its member parishioners on similar occasions. Though Catherine – to Ricardo's great joy and contentment – was a Roman Catholic, the bridegroom, Adebayo, was an Evangelical worshiper; therefore it had been decided that the wedding should take place in his parish church. Furthermore, musicians, such as Sonny Ade, the 'King' of *juju music*, or even Femi Kuti or Lágbájá, and drummers with their talking drums, as well as storytellers and praise singers would be called in to make the feast more enjoyable and to entertain and amuse the numerous guests.

Not only acrobatic male dancers and traditional female dancers would be engaged to cheer up the occasion, but also dances and jokes would be organized for the attendees themselves in order to make everybody jolly and fully contented.

A short time before the wedding was to occur, however, just when Catherine was about to go and pay the customary visit to his family – with whom she was preparing to spend, according to the old tradition of some parts of Nigeria, some cheerful days –, it was discovered that Adebayo already had two other wives and three children. He had maintained their existence, in a distant village in his homeland far from the town, secret and adequately concealed from Catherine's uncle and aunt, who were therefore totally unaware of these solid bonds of his. Catherine became furious, she had indeed always desired to be a sole wife, *as is the habit among white people*, and could not stand the idea that she would on the contrary be – although very common and frequent in Africa – the third wife of her husband. Hiding his other formal family bonds from her and her uncle and aunt when he asked for her hand was an injurious offence to Catherine's always nice and rather humble countenance. Her

temper had always been kind and mild, never harsh, but Adebayo had overcome and broken all limits of decency and correctness in her respect, deeply offending her. Shouting aloud like a galvanized fury, she accused him very angrily of treacherous betrayal of her kind behaviour and benevolent disposition towards him, and of being a worthless, infamous and also wicked man. Furthermore, she bellowed that as he had dishonoured her in that miserable way, she could no longer consider him an honourable man and trust him for the rest of her life. She had indeed resolved to marry him, an African man - against and in spite of her long cherished and strong desire to marry a white man - just to comply with her relatives' wish. As a consequence, however, apart from the declaration of everlasting love she made to her beloved Ricardo - though this was something due to their spiritual ties and strong mutual understanding, there was absolutely no evil thought in it - , she had behaved very properly as a good and faithful fiancée.

Feeling insulted, moreover by a young woman: 'How does a little, insignificant girl dare to accuse and curse me, a man of importance and authority, as though I were a simple frightened boy caught on the act of stealing jam and therefore severely told off?' (but this was exactly what she meant to do in revenge for his impoliteness and misbehaviour), he slapped her violently on her face, knocking her to the ground, openly, in front of all her relatives and bruising one eye, as well as splitting one of her lips. His hand was in fact heavy like a hammer. Unfortunately for him (but very luckily for Catherine, who could in this way acknowledge his real nature), this turned out to be the drop which let the pot pour out its content, disclosing to everybody his nasty and violent natural disposition, and she did not want him any more. She was full of wrath and very determined: though not really hating Adebayo despite his savage act towards her by unjustifiably and painfully beating her (it was not in Catherine's nature to hate anybody, whatever their faults), she stood up promptly and stared very fiercely in his eyes.

Then calmly, very calmly and coldly, her definitive sentence came out: she categorically declared, frankly and openly to the entire world, that she would *never* marry such an ill-mannered man. Adebayo felt all the blame for his unwise and rude gesture falling suddenly and heavily on his shoulders and, trembling with unrepressed anger mixed with unconscious shame, could hardly

stand her icy-cold gaze. She was absolutely superb in her gelid fierceness. And, to say the truth, also very attractive, even for Adebayo who could not refrain from keeping his eyes on her though he instantly realized he had lost her forever. Catherine in fact looked like a wounded lioness keeping herself hidden in the high grass, but ready to jump on her injurer to rend him. However, though her brilliant pretty face was blazing with outrage, she was able to keep cool and maintain her stillness. Her relatives supported her entirely, agreeing completely with her that such an insincere, impolite and unforgivable man did not deserve to have for himself an innocent, romantic and delightful creature, as Catherine certainly was and was duly considered by everybody.

Although the promised car was an attractive and very useful item of the dowry that they were eager to have, since they did not own one, they decided to give up at once the agreed bride-price and they cancelled the already programmed wedding. It has to be noted in fact that, being fundamentally honest and generous people, they felt extremely ashamed and embarrassed towards their beloved niece for having planned such an unworthy and dishonourable man as husband for Catherine and having insisted she marry him in spite of her initial firm refusal and resolute reticence. Catherine was exceedingly happy to have avoided an unfortunate and very probably sorrowful bond with an undeserving man and rushed to tell all that with great joy to Ricardo.

Her happiness was so evident and her tale was so vivid that, while she was telling him what had happened, he had the impression of seeing the entire scene as if it had occurred under his own eyes:

“Oh, Cathy, my lovely Sweet Sylph, what a magnificent, indifferent countenance you kept! You are really a great, very clever and unique woman! I cannot but approve your behaviour unconditionally and say: bravo! Well done! That man – it is evident and clear as a bright shining sun – was not the right one for you and did not deserve you at all, however high his rank in Nigerian society might be.”

Ricardo was obviously worried and sorry for her on learning about her bad experience – since she had missed a solid possibility of getting married to a wealthy man – but personally he felt as if on his moon nine: what an immense happiness, *he* still had *his* beloved Catherine only for *himself*!

At a relatively short distance from Catherine's aunt's house there was a tree with a big stone at its foot. The tree had luxuriant fronds and the rich foliage projected a thick refreshing and restorative shadow on the ground all around it. There was an astonishingly natural romantic atmosphere and comfortable mood there. Catherine liked it very much and used to go there and sit at the foot of the tree, among its big rampart-like roots, when she was immersed in her thoughts or when, for one reason or another, she felt sad and wanting to weep (women always willingly indulge in weeping when, for any specific reason, they feel sad). She had a habit of curling herself up in those defensive ramparts and weeping silently at length, confiding to the tree all her troubles and grief. Since her beloved Ricardo was far away, in Europe, the tree had become her best friend, the only one she could trustfully open her heart to, without fear that it could betray her sooner or later, as happens too often with human beings. One of the best moments to spend within the tree roots was when she was reflecting about her life or thinking of her strong and cherished bond with Ricardo. Thinking of Ricardo, of course, was one of her preferred subjects, but it always gave her an immense melancholy because, whilst she felt herself intimately tied to that man, at the same time she knew very well he could not give her the joy of a regular family with him. She had not yet given up entirely all hope of being able, one day or other, to formalize her bond with him officially in marriage, but time alas elapsed and she felt she was growing old without this so intensely wished dream reaching concretization and becoming true reality.

Unfortunately for her, since she loved him so much, Ricardo was a married man and, although she knew perfectly well that union with her was also his most cherished desire, could not or did not want to separate from his wife in order to marry her. If she wanted, as she felt so imperiously in her heart, to form as quickly as possible a family and have children, she absolutely had to look for another man, in spite of her so strong and indissoluble bond with Ricardo. She loved children and wanted with all her heart to have many of them, at first carrying them in her womb and then by happily giving them life. But in order to have children it was necessary to get pregnant and here resided the real key to the question: getting

pregnant! OK, she was ready to get pregnant, but by whom? By Ricardo, oh yes, it would be so marvellous and delightful: she adored that man, she adored making love to him; why not then make a baby with him, out of their wonderful and so exciting interludes? But by Ricardo, as her heart utterly desired and nearly constantly suggested her to get, it was not advisable and reasonable, because it would only have been possible by virtue of the great love bond that tied them to one another. Unfortunately this would be outside of a regular family, and would probably unduly give to their children the horrid qualification of illegitimate. And this was certainly not the best thing for the poor innocent fruit of their love, should a child be procreated by them. Catherine was really desperate: she loved Ricardo with all her heart and she knew she would never be able to love another man with the same intensity, the same adoration for his attractive appearance, the same dedication of true sound sentiments as those she felt for Ricardo. He and he alone, in her eyes, was the man, among thousands, entirely and unconditionally deserving her love. On the whole planet there did not exist another man like him, he was the very best one, the absolute master of her heart.

She communicated all these thoughts to the tree, as though it could hear her and give her advice and console her for her terrible discomfort and pain. But, in one way or another, strange as it might appear, it worked and, after having spoken to the tree, she always felt relieved of her troubles and went back home more content and full of hope for a better tomorrow and of courage for carrying on her painful life. For its part, the tree, as any other tree in the world, received Catherine's confidences and avowals remaining silent and immobile – maybe listening to her, but we don't exactly know if trees are capable of hearing what people tell them in a very particular secret confidence – and not giving any sign of having registered what she told it, but it certainly never betrayed her by revealing to somebody else her most intimate secrets. But the tree had reserved a special surprise for Catherine, as it harboured an inhabitant: on the highest part of its trunk there was a vast hole which had been chosen as a nest by an old owl.

Owls are deemed by everybody – especially in children's literature – to be wise animals looking at the facts of the world with a sceptical eye towards humans' insane haste and incomprehensible rushing, but yet full of wisdom and comprehension for their adventures. The

very first time Catherine became aware of its presence (just by chance, feeling steadily observed, she had raised her eyes and seen the big bird perched on a high branch while flapping violently its large wings), she was scared – especially because of its large round yellow inquisitive eyes that made it resemble a frightening little monster or a ghost – and wanted to run away in order to avoid any possible evil spell. The next time she wished to go to ‘her’ tree, she wanted her cousin to accompany her there for fear of meeting that dreadful ‘monster’ again, but her cousin, when he saw the reason of her fear, guffawed cordially at her explaining that it was only a harmless big bird. Since then, now totally confident and no more fearful, she was even happy at the appearance of the old bird on the edge of its den as if wishing to scold her for having disturbed it with her weeping or loud tales to the hosting tree.

She therefore started talking also to the owl, telling it all her misadventures and the pains and sorrows she had in her heart, thus gaining one more friend for her confidences. As a matter of fact, the owl seemed to understand what she told it, since it used to nod with its head and emit guttural sounds taken by her as showing agreement with what she was expressing to it.

One day, however, when Catherine went to the place where the tree stood, she did not find it. She thought at once she could not see straight any more: where was it? Where were the impressive rampart-like roots, where the elegant high massive trunk, where the leafy branches? It had totally disappeared and the place formerly occupied by its imposing bulk was now totally empty and void.

How come it had so suddenly disappeared? There was indeed a very simple explanation for its vanishing: because a street had been planned to run exactly on the ground where that tree had grown up, the town authorities had decreed that it should be cut down and for this reason it had been felled and taken away in pieces good for making thick planks for use by carpenters and for fire.

Catherine felt a great desperation filling up and wrinkling her heart: her bosom friend, her faithful and trustworthy confidant had been ‘killed’ and removed from its place; to whom would she now confide her most intimate thoughts, as well as her troubles and pains apart from Ricardo, who however lived thousands miles away from her?

On a couple of occasions she saw the old owl circling above the

place where the tree once rose up, then no more: the big wise bird had been chased out too and compelled to move to some other place in order to find a suitable hideout.

Catherine was profoundly convinced and confident that Ricardo, as always generously ready to give her all his assistance and the highest comfort, would help her in the specific matter of finding a right man for her.

Ricardo had at last found a suitable internet website for lonely hearts in search of a mate to put an end to their solitude, and was therefore able to insert an ad in her favour into it ('I am a woman and I'm looking for a man'), as she had so insistently and intensely requested him to do. As this website was based in Spain, it assumed that the subjects subscribing to it spoke Spanish, the knowledge of which, apart from some very basic words, was not yet familiar to Catherine. Ricardo helped her, while submitting her data and measurements, by specifying that she could understand Spanish only where it was similar to Italian and so she mostly spoke English. He just helped her at the very beginning of this new electronic adventure in order to introduce her to the use of the internet, but then he let her carry it on alone.

She soon became an expert in the use of electronic mail, which was by far the best and quickest method of communication between Spain and Nigeria, and could easily manage the receiving and sending out of e-mails. She had in fact established her own electronic address to receive messages sent to her by those men who had visited her ad in the lonely hearts' website and wished to make the acquaintance of an exotic woman, a black African. She felt happy and grateful to Ricardo for having maintained his promise and, as a consequence, put her into contact with a new world, that of Spanish men and their mentality, which just a short time before – apart, obviously, from Ricardo and his delicate delightful manners, but he, in her eyes, was a very special individual – was totally unknown and closed to her.

The men were mostly moved by curiosity for the different, which is what Catherine – being black and coming from a country situated in another continent – was for them. Among them all, one man in particular, whose name was Pedro Gutierrez, seemed to be genuinely and intimately interested in this pretty African young lady.

After seeing her delightful appearance on the photograph that Ricardo had posted on the internet website, he felt strongly moved by an attraction for her, and therefore sent her an e-mail. He was not racist and thought that a beautiful woman is a beautiful woman wherever she had been born and whatever the colour of her skin. Moreover, it has to be said that, as for Ricardo, he really liked the chocolate-brown colour of her skin. He found it very attractive and superlatively splendid and adamant.

Pedro, as he told Catherine, who immediately passed it on to Ricardo, was a 37 year-old farmer, very tall (2.10 m, a real basketball-player's height), living in a small village close to Burgos. He owned 1,500 acres of land on which he had built big greenhouses where all sorts of vegetables and ground fruit were grown to be sold to the town, but he mainly considered himself a cattle breeder, since he had a herd of 120 cows and produced milk which was sold to the town's main milk factory.

Pedro had already had a previous, disastrous matrimonial experience. His wife had in fact run away with the village parish priest, who left the priesthood for her and some years later, when she obtained a divorce from Pedro, married her. Pedro had of course been obliged to sue for divorce after his wife's behaviour in suddenly falling in love with the priest and leaving him. He had subsequently approached the internet website used by Ricardo in order to check – although with a good deal of apprehension in case of a new dreadful and regrettable failure – whether he might find another woman suitable to have a sentimental relationship with him and, eventually, to become his second wife. Because of his previous negative experience, however, he was in general terribly scared now by any possible contact and relationship with a woman and was convinced that women are not reliable and sincere beings. Among all the women who had submitted their ads on that website for lonely hearts, he had then chosen Catherine, not only for her adamant beauty, but also because he thought that an African young woman would be more genuine, open and sincere than a European one. He hoped he could find better and sounder understanding for his particular situation of divorced man in her and, if possible, strong liking for his person and deeper affection.

Catherine was a modern thinking young woman, full of comprehension towards the facts of life, and was perfectly aware

that nowadays there are many men who are no longer single and without previous matrimonial experience, but divorced. As a matter of fact, in Nigeria too there are many divorced people. Even some of her most intimate friends were divorced. When Pedro told her that he could only get married again through a marriage performed in the Town Hall, and not in a church, she replied that for her a marriage was a marriage, i.e. a formal bond tying a man and a woman together, whichever way it was performed. She knew very well that a divorced man cannot have a second marriage in the church, but has to perform this ceremony before the Lord Mayor or his/her representative. For herself, she had always dreamt of a sumptuous and happy ceremony in the parish church or in some specially chosen sanctuary: she would be wearing a long white dress with Swiss Sankt Gallen laces, in the presence of relatives and many guests; lots of multicoloured flowers would be placed everywhere to make the location more cheerful, with the church organ playing spiritual music (such as Mozart's 'Ave Verum' and the lovely Schubert's or Gounod's 'Ave Maria' sung by a good soprano), as well as the worldwide renowned nuptial march at the end of the ceremony, when she and her bridegroom, once married, left the church. But being a good, simple mannered and clever woman, she was also ready to accept a much simpler ceremony in the Town Hall, should she be so requested by an honest and lovely man worthy to be married.

Pedro and Catherine started a detailed correspondence by e-mail, using this modern way of communication to give each other news about their respective lives: his totally devoted to routine farm activities, hers as a student in the University of Lagos. She recounted to him not only the difficult progress of her studies (Pedro, in fact, just like Ricardo, encouraged her to pursue her studies diligently, in spite of all the difficulty she might meet), but also what she was doing outside study hours.

She told him therefore that she was spending hours and hours in jolly and thoughtless conversation with cousins and friends, making fantastic plans with them for their future (despite the dramatic and disastrous economic situation experienced at that time by Nigeria, young people's hopes in a better evolution of the unfortunate situation were in fact commonly felt and sound, openly manifested aloud or in excited secret talks), going out with her cousins or her

friends, *innocently and platonically* flirting with young men, shopping downtown.

Pedro liked her fresh and straightforward way of expressing her tales and started harbouring in his mind the conviction that she must be a marvellous person, full of natural genuine charms and of rich achievements. He was eager to receive her messages and pined a lot when for one reason or another she did not answer his own immediately. Each time, he longed to read her very soon and was in deep anguish and gloom when several days passed without a message from her. He was surprised himself by this new need he felt so imperiously in his heart as though it were a severe master who could decide whether to give him life or death. Though he had received nice pictures from her, where she appeared in all her splendid beauty (most of them were the photographs that Ricardo had snapped of her not long before), he desired with all heart to make her acquaintance physically, to meet and see her personally. Although less intensely (for Ricardo was still the undisputed sovereign in her heart) and mainly for curiosity towards this unknown man whose acquaintance had been made only recently, by correspondence, this same sentiment was obviously shared by Catherine too. At last, one day, when he felt he could not resist the impellent desire to know her any longer, he invited her to fly to Spain to spend some time in his farm/house.

Catherine was very grateful to Pedro for his kind proposition and was taken by great enthusiasm at the idea that she would soon be able to see the so much dreamt about fabulous Europe: she agreed enthusiastically.

Knowing that she could not afford the travel expenses (in spite of all the money that Ricardo regularly sent her, she had not yet been able – because of all the expenses that she had to bear – to set aside all the amount needed for such a purpose), Pedro wanted to alleviate this heavy burden to her and sent her, through the airline itself, the air ticket for the Iberia flight from Lagos to Madrid.

She took all the steps required to prepare for travel: first of all, she applied to the Nigerian authorities for a passport, then she submitted a request for a visa to the Spanish Embassy accompanied by a written declaration by Pedro stating that he had invited her and she would stay in his house for the entire period she intended to spend in Spain and finally she bought fine garments and items she

would need to wear and use in Europe. When the visa was finally granted, she packed up a big suitcase full of all sorts of things and prepared herself to leave her country. She hoped with all her heart that this separation from Nigeria could be a final cut with Africa, that she could leave it for good and remain in Europe forever, as this was her secret dream and she had always wished, since her most tender youth, that it would happen one day or another.

Finally, the fatidic day of her departure from Nigeria arrived. She had a heavy heart, of course, but only because of leaving – maybe for ever – her dear aunt and her beloved cousins, not for leaving Nigeria. She had always considered Nigeria a prison, a foreign land, not her homeland. Though black like any African woman, she had always fundamentally considered herself a citizen of the world or even a true European, for mentality, for manners, for thinking and behaving. She felt she *was* a European. Perhaps, of course, a *black European*, but anyhow a European in all respects. This feeling had been enhanced and exceedingly developed when she made the acquaintance of Ricardo; she felt so similar to him, so bound to his own behaviour and nice manners that she could melt totally in him and become just one unique and single person with him: hence, a real European woman.

On the other hand, he, Ricardo, had always behaved as considering her totally equal to himself, had always kept her in the highest regard, showing great respect for her personality and her brain, giving the amplest room to her reasons and her thoughts. He had also always told her that the difference in their respective skin colour did not necessarily imply a distinction between the two of them; on the contrary, his love – a literal adoration – for the colour of her complexion, which had totally fascinated and even subjugated him, acted as a catalyst to utterly unite them. But, of course, Ricardo was a very special man; in her eyes, the best companion a woman might desire to have for herself, the ideal hero who made a woman feel like a real goddess.

She was therefore not scared at all of leaving the country where she was born and had resided all her life up to that moment, of leaving the traditions she was so used to, as well as all the people she knew and was acquainted with to go to the far away stranger (though, in her opinion, welcoming and friendly) Europe. As a matter of fact, even if she had never been there, Europe was not

totally unknown and unfamiliar to her at all. She had learnt so much about it that she could say she knew it perfectly. And she was intimately convinced that she would live very well there. But, of course, she did not know what her destiny and the future kept in store for her. In particular, she did not know how this man, Pedro, who was apparently kind and gently mannered, who had so exquisitely invited her to go to Spain to meet him, by having her to stay with him and his relatives in his own house, would now behave towards her. Would he really like her? Would he keep her with him, letting her stay in Europe forever as she so ardently wished? Would he be willing to formalize a stable bond with her, by marrying her and, in so doing, give her the immense joy of a family possibly blessed with the birth of many children? These thoughts agitated furiously in her heart tormenting her during the nocturnal flight to Spain.

She had advised Ricardo of her arrival at Madrid airport and he decided to drive to Madrid very early in the morning in order to fetch her at the airport and take her to the railway station to travel to Burgos.

When Catherine got out of the luggage claim hall and saw him there, waiting for her, she was caught by an immense happiness and high emotion which filled up and warmed her heart at the highest level. She felt so pervaded right into her smallest bones by such tremendous joy that she nearly burst into weeping. At seeing Ricardo, Catherine forgot completely that she had come to Spain to meet another man, Pedro, at the latter's invitation. The old flame – the sincere, ardent adoration she felt towards Ricardo – fully and potently ignited again. To meet Ricardo, at last, in his own country: what a sensational event! All the affection, all the tenderness she felt for him burst out impetuously. Imperiously. They ran towards one another to hold each other in the warmest, sweetest, most delightful tight embrace. Their mutual ardour and passion were so impetuous that they hugged one another nearly ferociously, like mantises in a hysterical mystical fury. As though they were blind people, totally mindless of the presence of the other travellers passing-by and nearly blocking their passage to the exit, they searched keenly for one another's mouth, sweetly keeping each other's lips tightly in their own, at length. They kissed one another with immense joy,

passionately, immobile, standing in the middle of the arrival hall exit-door, without being able or willing to part from each other's arms.

Their love was still immense, absolutely without physical or spiritual boundary. Ricardo felt so extremely attracted to this delightful young lady that he felt the urgent need to make love to her, to possess her intimately in order to let her see how much he adored her, but he did not know how to express this desire to her. Knowing in fact perfectly well that she had come to Spain with the specific purpose of meeting another man in order to check whether a new sentimental story could be engendered between her and this man, he feared offending and wounding her and he did not want to harm her, at all costs. Even despite his own happiness and pleasure.

He was thinking: 'Is she still willing to make love to me? Maybe, because of the rising of this new love story, she would refuse me, even in spite of all these nice kisses that she is now lavishing on me, who knows? Frankly speaking, I would hate to be refused by her: it would kill me! Better, then, not to manifest my wish, not to say anything.'

Catherine told him that she had advised Pedro that she would not travel immediately to Burgos, but spend a couple of days in Madrid in order to visit this great capital of his country, in the company of some Nigerian friends, before settling in the country-land, so Ricardo took her around to visit the town. They went and saw the 'Plaza Mayor' with the lovely aligned stream of eighteenth century wrought-iron balconies all around it (Ricardo availed himself of the opportunity of being there to buy a nice silk blouse in the boutique he knew so well,^(*) which he gave to Catherine as welcoming gift), the Royal Palace and the Plaza de España (Square of Spain) where the impressive monument to the great writer Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra stood with the bronze statues of the characters of his most famous novel, Don Quijote de la Mancha and Sancho Panza. They had a very short and quick lunch, eating simple 'hot dogs' and drinking a 'cerveza' (beer). Then they spent the all afternoon visiting the immense 'Prado' museum.

At the end of this visit, which was obviously only partial, as the museum was really enormous and a full visit would require several days because of the very many interesting sections (Ricardo showed to Catherine, in particular, the fifteenth and sixteenth century

paintings, as well as the works by Goya), they decided to stay together not only that evening, but also the following day. Ricardo phoned home with a made up excuse for staying in Madrid for one more day and then took Catherine to have dinner in a Chinese restaurant. Because of her night flight she had had only a short and uncomfortable sleep, and after the long trip on foot around the town and to the museum, Catherine was rather tired and refused his suggestion that they go to a discotheque after dinner. She said:

“Please, darling, take me to a hotel where we can have a room together. I prefer by far to make love to you before sleeping rather than going to a discotheque for drinks and dancing. I have missed you for so long a time now that all I want is to have you in a very intimate and comfortable way just for myself and to make love to you!”

Ricardo felt so happy that she still wished to make love to him that he did not hesitate at all and took her to the ‘Carlos V (Charles the Fifth)’ Hotel, where they could get a double room. It was the very first time they spent a night together in a hotel. In the past, before this occasion, they had always slept either in his own house, as when he lived in Lagos, or in some friend’s residence, as two years ago when he travelled to Nigeria for the short mission he carried out there. They felt this new experience as being somehow sinful and they felt therefore a rather great emotion working its way inside them. But the room was nice and cosy, especially with only the small bed-lamps on, so they overcame their emotion: they undressed quickly and, once totally naked, they rushed to bed. How sweet and exciting it was for Ricardo to have her splendid lithe nude body in his arms again, to caress it tenderly and kiss and lick it voluptuously; how delightful and enthralling it was for Catherine to find herself tightly hugged as a prisoner in his warm and enticing embrace!

Though two more years had elapsed since the last time they had made love, they felt as if they had been far apart for only one day, so strong and violent was the passion they still felt for each other. They had however the impression of being survivors, because they had first met nine years before and they continued to love each other with the same intensity and the same passion and desire for one another – despite the two long separations suffered – throughout all this long period. They kissed each other voluptuously: Catherine this time did not hesitate at all and kissed him in the old so exciting way,

opening entirely her mouth and capturing his lips inside it, while she offered her tongue to his sucking action by inserting it, stretched like an arrow, as deep as possible, in his own mouth. He liked that very much and was in ecstasy for the pleasure he received.

They lingered in mutually caressing their bodies, arousing the most sensitive parts of them at length: he, obviously, taking in his cupped hand her breasts and nipples, then her belly, her buttock and finally her pubis and thighs; she, caressing sweetly his body until desire pervaded him entirely. Then she caressed his face at length with her fine, small but long hands – how had she longed to be allowed to caress *that* face again! – and, leaning down, kissed it with great care and tenderness. He became nearly crazy for the pleasure and the bliss she provoked in him. She was all in a flutter: she loved Ricardo's face so much; it was indeed the only man's face that gave her pleasant physical sensations and the highest joy at simply caressing it, imagine then what peaks of pleasure and happiness those sensations could attain when she was kissing it.

It was then his turn to give her intimate pleasure. To do this, Ricardo, after having stroked her body with his hand at length, leaned over it and parted carefully the lips of her mouth with his own lips and afterwards started audaciously kissing their internal part, thus sending her into deep ecstasy. He then changed his action and started licking her face and all her body: he did that with a sort of voracity that was unknown to her - or maybe she did not remember if Ricardo had already performed it in this exalting way the other times when they had been making love.

His tongue was at other times smoothly caressing, all flat, her face and her body. How could she resist for long this sort of superlatively pleasant action? She was totally defenceless, she lay on the bed, entirely and generously openly offered to his enthusiastic though suave licking action with close eyes, waiting – while her body was tenderly kept in his beloved hands – for the salient moment of the flood, of the unspeakable pleasure, of a potent and overwhelming orgasm. This did not take long to be attained; she started in fact blowing heavily: within a short time she got a potent orgasm which filled all her body with wonderful sensations. Her body vibrated and shook potently. Ricardo who held her by her waist fully sensed it. And he rejoiced at the pleasure he had been able to arouse in her. She came so ravishingly that she yelled out a sort of loud raucous

roaring like a wild lioness:

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Then, recovering her calm and quietness, she spoke sweetly to Ricardo, saying:

“Ricardo, darling, only *you* know what to do to me, and have the power to let me feel like that! You made me come so powerfully and intensely that I had the feeling of walking among stars; I thought I could die instantaneously: I got an exceedingly powerful, pleasant orgasm, indeed.”

Ricardo felt very proud to be the only man capable of giving her such great pleasure. He therefore replied:

“My beloved Sylph, you are undoubtedly the sweetest and most delightful girl existing on the face of this planet and probably also on that of all the planets of the universe! I love you so much with all my heart and with all my brain and I literally adore your magnificent, so responsive body: that is possibly why I am capable of behaving in this successful way with you and of letting you enjoy so powerfully our interludes.”

He felt now that he wanted to enter her, to possess her spectacular and adamant body, to make it become one single body with his own, to melt definitively in her and eventually to rest inside her. He needed her utterly; she was his peerless treasure, the most precious gemstone he had received as a unique gift from Heaven. It was definitely the most fantastic situation he had ever experienced (only with Edima^(*) had he found similar, or perhaps, even more thrilling and exalting sensations).

Inside her, he felt he was losing his sense of reality and being transported to another world, a world of fairies and oneiric fables, of splendid variegated colours, of the most imaginative unrestrained and crazy fantasy.

He saw, as in a fast moving film, images and images of spectacular gardens, attractive meadows and chilly, healing woods inhabited by elves and wizards, displayed before the eyes of his mind, quickly appearing as in a flash and then rapidly vanishing. He was no longer himself, but an integral part of her body. The pleasure that the thought of having been transformed in her gave him produced the final stroke to his fluttering body and he could no longer hold back the pleasure from coming, potently and savagely: with a short cry of anguish and bliss, he joyfully came inside her.

This time, the thrust for pleasure had been so powerful and rapid that it didn't give him the time to be more careful and withdraw from her intimate parts as he had always done in the past in order to avoid any risk of letting her get pregnant. But Catherine herself did not give him the impression of caring much about it; on the contrary, she appeared happy to have provoked his orgasm, after having attained her own, and having thus observed, through his ejaculation in her, the evidence of his pleasure.

They were both happy to see that their love was still intense enough to give them the highest pleasure and exceedingly fine and strong emotions. They therefore relished with maximum joy those moments of pure and ecstatic frenzy, murmuring to one another sweet words of love. Ricardo said:

"Sweet Sylph, I am convinced that there is no other girl on earth so enchanting and desirable as you are! You have given me years and years of unrestrained happiness and I am grateful to Heaven for putting you on my path in this life, normally so gloomy and sad, suddenly enlightened by your presence near me, as well as by your cherished love for me. I love and adore you more than my own life!"

She was moved by his delightful statement and, under the push of her emotion, replied eagerly:

"Ricardo, my unique love, I too am grateful to Heaven for having placed you on my own path in life. I love you immensely and will always love you, whatever happens to me: I can't forget all the lovely moments we spent together and all that you have done for me to take me along, up to my current status of real adulthood! Believe me, I will never cease to love you, all my life long!"

Ricardo uttered again:

"Cathy, my sweetheart, you will always be the Queen of my heart!"

Afterwards, they slept peacefully in one another's arms, tightly clinging to each other in a warm and sweet embrace, full of mutual affection and real, sound adoration. In the morning, the following day, Ricardo, when he woke up, found that Catherine was already awakened and was disconsolately weeping.

He was immediately alarmed and asked her:

"Why are you weeping, my Sylph? Did I by chance hurt or offend you? If it is so, believe me, it was not done on any purpose, it was not deliberate. Or did I disappoint you somehow making love last night?"

But Catherine was only weeping because she was sad, feeling bound to leave him forever. She therefore said to him:

“No, Ricardo, darling, don’t worry, you did not offend me nor do me any harm. And you did not let me down at all. On the contrary, you gave me only unprecedented great joy, immense happiness and unequalled physical pleasure. I am weeping because I have a great sorrow in my heart, since our fabulous romance has now to meet its end. I want to be absolutely sincere and honest with you, my beloved Ricardo: if by chance Pedro manifests a firm wish to marry me and, as a consequence, asks me to condescend to marry him, I will accept and ...”

Ricardo hastily interrupted her:

“You have to accept, Sweet Sylph! You have every right to have a family of your own and this man might be offering you the right occasion for forming it.”

Catherine resumed the thread of her speech:

“Thank you for your support, darling, but what I wanted to say is that the consequence of my acceptance of his proposition is that this night that we have just spent so marvellously together making tender love to one another will be the very last one in our life. As a matter of fact, that was unfortunately the last time we made love. Although I am terribly fond of you and there will always be, as long as I live, an important place reserved for you in my heart – believe me, this is absolutely true and I will never change my sentiments in your respect! – I don’t want to betray the faith and trust of a man who asks for my hand. Therefore, despite my wish to be yours forever, I’ll have to stop meeting you, having in my heart and head the desire to make love to you. In other words, alas, I shall not make love to you any more. But this renunciation is difficult because my love for you is really immense and this gives me an enormous pain. That’s why I was weeping, my dearest Ricardo.”

Ricardo, at this announcement, felt as if the entire world was collapsing on him, covering him with a mountain of debris, but still said to her gallantly and romantically:

“Cathy, beloved Sweet Sylph, I understand you entirely and fully agree with you. Even if this will tear my heart to pieces, I fully support you: this is the most correct attitude that has to be kept and that’s therefore how you have to behave.”

Catherine felt incredibly relieved and was happy to have found

such great understanding in him. She exclaimed joyfully:

“Darling, you are really a great man! A real special gentleman! I knew already how big your generosity is, but the statement you made right now fully indicates how unselfish you are and how much you care for me. I am exceedingly grateful for the respect that you demonstrate toward me and my ideas at this precise moment, as well as for all the care for me that you have always shown in the past nine years of our relationship.”

She then kissed his mouth tenderly and passionately.

Though responding to her with reciprocal unaltered passion, he let her do it with wrinkled heart because he knew that these were the last totally free, passionate kisses he would receive from her. He clasped her hands and held them jointly in his own at length; then turned them upwards and tenderly kissed their palms intensely, amply showing her how devoted he felt to her. Ricardo liked that woman. Very, very much. He loved her beyond any words.

He then felt a frenzy to possess her again, to have her intimately for the very last time, but he indulged in thinking that it had to be in a new way, in a way he had never carried out before, in order to have an indelible memory of her.

He therefore said to her:

“Cathy, my love, as this is the last opportunity I have to enjoy you, I want to get the whole of you, to possess your beloved splendid body in the most tender and suave way possible!”

She replied anxiously:

“OK, darling, do whatever you like of me. Only be conscious that although I would like to be yours forever this might well be the very last time we can give one another our love so openly.”

“I am fully aware that this is, unfortunately, the last time I can do something like this and enjoy you. I’m not sure at all if I can manage it, but I want to try anyhow to behave as if nothing so drastic and final would happen in my life, because I adore you and I like you above everything!”

She took his mouth in her own mouth sucking his lips voluptuously and eagerly till they became nearly blue.

Though with a certain difficulty and some slight pain for her, he entered her. A great pleasure pervaded him.

He felt happy to have done it, because he really loved her body immensely and now he could say that he had had her completely,

forcing his way in her, penetrating her delightful body with wild determination. She felt happy too, because she had given herself to him in the most exclusive way and, in so doing, amply demonstrated how big her love for him was. He looked straight into her eyes because to watch the eyes of a woman in love, while making love, was an essential part of an interlude, and he promised to himself he would never cease doing it again and again.

As his foremost concern in loving a woman was her pleasure he could not let her be exposed just to man's voluptuousness, without the involvement of her own wish and pleasure; he wondered how it was possible that there are men who enjoy possessing women against their will, wildly and injuriously raping them, and imposing their own will on them.

He knew very well that she had condescended to make love to him only because of the immense love she harboured in her heart for him; as he was a paladin of women's emancipation and of their rights, he could not favour acts that represented an awful violence disrespecting women's will. Especially in respect of *his own woman*. And Catherine, for sure, *was his* woman. He had the highest consideration for her, the maximum esteem, the fullest respect. He duly honoured her. She was a woman of great value – both for her beauty and for her cleverness – and certainly merited entirely the homage he happily and willingly paid her. But now his act, in his eyes, began to look like an annihilation of the person, a destruction of her strong delightful personality, a real subjugation to his own will and desire; and this was for him totally unacceptable. He considered in fact that the act of subjugating another human being, especially a woman (who in the interrelation between the two sexes is the weaker one, as well as the most exposed to the risk of loss of identity and the one normally ready to succumb to man's wild bullying), was a really detestable and awful crime.

Although she had not hesitated at all herself to give him a proof of her love for him, he detested himself for having asked his beloved Catherine – who, because of the great love and immense trust she felt for him, did not refuse (on the contrary, gladly accepted) to make him the gift of her body – to allow him to penetrate her in such a possessive way. No he would certainly never ask her again to repeat this infamous experiment. He felt very guilty and ashamed, as well as strongly irritated with himself for not paying her what in his

eyes was the due respect she deserved, and internally he reprimanded himself severely.

She understood however that he had done this only because of the immense love he felt for her and the unrestrained admiration he felt for her so desirable lovely body and her latent resentment against him for having taken advantage of her confidence in him was immediately suppressed. Especially when he happily said to her:

“Beloved Sweet Sylph, believe me, it is the very first time in my life that I took a woman in such a violent way. It never even crossed my mind to do something like that before, with any other woman, not even my wife; but with you everything appears to be possible and acceptable! In spite of this, I am ashamed to have done it. Do you condemn me for this act that the majority of people would define as horrid? Do you really believe that I have undergone depravation? The fact is, you see, my adorable Sylph, that I love you so much that actions which look detestable and infamous to most people’s eyes, as well as unspeakably perverted, ignominious and degrading also to my own eyes become delightful and desirable if performed with you: I had to show you how much I love you and pay a complete homage to your enchanting, splendid body. Everything which is part of your body is absolutely delicious and fascinating for me!”

Catherine was really delighted by his gallant statement. In her eyes, only he was capable of such great gallantry.

Then they rose from bed and went to the bathroom to prepare themselves for going out. They took a shower together, washing each other’s faces – while exchanging very passionate sweet kisses – and bodies with mutual intimate pleasure and lust, dressed and then took their continental breakfast (as it is the habit in Spain: coffee or tea with milk, biscuits, croissant, bread with butter, jam and honey) in the hotel cafeteria.

Afterwards, Ricardo paid the hotel bill and, asking permission to leave her luggage and a very big bunch of tropical flowers she had brought from Africa for Pedro’s mother in the cloakroom, they went out to make a last tour of the town centre, also to allow Catherine to do some shopping (she wanted to buy many small objects, but, in particular, a pair of shoes).

After that, Ricardo took her to the Plaza de toros (the bulls’ arena) to attend a ‘corrida’ (the fight between a man and a bull). Catherine

was exalted by the many 'olé' yelled by the enthusiastic and overheated crowd there. She deemed however that the struggle was not fair and mainly unequal, since the bull – even the most pugnacious and indeed even a victorious one – would be killed anyhow. Ricardo explained to her that it is not possible to leave a bull after it has defeated a torero by wounding or even killing him, because the bull might become very wild, aggressive and dangerous, but she was not convinced by his explanation. She found it ridiculous that the corrida should be defined as a match between a man and a beast, when already in the posters announcing the event it is clearly printed: 'Seis hermosos toros serán matados (Six beautiful bulls will be executed)':

"They, the bulls I mean, *will be killed*, you understand, darling? This is what is printed on the announcing posters! This means that there is no real sporting competition and no victorious exit from the arena possible for the bulls: their destiny is already decided from the beginning. It is then nothing else than an artistic slaughter, however long and admirable might be their agony in fighting against the cape-waving peones (men defying the bull with a large colourful cape), the banderilleros (men dextrously inserting painful pricking arrows in the bull's back to make it lose blood and, in so doing, weaken it) and finally the matador!"

In spite of all Ricardo's explanations and reactions, she remained fiercely fixed in her own convictions in defence of the bulls' honour. When the corrida was over, they rushed to the hotel where they had spent the night to collect Catherine's luggage and the bunch of flowers and Ricardo took her to the railway station, accompanying her up to the platform from which the train to Burgos left. Before getting into the coach where she had reserved her place, she turned towards him, hugged him tightly to herself and kissed him passionately saying:

"Keep your fingers crossed, please, my beloved Ricardo, that everything goes in the desired way and Pedro can consider me a suitable wife, thus becoming willing to marry me. But don't ever forget that my immense love for you is absolutely indestructible and will last forever, whatever events and facts might happen in my life, even if I get married, even if I have children, up to my death. And be assured that we shall keep in close touch, since I'm going to call you often by phone to let you know what is happening to me. You

are my hero and I want you to continue to protect me as you always have so unselfishly and generously done over these years. I love you with all my heart, my soul, my brain!”

Ricardo felt as though a large portion of his own body was cut off from him; though they were now in late springtime, he felt his blood curdle and an enormous sadness suddenly fall on him, because he was about to lose her, his most precious treasure. He perceived clearly that he was about to be excluded from her life forever, to be separated from the woman who, with her tender, sweet dedication to him, had so powerfully and delightfully enlightened his days for the last nine years of his existence. He had just the force to murmur to her:

“I love you too, Sweet Sylph, I utterly love you and I will always keep you very cherished in my heart, never forgetting you and the wonderful moments we had together, believe me! Now I feel I have to give you a last recommendation: do not make love to Pedro immediately, even if he asks you to do it and also if he insists on putting forward the devious excuse of your imminent marriage! Ward off his advances and refuse to concede yourself for at least some days. This is very essential if you want him to respect you and consider you as an honest and restrained woman, worthy to be married. Don’t pretend to be a virgin, this would be stupid and self-defeating; you can tell him that girls in Africa are commonly deflowered when they are still very young, during school time by school-mates; but be firm in your refusal to make love to him easily and too early. Be very firm on this issue, please! Remember, dearest Cathy, this is unfortunately the mentality of Spanish men: they always try to seduce a lady, but if and when she falls in their trap and concedes herself to their lust, they frequently start considering her by a whore’s standards and often do not want any more of her. So, please, if you don’t want something like that to happen to you too, follow my advice strictly. Let me now wish you with all heart: ‘Good Luck, Sweet Sylph!’ Be happy and live freely your life: above all, don’t think of me, please! Don’t worry, darling, for though profoundly wounded, of course, by this awful blow, I will survive.”

Half-heartedly, she succeeded eventually in separating from him and got into the train. It was a good time to do it. Immediately after her entrance, the doors were closed. He then waved his hand towards

her when the train was moving away, taking her alas to another man.

Ricardo remained on the station platform until the train became a little point on the horizon, thoughtless like a dead man, having lost all notions of space and time. He then decided to leave and collect his car at the parking place to return home. But he was silently weeping and tears streamed copiously down his face. He continued to weep also along a considerable stretch of the road to Valladolid.

* See *Living in the Land of Love*

5. *Enslaved!*

Ricardo did not have to wait long for Catherine's call. The telephone in fact rang two days later. It was Catherine. She wanted to tell Ricardo immediately about her arrival in Burgos and the welcome given by Pedro Gutierrez and his family. Pedro had gone to fetch her at the Burgos railway station and then taken her by car to the small country village outside Burgos where he lived. She had been warmly welcomed by his family, which was composed of his old mother, his brother - the second one in the line - and his young sister, the cadet of the family, more or less of the same age as herself.

His sister, whose name was María Ana, received her with particular cheers and enthusiasm, since she was a kind and gentle young woman, rather lonely, who found the arrival of another young woman in their house thrilling and exciting. She had not had a good relationship with Pedro's former wife whom she did not like at all because the latter came from the town - and gave herself airs of superiority towards a country girl, as María Ana certainly was - and also because of her nasty character. María Ana was genuine, open-minded and not racist at all, and therefore disregarded totally the fact that Catherine was an African, a black woman. She also spoke English quite well and this facilitated greatly Catherine's integration in this Spanish family whose knowledge of foreign languages was rather limited.

On her side, it has to be said that, although she, while studying Italian, had also learned a bit of Spanish at the University in Lagos, her familiarity with this language was still rather execrable and poor. But thanks to Pedro's sister's knowledge of English, the two young women understood one another very well right from Catherine's first entrance in their house. In less than no time, they had become

good friends and henceforth Catherine enjoyed María Ana's constant life-long full support. Catherine, moreover, had acted wisely in order to get into Pedro's mother's good books by bringing her from Africa the big bunch of magnificent tropical flowers, the spectacular 'Lobster Claw Heliconias' (*Heliconia rostrata*), also known as 'Hanging Heliconias' and the attractive 'Nicolaias elatiors', alias 'Phaeomerias magnificas' (commonly called 'Roses of porcelain'). It had been a problem for Ricardo to deal with these cumbersome flowers during the two days that they had spent in Madrid before she travelled to Burgos. Pedro's relatives had never in their life seen such impressive and superlatively beautiful flowers before and the old lady was therefore in ecstasy at receiving them and liked them much. And, obviously, she liked Catherine too, in spite of a certain fear she felt before a black woman. In general then Catherine had been well received by Pedro's family. The atmosphere found there by Catherine was almost idyllic, had it not been for Pedro's younger brother's attitude: he was indeed the only member of the family who had not demonstrated amiable behaviour to Catherine and had, on the contrary, given her a rather cold and disdainful welcome.

As a matter of fact, this man, whose name was Miguel, was a brusque and rude man, a real peasant verging on misanthrope, who did not like foreigners and unknown people in general and therefore could not at all see the presence of a black African in his house with favour. It could even be said that black people were so different, in his eyes, from Europeans; he openly detested them: as a consequence, contrary to the rest of his family, he disliked even Catherine, in spite of her delightful appearance, her kind and polite manners, her gentle, educated overall behaviour and marvellous sweet character. It goes without saying that, because of his so rough character, even the fact that he could not spot in Catherine any fault or bad side – which he would have been happy to underline and mock – increased and enhanced his acrimony towards her. But he was clever and cunning enough to hide this bad feeling towards her under the cover of an apparent politeness and courtesy.

Catherine called Ricardo again ten days later. She was so happy to hear his voice that she nearly burst into tears: her pleasure and her joy at speaking to him were really immense. Her attitude towards

him was unchanged at all; it was that of a woman in love with a man, him! Although she was living in the house of a man who could very well become her husband in a short time, she felt she was utterly missing Ricardo, his delicate manners, his constant care for her, his gentle attention and, in one word, his unique, enrapturing love for her.

She was totally unable to hide her great nostalgia for the lovely moments of passionate love spent with him. However, what she found that was absolutely absurd and ridiculous was the fact that she did not really feel she desired to make love to him, this wish was totally secondary and not-relevant, but rather that she aimed with all her heart and her being at having him constantly beside her. She needed his so appreciated support and she felt like lost or even dead now that she could no longer count on his presence near her. This was a real misfortune for her! Ricardo knew pretty well that this would happen when they parted and was sorry for her, since there was nothing he could do to reverse the negative situation and come to help her in one way or another. She furthermore said:

“Ricardo, darling (she could really not stop calling him with this cherished adjective that she had happily used for such a long time towards him), you know, you were perfectly right, saying that Pedro would try to induce me to make love to him: he did indeed try! Moreover, he used exactly the tactic that you foresaw: he said that I could be tranquil and comply with his desire and fully satisfy it with no fear and no qualm because afterwards he would marry me! I refused to condescend to his request, as you had so wisely taught me to do. But he has not yet officially requested me to marry him. So, I am still waiting and I will refuse to concede myself until he officially asks me to marry him and he formalizes his promise in front of his family.”

Ricardo admired her behaviour and praised her resoluteness, saying: “Well done, Cathy, my Sylph! ... Oh, may I still call you ‘*my Sylph*’?”

“Of course, you may, darling! *You* gave me such a nice and quite cherished nickname and only *you* have the right to call me by it: I’ll therefore be *your* Sylph forever!”

He felt happy that she still appreciated that nickname, which he had given her with great concern and joy nine years before:

“Thank you, dearest Cathy, you make me really very happy with

this statement. Don't recede from your firm position, Sweet Sylph; the longer you can resist his advances, the better: you will see, if he really likes you and his feeling for you is sincere and profound and he wants to have you for himself, he may get crazy about you and be willing to marry you in order to get you forever. He is certainly aware of the charms that emanate from your lovely person and may be fearful that some other man might meet you and get fond of you to the point of taking you away from him. Here in Spain this is something that happens frequently and the power of seduction that you, beautiful black women, have on us white European men is very strong. He has therefore to hurry if he does not want to lose you: although you are a too serious and not easy girl, such risk is just 'round the corner'!"

"Thank you, Ricardo, my dear, I knew I can always count on your support! There is no other man like you, you are really my sole hero and my very best friend!"

After a fortnight, she called Ricardo again. She said to him with an excited tone of voice that let happiness and joy transpire:

"Darling, you were right, as always, and it happened exactly as you predicted: Pedro asked me officially to marry him! ..."

Ricardo felt tremendously happy for her: she could at last crown her long-cherished desire to get married with a white man. He therefore interrupted her joyfully:

"Beloved Sweet Sylph, although this announcement gives the final blow to my residual hopes to keep you for myself, I am really exceedingly happy for you and must rejoice with you for this long-awaited event! I sincerely congratulate you for having at last attained this target, which will soon enable you to become a European lady with full rights and title."

"Ricardo, since Pedro is a divorced man, he cannot marry me in the church as I would at the utmost like to do. In such a case, believe me, I would request you, as you are the best friend I have, to accompany me to the altar. But, since I'll be marrying in the Town Hall, before the Mayor, you could at least be my witness: I desire this with all my heart – you are indeed the best man I know –, if it is not too difficult and hard for you to give your official backing to an act which, in practice, will formalize my parting from you and my union to another man!"

Ricardo felt a great emotion filling up his heart and an urge to burst out weeping: his beloved Catherine was bound now to tie eventually and definitively her life with another man! But he was able to refrain from weeping and fought back his tears; as if in a dream he heard himself proclaiming to her:

“Cathy, my Sylph, although, of course, it gives me great fatigue and an immense sorrow to see you going away from me to another man, I don’t want to be greedy: so I’ll be not only pleased, but also utterly honoured to be your witness at your wedding!”

“Oh, Ricardo, what an immense joy you give me! Thank you, my dearest Ricardo, I knew you would not pull back and deny me this great favour and true happiness: after all the support you gave me to make me the woman I am today, who better than you could play this role beside me to back me for such important event in my life, the ceremony of my wedding? For sure, nobody! I am grateful to Heaven that you are such a noble and generous man!”

“Sweet Sylph, I supported you since the very first moment I met you: it is therefore a ‘must’ for me to support you also on this specially important occasion. Frankly speaking, I feel that I really cannot draw back. Should I do the contrary, it would only signify cowardice and real treachery (a sort of high treason) from me in your respect.”

In the meantime Catherine had learnt a lot about farm works and activities: she had learnt how to milk cows, how to make cheese, how to water fruit and vegetables, how to pick them at the right time when getting ripe, how to weave baskets out of reeds, how to twist straw to make nice peasants’ hats and even how to drive a tractor towing a cart. She was very diligent and had become a perfect country woman, so being of great help for everybody in Pedro’s farm.

Everybody was happy to have her there. Everybody, but Miguel. To tell the truth, he certainly was a hard worker and was fond of putting all his strength and energy at the service of the good running of their farm. But this was the only positive aspect of his nature. He was unfortunately a sly man, incapable of being happy because of his nasty character and therefore unlikely to receive a woman’s love. Although eager, as any man is, to have a woman for himself, he had always lost all the opportunities that happened to him, because no woman could accept being maltreated (including physically) and

offended by him. He was therefore obliged to stay single and was exceedingly envious of all couples in love. He had long since conceived a vile envy towards his elder brother Pedro who was, on the contrary, a positive and optimistic man, who loved good and jolly company and was usually sought for by women - who ran after him. When he saw that Pedro had started courting Catherine, and the latter accepted his proposition to become his fiancée, he did not like this event at all and conceived a really profound hatred against the poor African young woman. She was totally unaware of his sentiment, since he had been very able to conceal his real feelings and his resentment behind ample friendly smiles, and therefore always addressed him with maximum confidence and courtesy. But he conspired in the shadow against Pedro's and Catherine's happiness and plotted a horrible and outrageous crime.

Slightly more than one month after her departure to Burgos, Catherine called Ricardo one day very excitedly and alarmed, saying in a voice broken with emotion:

“Darling, I must tell you something very grievous and cumbersome, but at the same time marvellous and exalting, which I have on my heart and doesn't let me sleep peacefully: ... I am ...am ... pregnant! And it is certainly too early to be Pedro's responsibility, because I consented to make love to him only one week ago, when he formalised in front of his mother and his sister that we have to be considered as fiancés, after officially giving me the engagement ring; so it must be your baby, dear Ricardo! Do you remember, the last time we made love, in Madrid, you did not take any of your usual precautions and you ejaculated right in the depth of me: so now I am absolutely sure I am pregnant by you! Darling, I am really happy that I conceived a baby of yours out of our past great love relationship, but how can I now justify my pregnancy and how should I behave vis-à-vis Pedro and our planned marriage?”

Ricardo had remained for a moment silent, like electrocuted, with an “Oh?” of marvelled astonishment on his half-opened mouth, so powerfully had Catherine's announcement struck him. But he came back immediately to his usual spirit and felt an enormous happiness wrapping him in its warm embrace: his beloved Catherine was pregnant by him and was therefore about to give birth, eight months later, to a baby, who was also his baby! How splendid, how exciting,

how wonderful! No news could be more joyous and more delightful to his ears than this! Only his natural aplomb kept him still, inhibiting him from starting to jump all over around the room for the immense joy he was feeling for this marvellous announcement! ‘Oh Catherine, lovely adored Cathy, what have you done to me?’ was the joyous thought in his mind.

He replied with his heart overflowing with joy:

“Cathy, sweet, beloved Cathy, you don’t know how much I love you for this delightful announcement that you just gave me: you conceived a child from my own semen, the semen that I deposited inside you, it is simply fantastic! This is the most splendid gift that you could make me and I can hardly believe that all this happiness is really destined for me. I am exceedingly happy, I feel as if I were touching the sky with my finger!”

“I am very happy too, believe me, Ricardo. But what can I do with Pedro now? Help me, please, as you always did in the past, give me some good advice to cope with this present situation, which, apart from this need, for the rest is an absolutely delightful circumstance!”

“Well, you are right, my Sylph: in my happiness I forgot your particular situation. OK, let’s think now how to act for the best. First of all: do you want to keep the baby, Cathy?”

“Of course, I want to keep it, Ricardo. What do you think of me? I am not that sort of woman, scared to get a baby! I firmly want it, even if illegitimate: it is my very first child, how could I renounce it? And, moreover, it is also *your* child, I mean *the child of the man I love forever more than my own life*; I absolutely want to give it life and raise it. Give me then, please, a good suggestion to enable me to carry my pregnancy on to completion and also save, at the same time, if it is ever possible, my foreseen marriage with Pedro!”

Ricardo would have at the utmost liked to be allowed to officially recognize this child of Catherine as his own and give it his surname, but this would nearly certainly signify the death of Catherine’s dream to get married with Pedro, since the latter would not agree to marry a woman who had so openly betrayed his trust. He had therefore to give up this desire and devise a solution to save Catherine’s future marriage.

“OK, then. But first of all, let me congratulate you for your courageous decision and express to you all my immense gratitude for being willing to give life to a child of mine. As far as Pedro is

concerned, it is better that he doesn't know anything about your pregnancy; I am convinced that he may take in good part the fact that you made love to other men when you were in Africa. But he will certainly not accept and give you his pardon for having made love to another man – moreover, a white man and, worse than ever, a white man living not far from your place, whom you could therefore easily continue to have an affair with! – after he invited you to come to Europe. He cannot know that you made a sincere oath not to make love to me any more; and how could he believe and trust you after he's made aware that you made love to another man after you got his own invitation to come to meet him, and got pregnant by this man? So, please, don't tell him anything for the moment and just try not to become too fat during this month, which will be the second month of your pregnancy, but has to appear as being the first one. In this way you can keep your pregnancy secret and nobody will perceive that you are pregnant. In three weeks time you will reveal your pregnancy to Pedro, so that he will be convinced that you are pregnant by him. Go to a doctor for an appropriate thorough medical visit only then. Afterwards, at the moment of the birth, you will pretend that the baby is born premature, that it is only of eight months instead of being regularly of nine months. Is that OK? Will you be able to stick to this advice?"

"I will, of course! Your suggestion is maybe tricky in Pedro's respect, but very wise."

"Above all, please, my beloved Sweet Sylph, for your peace and the safeguard of your matrimony, never – you understand: *never* – reveal either to Pedro or to your child itself that it is not his own child, but *my* baby."

"I will not, be sure of it, Ricardo. I will keep strictly and carefully to your recommendation and this will always remain a well protected secret between you and me."

"I just hope that you will allow me to see our child from time to time, Cathy."

"Darling, it is also *your* child! For sure, you will have the right to see it whenever you want."

Catherine behaved as Ricardo had recommended her to do and did not reveal to Pedro that she was pregnant, waiting for the right moment to tell him about her pregnancy. Three weeks later, in the

evening when they were in the intimacy of their room (after their engagement, Pedro had prepared a bedroom for the two of them which Catherine had moved to), she told him of this happy event. Pedro, obviously, thinking that it was his baby, felt happy and proud for the lucky circumstance of soon becoming the father of a child and accelerated the preparations for their wedding (especially the papers for her, which were not at all simple to receive from Nigeria).

Miguel however had worked out a well devised plan and plotted a mischief to hinder Catherine's marriage with Pedro. He was a secret supporter of Eta, the irredentist party fighting for the independence of Basque territory with acts of violence and terrorism, sometimes also of unprecedented fierceness, and through this connection he organised the kidnapping of Catherine by its experts. To convince them to act so grievously towards her, he had told them that Catherine was an important emissary of the Nigerian government officially sent to Spain to negotiate and stipulate an essential pact of co-operation and reciprocal support with the Spanish government. The disappearance of this extraordinary envoy would put the Spanish government in great difficulty vis-à-vis the Federal Republic of Nigeria and would create an international diplomatic incident, which was what Eta wanted in order to place Spain in an unfavourable light towards the rest of the world.

So one evening when Pedro was out for an important meeting with other farmers – who were devising a plan to get the government to support specific agricultural activities and olive oil production, to protect them against the importation of foreign, mainly Moroccan, oils – four of those terrorists came to Pedro's farm. With the help of Miguel, who had purposely left a window open, they succeeded in penetrating it. In the darkness of the house, they first entered into Pedro's mother's room where the old lady was reading a book and had therefore the light on. She was terrified seeing those men wearing hoods or masks on their faces (they were in fact people living in the neighbourhood and therefore easily recognizable, should they not conceal their faces) coming into her room, and remained immobilized all crouched in her armchair. They left the lady with a large expression of terror well depicted on her face and entered into Catherine's room where she was already sleeping. Silently they went near her bed and, while one of them put a hand on her mouth to hinder her from shouting aloud, dragged

her out of bed and then took her out of the house, together with her garments and dress which were laid on a chair, to a near place where they had left their car. She struggled and tried to free herself by kicking out furiously, but could do nothing against their strength which was by far superior to hers. They took her away with them. They took her to a far farmstead which had been uninhabited for years and locked her in a dark cellar no longer in use.

When Pedro came back home, he found his mother still terrified, weeping and trembling for the great fear and the anguish she had experienced, while Catherine had vanished. Since there were no traces at all of her and no messages left around indicating that she had gone out, his mother then supposed that the masked men had kidnapped her and told Pedro that. Pedro was highly disconcerted and full of anxiety for her fate and wondered who could be so full of resentment against him or against Catherine herself to do an act of such gravity, but was unable to find an answer to his speculations. He then thought that it was an action perpetrated by some rascals who would request him to pay a ransom to get Catherine back to him and became really furious. He reported her disappearance to the police and remained seated near the telephone to wait for a call for the request of a ransom. At every ring of the telephone he jumped to pick up the receiver, but no call arrived for such purpose. After some days of complete silence on that front, he was really desperate and started thinking that it had been a plot arranged by African compatriots of Catherine evidently unwilling to see one of their women become the wife of a white man. Finally he became convinced that it was a kidnapping organised by slave traders in order to sell her on one of those so flourishing Northern-African slave markets. It happened indeed quite often even nowadays that nice and attractive young women disappeared to be sold to some sheik's harem in the Middle-east, and as Catherine was such a delightful young woman, this last supposition was far from being unrealistic.

The Eta terrorists soon became persuaded that keeping Catherine a prisoner indefinitely – even though making use of an abandoned homestead as hideout – was neither simple nor safe, since they were not prepared to keep hostages in prison-like conditions; on the contrary, should the police get informed about the hideout by some villager or some spy, it would become extremely dangerous for

them. Moreover, even though she had never had the opportunity to see their faces, she might recognize the sound of their voices and, as a consequence, denounce them, should they be caught by the police. Once, when two policemen on patrol came very near the farmstead where Catherine was kept prisoner, they became exceedingly scared and thought they were lost: they had already prepared their weapons to start a shooting-battle. It was therefore necessary to get rid of her as soon as possible. After some days, they therefore passed her over to a gang of common bandits who thought they could make a good bargain of her and willingly agreed to take her with them. She was then taken to a well hidden grotto on the Sierra Nevada, where she remained chained and, most of the time, also gagged for a couple of months. They even used to blindfold her when they wanted to take off their balaclavas in her presence. Apart from these vexations, they treated her rather well, also because her belly, getting rather round and swollen, had started giving a clear sign of the presence of a foetus in it and motherhood is sacred in Spain.

One day however a young member of the gang tried to rape her in spite of her evident pregnancy, but she kicked him very powerfully in his testicles provoking in him an atrocious and shooting pain which obliged him to release her and abandon any desire of having sexual intercourse with her. She had indeed learnt how to defend herself against a man trying to rape her from the young virgin who was to be immolated for her enthronement in Edo-land: a hard kick in the testicles knocks a man out totally for a good while (if not forever, as is the case when balls inflate and get swollen and ache in a terrible and unequalled manner).

But after a while this gang sold her to another gang of criminals who immediately got rid of her by selling her to slave traders who surreptitiously took her to Morocco where she was sold in secret at an auction on a secluded slave market held in Meknès. In order to block her from retracing, they changed her name, giving her a new name, a Berber one, Amenna.

A Spanish diplomat used to attend these slave sales both out of curiosity and to get a chance to find nice girls, whom he normally bought in order to liberate them and let them go free after having had sexual intercourse with them. He noticed immediately Catherine's beauty when the traders showed her naked to the public, amply demonstrating the attractiveness of her body, and was on the

verge of buying her, but he noticed also the roundness of her belly betraying clearly the presence of a baby in it and thought that in those conditions making love to her would not be too exciting and delectable. When she saw this man – he was the only European man present on that occasion – she tried to communicate with him to implore his help in order to be freed. One of the slave traders however caught her while trying to sneak out of the crouched circle formed by the fearful men and women to be sold and slapped her violently on her face repelling her back in the group. All external contacts were thus cut and she had no more opportunities to communicate with any European to plead for her horrible situation and ask for help. She was really desperate, but by virtue of her strong character also absolutely determined to fight to obtain her freedom.

Catherine, now under the fake name of Amenna, was bought by a smith who was seeking for a help in his house in Marrakech where he lived with his two wives and ten children. When however he saw that Catherine, alias Amenna, could not manage hard tasks because of her pregnant condition, he decided to resell her. He sold her to a groundnut trader who however did not like her and, in turn, sold her to a carpet trader from Fès. Also this man was not content with the quality and quantity of work that the poor Amenna could produce in her pitiful condition and sold her to a tribe of Chaambas Tuareg leaving for the desert with a caravan transporting slabs of natural salt to the oasis of Ghardaïa. She then passed from one tribe to another (from the Ikadéïen to the Taïtoq and from these to the Tégéhé n'Efis), passing through the Algerian oasis of Ouargla, El-Goléa, In Salah and Tamanrasset until she was the object of a gift by Ahmed El-Moktar, the head of a small group of the Kel Ajjer Tuareg based in In Guezzam, on the border between Algeria and the Republic of Niger, to the old and renowned chief of a tribe of the Kel Aïr ethnic group whose name was Moussa Ag-Mongoufou.

The Tuareg have always been used to making raids in the land of the black Africans and abducting the most beautiful or attractive women, whom they married or lived with as if married, considering the children born from those mixed relationships as Tuareg children to all effects (that's why, apart from the layer of dirt covering their bodies – as water in the desert is too precious a commodity to be wasted for washing themselves –, they have now darkened

consistently from the original white complexion). Moussa Äg-Mongoufou was a right and wise man who had attained the age of 67 years, but was still vigorous and strong. He lived with his tribe in the village of Iférouane right in the middle of the Air mountain range in the Niger's Sahara desert. Being still a good and powerful lover, he was immediately struck by Catherine's majestic, delicate attractiveness and was very happy to receive her as a possible future concubine in his hut. He had however great respect for her evident maternity status and decided that he would possess her only after the delivery of her child. He might even receive and consider this child as his own child.

Moussa Äg-Mongoufou had two sons, Idriss and Amoud, aged 40 and 38 respectively, who both fell fond of Catherine/Amenna and considered that she was too young and beautiful for their old father, whilst they were convinced that she was the right concubine for themselves. Of course, being much younger than him, they were not as wise and good-thinking as their father and wanted to possess her immediately: they were certainly not inclined to wait until she had delivered her child. They challenged their father to release her and give her to one of them, according to his choice. Moussa was not a man who could easily give up something or somebody belonging to himself, not even in favour of his own sons and especially under an external pressure, and against his will: Amenna (as he knew Catherine) was a personal gift he had received from his own great friend Ahmed El-Moktar and therefore belonged exclusively to him. He and he alone could decide whether to renounce his rights in her and give her to somebody else. And he did not want to give her to anybody; she was too delightful, in spite of her belly that had now become rather big (it was already nearly the fifth month of her pregnancy) and he liked her too much. He accepted however a challenge from his sons. The one who should win would take Amenna for himself (he was in fact so sure to be the winner that he could willingly offer her as a prize in a hard contest with other men, even his own sons).

The women of the tribe decided what the challenge should be between the father and his sons: they gave the competitors the task of going, mounted on their dromedaries, beyond the Ténéré (the 'desert of the deserts'), up to N'Guigmi on the lake Tchad's shore and bringing back to Iférouane some dried fish from the lake itself,

bought straight from the local fishermen. The winner of the race would be the one among the three men who arrived back first in Iférouane. It was a long and gruelling ride, even for experienced and well-adapted Tuareg, profound connoisseurs of the desert and its traps and hurdles. Moussa however was not only a strong and vigorous man, as said here above, but also a fabulous expert traveller through the snares of the desert: in his long life, he had crossed the Sahara desert innumerable times and knew every single corner of it. He was an old desert fox and knew perfectly how to orient himself via the smallest markers that were disseminated in the sands and were practically invisible to a non-expert eye, but did not escape his sharp and long experienced sight. Moussa knew all the tracks crossing the tremendous and frightening, exceedingly arid Ténéré and had well in mind which was the fastest track to reach N'Guigmi.

At the start of the race, he made some detours just to disorient his sons by cunningly putting them on a fake track, not to be followed. Then he pointed straight towards the Adrar Ciret – a circular mountain ridge situated at the border of the Ténéré, between this and the Aïr massif – and afterwards southwards to the place where once existed (before a drunk lorry-driver struck and felled it), the world-famous 'Arbre du Ténéré (the Ténéré tree)' which served as geographic marker. From there he rode straight to cross the long (more than 150 km total length and 70 km width!) Gadoufaoua strip where the large dinosaurs cemetery lies - or the 'Land of stone snakes', as the Tuareg call this vast area scattered with fossilized skeletons and, mainly, lines of backbones and vertebrae of those gigantic prehistoric animals.

He had taken only a little food with him and a bit of water in a sheepskin jar (he was used to eating and drinking very little while crossing the desert); therefore his dromedary was very light and literally flew on the track, covering 50 miles a day and the entire distance in only 9 days. At evening when he stopped to spend the night under the stars – among which he could see, very brilliant and evident, but low on the horizon, the constellation denominated 'Southern Cross' – he would shackle the front legs of his dromedary to hinder it from going too far in search of pasture, then ate a very frugal meal and afterwards, wrapping himself in a cloth laid straight on the sand, slept peacefully until the following morning. At the break of the day, he went in search of his dromedary and after

finding it slurping up with maximum gusto the very tiny leaves of a solitary thorny acacia, he started his race again.

Following this route, Moussa had gained a great advantage on his sons who, on the contrary, had pointed southwards from Iférouane to Agadèz and then taken the usual caravan track to N'Guigmi. But when he was not far from the final destination of the journey, i.e. the small coastal town of N'Guigmi (though the Tchad lake has in these last years substantially shrunk, because of the scarcity of rain and consequential drought, and now its borders don't lap the town any more), when he had already reached the Manga region he bumped into a band of marauders (probably pertaining to the dangerous Tubus, notorious plunderers of the desert, pushed down southwards from the Djado plateau). They threw themselves on him shouting aloud to frighten him and swinging furiously, with the arm stretched out towards the sky, their 'takoubas' (Berbers' and Tuareg's swords, usually made out of soft iron, but sometimes, for instance when forged out of old cars leaf springs, also in good steel). He immediately unsheathed his own takouba (Berbers and Tuareg are the only people in the world who still go around always wearing a sword hanging on their side) and gave them battle.

He fought his hardest, but they were highly preponderant – eight against one – and they soon got the better of him. They stole all his few belongings (dromedary, food, water, garments and the little money necessary to buy the fish he had with him) and left him wounded and half-dead, as well as practically naked on the track. With so much of his body's skin exposed naked under the heavy blazing of the sun, and being deprived of the refrigerant shield of his ample 'boubou' (the typical Tuareg's clothing), he would certainly have soon died from dehydration, had it not been for the lucky circumstance of the passage on that site, three hours later, of a Tuareg family heading to N'Guigmi. Fortunately, the Tubu marauders had not taken the 'tagoulmoust' off him, the long (up to 25 feet!) kerchief that Tuareg and, commonly, Sahara people wrap tightly round their head to protect it from sun, sand-blows and wind (among Tuareg, whilst young men used to dress their long black hair in fanciful, very attractive braids or nape chignon and tuft, adults shave their heads completely, thus remaining with an absolutely bald skull), otherwise he would not have survived.

The Tuareg family took care of the poor man in a mess, fed him

and gave him water to drink and, above all, healed his wounds and finally took him with them to N'Guigmi. They put him up in the tent that they rapidly erected on the outskirts of the small, but pleasant town. The most active member of the family in taking care of him was a nice young girl of around 16 to 18, a real splendid beauty with delightful light grey eyes skilfully put in full evidence with a line of khol (a mixture made out of antimony as basic ingredient) around them, who struck Moussa's heart potently. Despite his age, Moussa was still a very handsome man, often breaking the hearts of young women, and he was well aware of his own power of seduction. As a matter of fact, it worked also this time: smiling tenderly, she stopped glaring insistently at him and turned her look away from him whenever she perceived that he was looking straight into her eyes to meet her look. When he felt he had totally recovered, three days later, he felt a great desire to take that girl, whose name was Mariamá, with him to Iférouane and let her live with him. Because of her, he had nearly forgotten that in Iférouane there was another young woman for whom he had accepted the challenge of his sons, which had led to that bad encounter and great danger. Now, he was tempted to give up Amenna (Catherine) and hand her over to his greedy sons: for him, she was in fact simply a black woman, a slave, whilst this beauty here was a woman of higher rank, a woman begotten by a Tuareg couple! But he quickly chased away from his brain this unlucky awful thought: he couldn't declare himself beaten by two young and inexperienced men and, above all, he judged Amenna really fascinating and he wanted her for himself.

Moussa was not a shy man and asked Mariamá's father straight out to grant him the great honour of taking her with him. The girl's father, when he heard that the man aided by them was the great Moussa Äg-Mongoufou, had highly rejoiced, because – although the different Tuareg tribes are totally independent from one another and they don't recognize any superior authority to any of them coming from a different clan – the renown of Moussa had spread beyond the restricted boundaries of Iférouane. He therefore condescended to give Moussa his daughter, agreeing on a dowry of three dromedaries, four donkeys and seven goats that Moussa would give him later, once safely back in Iférouane. Mariamá's father was obliged to plan a trip to Iférouane in order to accompany Mariamá

to meet her newly acquired man, Moussa, because the latter had to be alone to ride back as rapidly as possible if he wanted to win the race. He had already lost too much time because of his misadventure and now had literally to fly to make up for this. His sons in fact, who had arrived to N'Guigmi two days later than he, had already left the small town, heading back towards Iférouane a couple of days earlier. He was given some money by Mariamá's father to enable him to buy some fish from the local fishermen and a dromedary, a good and fast runner, was lent to him on the promise that he would give it back later on, when they came to Iférouane with Mariamá.

Moussa thanked them cordially for what they had done for him and then jumped on his new mehari and spurred his mount away. He followed the same itinerary back as he had covered while riding to N'Guigmi, and arrived happily home in Iférouane one day earlier than his sons. Luckily, this time there were no bad encounters along the track and his dromedary was able to run at maximum speed. But if he had still had his own mehari, it would have taken him even less time to get home, as dromedaries sniff the odour of their stables and head faster towards them. All the inhabitants of the village feasted him (most of them were absolutely sure he would win the race, since he was an astute traveller and too fine a connoisseur of the desert and its tracks; only a few, mainly the youngest ones, sided with his sons). Especially the women, who all liked him – and some were even secretly fond of him and would have liked a lot to be enabled to 'play' (fuck) with him – were taken by a real frenzy and started launching in the air their typical piercing trill or ululations of joy and encouragement, letting their tongue vibrate wildly in their mouth.

Catherine/Amenna rejoiced too for his victory: she therefore feasted and welcomed him, like the rest of the village, with personal cheers and howls. She was in fact now convinced that her destiny was already signed and she had to give up all hope of being freed and going back to her promised bridegroom, Pedro, and had no chance left of escaping this sad slavery. If she had to be a slave, then to belong to Moussa was certainly better than to be property of his sons or other men of the tribe. At least he had respected her and her situation, whilst the others would not take any care of respecting her pregnant condition. The longer she could avoid having sexual intercourse with her master – being compelled to perform that act, rather than making it voluntarily for love or passion on her side –

the better; afterwards, she could only trust Heaven's Providence for her good. At the moment, anyhow, all her thoughts and care were for the child that she brought in her womb and she utterly cherished. And Moussa Ag-Mongoufou had clearly and sincerely shown his concern for her pregnancy: he wanted her to take it quietly and serenely to completion without compelling her to have sex, and waited for the child's delivery as though it were his own child. Strange to say, but he looked proud that the birth of a child from this marvellous black woman should happen within his family, in his hut and had expressed her his will to consider this baby as his own and to make a real Targui or Targuia out of it.

Ricardo was totally in the dark about Catherine's misadventures and waited patiently for her call. Not receiving any call from her, at the beginning he thought that she was so engaged with the preparation for her wedding that she had no time for other occupations and, though eager to have news of her, did not want to disturb her and distract her from her arrangements. For this reason he did not call her either. But after a couple of months of this lack of correspondence, he started worrying about her silence, it was not consistent with her normal behaviour, she ought to give news of her pregnancy, she was aware of the fact that, as the child in her womb was Ricardo's, he would be particularly worried about how her pregnancy was proceeding. The tension in his house was therefore very high; he couldn't stand her silence any more – it was really terrible not to know anything about her! – and would spring up and take offence at the slightest disappointment or trouble. At this point, he thought that something bad must have happened and decided to call her. Luckily, he did not catch Pedro or his brother, but their sister, Maria Ana, who was well aware of his existence (Catherine in fact, in her genuine honesty and transparent character, incapable of hiding truth and facts regarding herself, had confided in her all her secrets, even her child's true paternity) and had no difficulty telling him about Catherine's disappearance.

Maria Ana confessed to him that she had even thought that Catherine might have chosen to go and live with him, since she loved him so much as to have his child. She had however kept everything to herself and not revealed to Pedro or to their mother her secret belief, being willing to protect the happiness of Catherine

whom she loved and considered her best friend or, better, just like a real sister. Ricardo assured her that he was absolutely not guilty of having organised Catherine's disappearance and hidden her and that he did not know anything of her whereabouts. He, on the contrary, had no idea that she had disappeared from their house – where he thought she was happily living – and was now very anxious to know where she might be. They lucubrated together about what could have happened, who the masked men who had kidnapped her were and why they had acted like that, but, not knowing anything about the involvement of Eta in the unfortunate and felonious deal, they were unable to come to a reasonable and plausible conclusion.

Ricardo however decided to investigate in the criminal milieu to find out whether they knew anything about the kidnapping, two months earlier, of a two months pregnant young black African woman. At the beginning he found himself knocking against a rubber wall, since every contact he managed to establish either vanished suddenly or was very reticent to reveal what he/she knew about the relevant matter. One of the contacts he made after much wandering in the dark, a man from Valladolid, the town where he himself lived, was killed in order to shut him up and prevent him from revealing to Ricardo what had happened. But, careless of the danger he was running in, Ricardo persisted in his strenuous search, scouring the slums of the towns, mainly Burgos – in the vicinity of which the kidnapping itself had taken place –, Madrid, Barcelona (for its big and important port), Malaga and Alicante (for their proximity to Africa). He also went to Marseilles for a few days where he was told she could have been taken as there was a big port from where she could be surreptitiously taken anywhere, especially to Arabia, but this turned out soon to be a false trail.

At each unsuccessful attempt to find traces of her, he was on the verge of losing his courage, but the thought that his beloved Catherine might be in great difficulty and even in extreme danger for her life gave him the force for beating all possible paths to conclude his indefatigable search victoriously. At last, luck was with him and kissed him on his forehead: he found an old woman who had witnessed just for chance, and unobserved, the assignment of Catherine to the gang of bandits who took her to Morocco for selling her on the slave market. She told him she had clearly heard them speaking of Morocco, but she could not hear where, i.e. in

which town of that country the sale itself would take place. It was a trace, at last! Ricardo decided to fly to Morocco and try to track her movements there in order to find out where she now was. He told his wife frankly that he had to rescue a friend in danger, and also requested his friend in the office to grant him a long leave for this purpose; subsequently, he left to Casablanca in Morocco. He did not know which town the auction had taken place in, of course, but he thought that it had to be a rather important auction, not one of low level, if a beautiful woman like Catherine was sold there.

He started therefore by going to the Spanish consulate to learn where the highest level of slave sales took place. Of course, open sale of slaves was now officially forbidden by law, but everybody knew that it was still taking place all over Morocco and in many other countries, especially in the Middle-East. He hoped obviously that Catherine was sold there and had remained in the area that he knew and not been taken to the far markets of the Middle-East where he had never been. At the consulate, they mentioned to him that one of the best places where people wishing to get a slave could get a good one (either strong and subdued men or beautiful and passionate women) was Meknès. He then rented a car and drove to Meknès. The road was good and the journey, had it not been for his anguished thoughts of Catherine's fate, which did not abandon Ricardo's mind at all, not even for a second, was therefore quiet and pleasant. It was however very difficult to find people involved in the slave auctions! Most of the persons he interrogated answered elusively, that they did not know that sales of slaves took place in the town; the others, those who knew and had even attended, sometimes, the auctions, did not want to tell him whether they were present the day Catherine was sold there and said nothing for fear that something bad could happen to them or to their family for having revealed secret facts to a foreigner. Conspiracy of silence vis-à-vis a foreigner and fear of being cruelly persecuted was very strong and kept people's mouths closed.

A further difficulty resided in the fact that Catherine had been sold under a fake name and nobody had ever heard of a black lady whose name was Catherine. He was desperate: to be so near to the core of the problem and not to be able to resolve it was really disheartening! At last, when only a very little hope of success still resided in his tired heart, a man to whom he showed Catherine's photographs,

taken by surprise, exclaimed sotto voce, as if recalling memories from far away times:

“But this young woman here is Amenna! ...”

and did not want to go on for fear of compromising himself. Ricardo however was happy because he knew now whom to search for: Amenna! So, this was then the ‘key’ name they had viciously put on her in order to make her tracking exceedingly difficult if not impossible! But he had found it out eventually! A slightly easier search could now start.

This essential discovery gave Ricardo a new vigour and refreshed his hopes that he would now be able to find her and rescue her. It was however a time consuming exercise and he was still far from identifying her present hideout. Eventually, he found a man who had been present when she was acquired by the Marrakech smith and he rushed to Marrakech. It was not too difficult to find the right smith among those working in that town. He simply made a tour of all of them until he found the right man. Although some time had elapsed this man remembered very well the acquisition he had made of Amenna at the auction on the Meknès slave market and had no difficulty revealing to Ricardo that he had resold her because of her poor performance in the jobs assigned to her by his wife. He told Ricardo happily how he had succeeded to get rid of her by passing her on to the groundnut trader. This trader was a big businessman who owned a large warehouse where innumerable groundnut bags were stocked. Ricardo met him feigning to be a Spanish importer interested in establishing an import-export business and, as a consequence, in the acquisition of a conspicuous quantity of groundnuts bags. His proposition obviously raised the man’s interest, who became very loquacious and expansive. After chatting amicably about various topics, Ricardo adumbrated the problem of manpower, saying:

“How expensive is manpower here in Morocco? In Spain nowadays salaries have reached unsustainable levels that hike up all costs steeply!”

The man, not noticing that Ricardo was drawing him into a trap, replied eagerly:

“Well, though they are still reasonable, they have increased a lot recently here in Morocco too!”

Ricardo went on pulling the threads of his trap:

“But you can still count on work performed by slaves, don’t you? And slaves are paid a mere bagatelle, isn’t it true?”

Not suspecting where Ricardo was taking his questioning, the man answered:

“The slave trade is officially prohibited nowadays. Therefore to get a good and strong slave has become a real problem and to buy a good one on the flourishing secret slave market it is necessary to spend a lot of money. Moreover, these slaves are very often sickly and the game is not worth the candle.”

Ricardo reiterated:

“What about women? Is it possible to buy a good and nice girl there?”

The man fell completely in Ricardo’s cunning trap and exclaimed:

“Let’s leave the women alone, don’t talk of them! Their beauty is totally scornful and tricky! Imagine that a couple of months ago I bought a young woman from a man I knew, but only superficially. She was very beautiful and I frankly hoped I could have a pleasant intercourse with her, as well as the performance of jobs in the house, but she was pregnant and practically useless even for domestic work. I had to resell her as soon as possible, in order to get rid of a totally unserviceable further mouth to feed.”

“If she was so useless, then you were very lucky to find someone willing to acquire her! Who could be so stupid to buy her?”

“Oh, it was an ingenuous carpet trader from Fès: frankly speaking, I still wonder what he could use her for, I happily laugh at his naïve credulity!”

Ricardo was happy: he had attained the desired target. He further questioned the man:

“A carpet trader, you said? I happen to be wishing to buy some carpets: can you give me his address or his name, so that I can go straight to him, instead of wandering around in search – which might be time consuming or even unsuccessful – of a reliable and honest one?”

The man, who had now entirely risen to the bait, told him the name of the carpet trader:

“His name is Abdel’aziz Haroun and his workshop is in the souk of Fès.”

Ricardo thanked the man cordially and said he would send him an order for the groundnuts deal from Spain as soon as he was back at

home.

His next destination was then Fès. He found Abdel'aziz Haroun's shop and entering into it went straight to the man who appeared as being the oldest and the most respectable among those who were present in the shop. Unwilling to lose too much time in useless verbal diplomatic expressions of cordiality, asked him brusquely:

"Are you Mister Abdel'aziz Haroun?"

The answer he received was:

"Yes. In which way can I serve you: what do you want from me? A nice old carpet?"

Ricardo went straight to the question that was burning in his heart:

"Mister Haroun, a couple of months ago you bought from a groundnut trader based in Marrakech a young black African woman by the name of Amenna. Do not try to deny it; I know for certain that you did it! This trader told it openly to me and is ready to witness in the Court that you have been his customer in this particular deal: better for you to confess everything to me rather than to the Police, to which I'm going to apply and denounce you, if you are reticent to reveal me all the details about such acquisition. Where is the lady? Is she still with you? She is my fiancée and I want to know everything about her whereabouts."

The man was too frightened by Ricardo's straight speech and truculent face to dare saying lies or inventing something plausible to his opponent's ears. As he was scared, he said only the truth, telling Ricardo how, finding Catherine not able to perform heavy work because of her status, he had decided to pass her to the Tuareg tribe about to leave Fès for some oasis in the desert.

Here came the most difficult and complicated part of Ricardo's strenuous task of rescuing Catherine: to find a group of Tuareg in the desert – because of the dimensions of the desert itself and also for the fact that Tuareg are nomadic populations continually moving from one site to another, regardless of established national borders, across this sandy immensity – was worse than looking for a needle in a haystack! Ricardo knew very well that he faced a very complicated and hard problem. Because of his work as chemist and mud specialist, he had lived for a couple of years in the desert, many years ago, and knew well how hard it is to trace somebody there and how full of dangers and natural pitfalls this vast inhospitable land is. Ricardo however did not lose heart and rented a Land Rover instead

of the saloon car he had formerly, then headed towards Ghardaïa that was the most northern of the oases in the Algerian territory. He hoped to catch Catherine there, it would have been a marvellous surprise for her to see her beloved Ricardo who had eventually come to rescue her, but his hopes were miserably wrecked: although he toured the entire oasis and waited hours for women watering at the wells, there was not even the shadow of Catherine.

He started questioning people, but nobody seemed to be aware of Catherine's presence among them. He had to reside some time in the oasis to wait for the return of the Tuareg tribe called Chaambas who had travelled far away, to Mali, in order to ask them whether they knew anything about Amenna. When the tribe returned, he went to meet the oldest man who seemed to be their head. He revered him asking him news, as it is the habit among Tuareg, of his wife, of his children, of his entire family, of his friends, of his tribe, of his hut and only after having completed the formal greetings ceremony asked him whether it was his tribe that had acquired a young black woman from a carpet trader based in Fès.

At first the man seemed uncertain and unable to remember, then after receiving some money from Ricardo and after seeing the photographs of Catherine that Ricardo showed him, he said that a long time ago (i.e. three months before) his tribe had taken possession of a young pregnant black slave who resembled the woman represented on the photos. But they had passed her over to another tribe, based in the Ouargla oasis, because she was too disobedient and independent.

Ricardo took to the road again and drove to Ouargla. Here also unfortunately, he was unable to find traces of Catherine, although she had been noticed, because of her beauty in spite of her belly that had become quite big now, by some men who told him to check in the next oasis, El-Goléa, since she had been taken there by a tribe who had obtained her from the Chaambas. Ricardo, after his car had been taken to a workshop for some repairs, which had become necessary, drove on to El-Goléa in order to pursue there his laborious search which at this point had become really desperate (some months had elapsed and a thick beard had grown up on his face, because he could not use his electric shaver in the desert and he did not want to use a normal razor for fear of wounding himself as normally happened to him when using one). However in El-

Goléa too he could not find Catherine and was only able to track her short stay in the oasis, as well as her transfer to another tribe living further south, in In-Salah. He had travelled through all the main oases of Algeria and could say that he now knew the territory quite well, but in In-Salah too he was compelled to experience his umpteenth failure to find Catherine: she was not there.

But where was she then, what sort of tremendous experience had she been submitted to, and in her particularly delicate status? How strong must she have been to survive this tragic drama! In In-Salah, he learnt – with a certain difficulty, but his courteous manners and, mainly, a large distribution of money opened quickly all doors to confidentialities – that she had been passed over from the Taïtoq tribe to the Tégéhé n’Efis and had therefore moved to Tamanrasset. Ricardo then drove to Tamanrasset. As this is the last and most southern town of Algeria, he hoped with all his heart to end there his frenetic, laborious chase after Catherine. Since Tamanrasset is not a typical desert oasis, but rather a real small town, located on the plain not far from the Hoggar mountains range, his search for Catherine’s presence and possible hideout was more difficult and lengthy than on the former occasions.

He availed himself of the opportunity of being there to do some tourism and visited Père Charles de Foucauld’s hermitage and the blockhouse in front of which the French eremite had been killed by a frightened Targui boy armed with a rifle, as well as the souk. Here he bought very pulpy and succulent fresh dates that were a real delight for a gluttonous man like him. He spent five days in Tamanrasset looking everywhere and interrogating people. He made a good and staunch friendship with the French residents – with whom he used to have most of his meals at lunchtime and in the evening. Only at the end of this unfruitful period he met an old Targui, who had returned to Tamanrasset after a trip to Djanet in the Tassili n’Ajjjer mountain range. This man, under Ricardo’s pressing interrogation, revealed that he had been present some time ago at the sale of a black girl by the name of Amenna to the chief of a Tuareg tribe called Kel Ajjer whose normal base, when they were not wandering about in the desert, was In Guezzam. Since there was no road between Tamanrasset and In Guezzam, but only a tricky track which was sometimes obscured, Ricardo had to wait until other travellers wishing to drive to In Guezzam arrived to the small

town, in order to proceed together in convoy. Luckily, one day later the occupants of other two cars presented themselves to the town authorities declaring their intention to travel to the Republic of Niger. Ricardo was immediately informed by them about the chance of joining these tourists for travelling more safely together on the dangerous misleading track. He joined them and in this way a convoy of three cars was formed and left Tamanrasset to live the inebriating experience of the desert crossing. On arrival at In Guezzam, Ricardo left the other travellers and went immediately to the Kel Ajjer camp where he asked to be admitted to meet their head, Ahmed El-Moktar.

Ahmed was a generous and mild-tempered man and was exceedingly happy that a European gentleman asked about him and wanted to see him. He courteously invited Ricardo into his tent and offered him the traditional Tuareg tea that Ricardo drank with great pleasure, as their tea is really delicious. When Ricardo asked him whether Amenna was still with him, he had no difficulty at all admitting that he had offered her as a personal gift to the powerful head of the Kel Aïrs, the renowned Moussa Äg-Mongoufou. Ricardo then asked him where could he find this Moussa Äg-Mongoufou, fearing that this mysterious Targui (singular form for the Tuareg population's collective name) could be wandering somewhere in the immense Sahara desert, giving him little chance of finding him. He therefore asked Ahmed El-Moktar:

“I have been looking for Amenna – who is my fiancée and, obviously, a free woman, a lady, both in her and in my country, not a slave – for several months now and every time I thought that I was about to attain my target, I had a bad surprise to find that she had been sold or ceded to other groups or tribes having their base in another locality; do you think that the chief Moussa Äg-Mongoufou still has this woman with him? Where can I find him?”

He had the agreeable surprise of hearing his interlocutor saying that Moussa Äg-Mongoufou was the head of a rather residential Tuareg tribe living in the village of Iférouane, just in the middle of the Air mountain range in the Republic of Niger. Ahmed El-Moktar added:

“I cannot know, of course, if he still has the young woman you are looking for with him, but since Moussa Äg-Mongoufou is a loyal man and usually cherishes the gifts he receives from friends, I

presume he has not given her away to somebody else. She is a very beautiful woman, in spite of her current condition and I am sure he must like and desire her. He is a lady-killer indeed, you know. Well, from what I know of him, he must still have her with him.”

Ricardo thanked Ahmed El-Moktar very cordially for his kind and useful information and wanted to take leave from him assuring him he would then go to Iférouane, but Ahmed surprised him saying:

“Listen, Sir, I like you and I have been fascinated by the story that you told me about your long search for this black African woman. You must be really very affectionate to her to undergo all the disappointing mishaps that you experienced in the frantic search for her! I am full of admiration for a man so courageous to risk all these vicissitudes for a woman’s love, especially when the two subjects of the romance are a white European man and a black African woman! The 800 km track between Assamakká, opposite In Guezzam on the other side of the border, and Arlit, west of Iférouane, are still difficult and mischievous and you risk losing the track. So, if you like, I can accompany you to Iférouane myself. The only condition that I put forward is that you agree to go there riding a dromedary. Don’t ask me to get in one of your infernal cars. I would in fact miss my usual markers in the desert – which I can see from afar while sitting high on a dromedary back but not from the low seat in the car – and I too would risk getting lost!”

Ricardo knew Iférouane and how to reach it from Arlit: he had in fact been there when, many years ago, he had worked as chemist for Cominak – the company meant to exploit the other uranium ore deposit of the province, Akokan, 10 km west of Arlit – with the task of setting up the laboratory to test both the initial ore content and the ammonium uranate produced in the ore treatment plant to verify its exact composition and the grade of the issued concentrate and so determine the plant efficiency. But he didn’t know the track between Assamakká and Arlit. Moreover, he was too happy to have this kind and jovial man as guide for the rest of his long and fatiguing journey to refuse, and so accepted willingly to leave the car in In Guezzam and pursue his travel riding a dromedary. Since being on the boat, from long before, and taking into account all the vicissitudes and the ups and downs that had already happened to him, this new experience would be a further exalting adventure! Ahmed carefully

chose a good and mild-tempered dromedary for the novice rider Ricardo (dromedaries are in fact moody and not totally governable animals and often try to bite the camel-rider) and, having loaded the provisions necessary for the long journey ahead on their mounts' back, they left In Guezzam.

A magnificent unforeseen adventure then had its start: crossing part of the desert riding a dromedary! For the first time since the start of his frantic search for Catherine he felt happy, because he realised he was living something extraordinary and absolutely unusual for a European. Used however to the clattering normally produced by the hooves of horses, Ricardo was surprised by the quietness of the dromedary's solemn gait. He did not dare disturb the three-dimensional silence of the nature all around them, and enveloping their march, and did not exchange a word with Ahmed El-Moktar during the whole ride. As a matter of fact Ahmed usually remained silent during the daily journey and only in the evening, at the camp fire, opened himself to jokes and tales and became loquacious and friendly. He found in Ricardo an attentive and interested listener and was therefore particularly happy to confess to him his most intimate hopes and desires, as well as to tell him the innumerable adventures he had experienced.

Obviously, as a man, for a Targui too the most cherished topic in a conversation with another man was to talk about women and Ahmed openly told Ricardo how many women he had conquered and violated, and what techniques he normally adopted to attract a woman's attention to him. He showed himself to be an affable and jovial man, full of humour, and Ricardo decidedly liked him. Ricardo was totally absorbed by Ahmed's tales and was fascinated by the sort of life that could be lived by a clever and wise man in the desert.

Ahmed reserved another surprise for Ricardo: unwilling to follow the normal track used as well by cars heading southwards to reach Agadez, he decided to cover a totally different itinerary: from In Guezzam he pointed straight eastwards to the Mount Greboun – at the northern extremity of the Aïr range –, from where he then drove his dromedary southwards straight to Iférouane, avoiding totally the mining town of Arlit. It was a fantastic journey among the broken peaks of the Aïr mountain range, which from afar appear as solid cliffs of basaltic rock, but from near have more the aspect of enormous heaps of big blocks and boulders, since the rock is all

fragmented from the weathering action. Following this route, without being disturbed by passing cars as would be the case on the normal track, Ricardo and Ahmed arrived to Iférouane in few days. But in the evening before their arrival, when they were sitting at the camp fire, they heard the subdued grumbling of a hunting cheetah not far from them and they could even see the yellowish eyes of this elegant predator sparkling in the darkness of the incumbent night. They did not feel scared for themselves, but they were very alarmed for the safety of their lonely, defenceless mounts.

“Let us hope that he doesn’t attack our dromedaries” said Ahmed: “Because tied up as they are they could not escape and they would be bound to die!”

How wonderful the night was in the desert! A really spectacular wonder and the most phantasmagorical natural show! The immense vault of heaven appeared to be at immediate hand’s reach: the moon in fact appeared to be so near to the earth that it was possible to distinguish and observe the various volcanoes on its surface with the naked eye. The stars were a myriad of luminous flickering lights filling all the visible sky completely, from the far Eastern horizon delimited by the Air mountain range to the distant Western one on the vast flat desert plain. The Milky Way was so visible that, instead of the usual lacteous nebula, as it can normally be seen from Europe, it appeared as a real path strewn with myriads of stars, which were so distinguishable from each other as to be more or less easily counted one by one!

The following morning however they had the bad surprise to find one of the two meharis dead and half devoured. It must have been killed by the cheetah! Luckily it was Ricardo’s mount, not Ahmed’s one, because he would have suffered a lot to lose his own habitual dromedary, the loyal partner in so many excursions in the desert, to which he was particularly attached and affectionate. Luckily only a few more miles divided them from the target of their journey: more or less just a one day dromedary walk. They took it in turn to sit on the dromedary’s back, while the other walked on foot at its side.

When they arrived in the village, at nightfall, Ricardo said to Ahmed:

“Before going to meet Moussa Äg-Mongoufou, let me see whether I can meet my beloved Amenna, first: I want to see her alone, not in the presence of Moussa and his relatives, in order to give her a

personal intimate surprise; after that I can meet all these other people.”

He went to the water-well and posted himself there in attendance. He did not have to wait long; here she was advancing steadily, but slowly on the path. How she had changed! Her splendid slender silhouette had alas totally vanished, giving place to a rather fattish woman arduously carrying her big swollen belly in front of her. From time to time she put her hand under it, as though she wanted, with this gesture, to tenderly sustain its weight and reduce her burden.

She was dressed in the typical Tuareg style: a dark long skirt wrapped around her waist and a white open-sided shirt (which let her round breasts, swollen because of her pregnancy, wildly and erotically peep out from the opening) with embroidered red geometric patterns. She also had typical henna drawings on her face and on the back of her hands. Though fatigue and tiredness transpired from her overall figure and her attitude, her beautiful black eyes still had the same brilliant vivacity and glowing fierceness and her face, though become more round because of her condition, retained its original attractiveness. Ricardo felt the old passion for her pervading his entire body and the ceaseless desire for her becoming prickly and intense. He surely still loved her with all his heart and felt he wanted her very much.

He stepped forward and asked her gently:

“Good evening, Amenna. Would you like me to help you draw water from the well?”

He was still wearing the tagoulmoust on his head which left only his eyes uncovered. She therefore could not recognize him, but even when he removed the veil from his face to talk to her freely, she still did not recognize him: she had never seen him with such a thick and unkempt beard and, moreover, he had used her fake name when addressing her, the one imposed on her by the slave traders and with which she was known there, not with her own name that he knew so well. But the sound of his voice gave her a jolt: it suddenly evoked old memories buried in her mind and made her give a start; with a faint voice, she exclaimed hurriedly in a lively and moved way:

“It is not possible! ...It is not possible! ... My ultra-intense desire for him is misleading me and takes me astray, driving me to imagine unrealistic things and ghostly apparitions!”

Then with a very thin voice she asked him shyly, nearly not daring to put forward the question clearly in case she received an extremely disappointing answer:

“Is that really you, ... Ricardo?”

Happy for the fact that she – despite the time elapsed and his unrecognizable appearance – had anyhow recognized his voice, and no longer able to conceal himself, Ricardo promptly answered:

“Yes, Cathy, my beloved Sweet Sylph. It is really me, Ricardo.”

Catherine let the gourd she had brought to the well fall onto the ground abruptly and flung herself crying aloud into his arms while weeping abundantly for the immense happiness she was experiencing at that very moment:

“Oh, Ricardo, oh... *my* Ricardo! ... You are here at last, *my saviour* and my *real* sole, splendid love!” After a pause to stop her difficult excited breathing and aimed at starting to breath normally again, she added: “You can’t imagine how much I prayed that *you* would come to rescue me! I was so absolutely sure that *only you* could do it that I hoped with all my heart that you could be informed by Pedro’s relatives of what had happened to me!” then she caressed her belly and said: “Your baby here has grown up a lot in the meantime and now is nearly ready to come out to start its external life in our crazy and feverish world. Look how violently it kicks, now: it must be absolutely enraptured to have heard your voice, its father’s voice!”

Although kept far from each other by Catherine’s big belly, they caressed tenderly and kissed one another passionately. Their limbs could not join, but their spirits, absolutely united, were playing the most romantic tunes in perfect unison.

They still loved each other so intensely, the old flame of their mutual passion had never extinguished. They kept each other as tight as possible, with one’s eyes fixed in the other’s, searching eagerly for love and affection on the other’s face. Catherine was so happy to be in Ricardo’s protective arms that she did not care at all being seen in such an intimate posture ‘with a foreigner’ by the other villagers of Iférouane coming to water at the well. Catherine said:

“My beloved Ricardo, I said to you once that you were my hero, do you remember? Now I must repeat it aloud: you are an exceptional man and I am very proud to have had such wonderful man as my exceedingly beloved lover in the past and as my real bosom friend at present. I never doubted that, should you be aware

of my misadventure, you would succeed in rescuing me: but, tell me, how could you track me up to this secluded desert village in such a relatively short time?"

Ricardo told Catherine all the adventures he had lived and all the hard difficulties he had experienced while trying to track her, raising, in so doing, her most intensely dedicated admiration. When he came to talk about Ahmed El-Moktar, he said to her:

"You know, my Sylph, Ahmed is an exceedingly kind person and a very pleasant travel-companion: when I told him that you are my fiancée who had been kidnapped, he was very sorry for what had happened to you and felt so guilty at offering you as a gift to Moussa Äg-Mongoufou that, to be pardoned, he wanted to accompany me to this far place. Now, you will meet him!"

Then Ricardo added:

"Now I have to go and talk to Moussa: I hope he will be reasonable and understand the unusual situation!"

After helping Catherine to draw water from the well, he moved with her towards Moussa's hut; on the way to it, they met Ahmed El-Moktar who had quietly been waiting for Ricardo unwilling to disturb him while he let himself be recognised by Catherine; when Ahmed saw Catherine, he knelt in front of her and bowing his head deeply in a sign of courteous homage, he said to her:

"Lovely Amenna, I bought you as a slave because you were introduced as such to me and as a slave I thought I had the right to make a gift of you to my old friend Moussa (we are good friends since youth); I did not know at all that you were on the contrary a free woman who had been kidnapped and, moreover, the fiancée of this courageous gentleman who underwent so many vicissitudes to rescue you. I am very sorry for what happened to you and ask your clemency on me and your pardon for how I treated you. Please, forgive me!"

Catherine was too happy to be with her beloved Ricardo again to feel any resentment against this man who on the other hand had fairly treated her and was only guilty of having considered her as a slave, i.e. as an object of relatively no importance (her beauty apart), who could be given as gift to somebody else, mindless of her will and, of course, without requiring her advice.

She therefore put her hand on Ahmed's head and said cheerfully:

"Ahmed, you are a kind and generous man and, believe me, for

me, you are my friend!”

The chief of the Kel Ajjer tribe felt very happy at her kind expression and thought that she was certainly a woman of higher rank fully deserving the great love that Ricardo (this adventurous European man who had so vividly shown how courageous he was to come over here and rescue her!) so openly demonstrated for her.

Ahmed, who was one of Moussa’s best friends, entered into Moussa’s hut first and introduced Ricardo to him. Moussa’s three wives were present in the hut with him. Ricardo, keen to get on the right side of the Kel Aïrs’ chief and his relatives, saluted them with the particular greeting formula used by the Tuareg, raising his arm with open palm:

“Oeik!” then added: “Mattahallaká (Good evening)!”

Moussa looked amused and gratified at this foreigner capable of using greeting expressions in Tamacheq – his own Tuareg language – and thought he must be a man of great understanding and education. A real guest of honour. He therefore answered willingly:

“Mattahallaká!”

Ricardo shook hands with Moussa taking care to do it in the very particular way practiced among Tuareg, which consists in stroking the palm of the interlocutor’s hand to the end with his own hand and then with his fingers, while slowly withdrawing the hand after the shaking action is terminated; then the hand has to be left with a sort of jerk, half-crooking the fingers immediately after leaving the other’s hand. Moussa was literally enraptured that this foreigner knew so many things about Tuareg customs and thought he had to treat him with the typical Tuareg form of welcome for a distinguished guest. He would offer him his own wife. Ricardo in the meantime had started the long sequence of the ritual questions normally put among Tuareg to the host on the occasion of a courtesy visit; although all three were present and apparently in good health, he therefore asked news of his wives, then of their house (the straw and wood hut where they all were in that precise moment), then of his children, afterwards of the other relatives and then terminated by asking news of his dromedaries too and other animals belonging to him. Only after having completed all these compulsory formalities, which elicited the evident open approval of the three wives sitting in one corner on a mat who nodded their heads at each term mentioned by Ricardo, he launched himself into pleading his

and Catherine's cause.

At that moment, however, Moussa pleased his guest by offering him tea. Ricardo was happy to be offered tea because he found that very sweet Tuareg tea was a real delight. Obviously, to fully honour his host, he had to perform the entire ceremony and drank all the seven small glasses of tea put in front of him (normally, only the first glasses are very sweet, as a big piece of sugar is put in the teapot, then the sweetness little by little decreases for the following ones because they add water to the pot, but not more sugar).

Ricardo addressed his speech to Moussa with a certain dose of rhetorical emphasis, as required by the circumstances and by Tuareg customs:

“Moussa Äg-Mongoufou, great chief of the Kel Aïrs, your renown has overcome the boundaries of your village and has spread out everywhere. All people know that you are a right and generous man whose sense of justice is firm and sound, so that they all consider you an absolutely honourable man. Now I come to pay you my due deepest respect and ask you to accord me an act of justice, which would consist in giving freedom to this young black woman, Amenna. She is in fact not a slave, as you erroneously thought, having been so told by this man present here, Ahmed El-Moktar, who in turn was brought to this error by slave trader middlemen. She is a free woman, a real master-lady duly honoured in other countries, mine and hers, who was kidnapped from her house in Spain by some jackal bandits. Even this name, Amenna, is not her real name, but was given to her by her kidnapers in order to make it more difficult for me or any other rescuer to track and follow her. Her correct name is in fact Catherine and, moreover, she is my fiancée. Also the baby she is at present carrying in her womb and nearing delivery is the product of my own semen deposited in the depth of her body before her abduction from home: it is therefore my own child! That's why, in spite of all the difficulties and painful reverses following my path, I came to this far away place to rescue her. Please, chief, heed my plea: set her free and give her back to me!”

Moussa was neither a stupid nor an egocentric man; he understood immediately that what the foreign European was saying was nothing else than the truth and felt in his heart a sincere, unspeakable admiration for a man capable of running so many

adversities just to find out where his promised woman had been taken and try to rescue her. He was however surprised to learn that a European man could be so courageous and so tenacious in carrying out such a temerarious, difficult and fatiguing enterprise only because pushed by the love he felt for a *black* woman. He must have loved her really very much to do all this! Moussa revealed himself as a very reasonable, sensible and pragmatic man: if Ricardo had undergone all these tremendous difficulties just to rescue Amenna – what did he call her? ... Catherine, is that her correct name? – then he had the right, moreover: the *full right*, to take her with him, regardless of all Moussa's desires and plans he had conceived for her. He therefore condescended willingly that Ricardo take Catherine with him, saying cheerfully:

“OK, foreigner: you fought to maintain your rights and you deserve entirely to be joined to your woman again; Amenna, I mean ... Catherine – is that what you call her? – is yours and you can take her back to your homeland. I require the Heaven's blessing on you and on your fiancée, as well as the protection of the Almighty Allah on you both and on your offspring (which is about to arrive in more or less one month's time). Marry her soon, don't let her flee away, she is so beautiful! But you cannot lie with her in her present condition; you will have to wait another couple of months before making love to her. So, please, honour me and my house by playing with my wife. Please, accept my humble offer!”

To follow the hospitality rules exactly, Moussa ought to have offered Ricardo his first wife, Hamla, the most important one in the hierarchical order of the family, but Moussa was a man of the world, a broad-minded person and he understood easily that Ricardo would not like to make love to an old woman. He therefore offered him his third wife, who was a rather young woman, just two years older than Catherine, whom he had married only one year ago. In truth, he did that half-heartedly, because she was his favourite, whom he wanted only for himself and he felt clearly a hint of jealousy in respect of another man now going to enjoy her. But this clearly showed, further enhancing it, all his natural courtesy, as well as his respect for Tuareg hospitality rules. Her name was Aysha. She accepted the order of her husband willingly (in her heart she was even very happy to have the totally unexpected chance to make love to one of these bespoken fabulous Europeans, but she did not let this secret feeling

of hers surface), humbly prostrating before Ricardo.

Ricardo understood he could not refuse Moussa's welcome gift, not least because Ahmed El-Moktar told him that a refusal would give Moussa great offence, which was absolutely not the thing to do, especially now after Moussa had demonstrated such generous goodwill towards him by freeing Catherine. The offence, should he refuse his gift, would be so unbearable as to push Moussa to take the drastic decision to fatally wash it in blood! And in that far apart village, should Moussa kill him, who would care about his death? Certainly not the other villagers who were all his devoted followers and subjects. Nobody else knew about his presence in Iférouane: the last messages he could send home had been from Tamanrasset, from where he had assured them that he was well and tracking Catherine southwards but nothing more. He had therefore to comply with the obligation and fulfil the task assigned to him. A task however certainly not disagreeable to perform, since Aysha was a very pretty and attractive woman. He therefore took her and Catherine – who had been returned to him, so he had to take her with him too – to the hut that had been put at his disposal.

When Aysha undressed to wash and then go to bed – if the simple pallet on which they were going to sleep could be defined as a bed – with him (though she was not used to doing it, she took the decision to undress completely and to lie totally naked in his arms), he could entirely appreciate the level of the gift he had received from Moussa. Aysha was absolutely splendid: apart from a beautiful face with intense big green eyes, she had a marvellous body, slender, well shaped, with wonderful round plump pointy breasts and nicely shaped long thighs, a slightly convex belly, a well proportioned buttock with long behind muscles, an attractive pubis covered with a tuft of long thin silky black hair. Ricardo was delighted to see all this God's grace openly shown to him.

He thought that he had been kissed by luck. To make love to this delightful creature was very exciting and tremendously satisfying: she had never been licked on her body and when Ricardo did lick and suck her with great ardour, she nearly swooned for the intense pleasure she was experiencing. She came nearly instantly with a loud cry of voluptuousness and bliss. She had never had an orgasm before because Moussa, as all African men, cared only for his own pleasure and was not concerned at all for hers. Even more, he

openly disagreed that a woman could get an orgasm; therefore his wives and his concubines were inexorably condemned never to experience the pleasure of having it. The orgasm she attained by making love to Ricardo was therefore welcomed by her with particular gratitude and would remain forever among her most cherished memories. She felt she loved with all her heart this foreigner who had engendered in her so much totally unexpected and unsuspected pleasure.

Ricardo then possessed her penetrating her in depth with great voluptuousness and desire, making her come again and coming at last himself with a wild cry that sounded rather like a low frequency howling, though this was contrary to his normal behaviour. He normally emitted just a sigh of pleasure. Catherine who was lying on the other side of the hut, but very near to them as the hut was rather small, had obviously witnessed the entire scene. She felt a hint of jealousy filling her bones at seeing her man, the man she loved with all her heart, her age-old adored lover, making love to another woman: she felt desire for him growing up imperiously and would have liked so much to feel his weight upon her, to feel him inside her own body!

But in spite of her desire, she knew very well she could not even think of displacing this woman from her place under Ricardo in order to take her place in his arms; as a matter of fact, when she was highly desperate during her captivity, she had made a vow to God not to think of Ricardo with desire for his body any more and not to consider him as a sexual target for her, as a potential lover. This was indeed the greatest sacrifice she could offer to the Almighty in order to move Him to pity for her present miserable condition at that moment and require His help to get her freedom again. She was thus compelled now to look at Ricardo only as her very best friend, no longer as the object of her sexual desire!

The following day Moussa, very proud that Ricardo had given full satisfaction to his wife, organized a small feast – a ‘feria’, as Spaniards would define it – in his honour among the Iférouane villagers.

They gathered at the centre of the village and while women emitted their piercing thrills and ululations, beating drums, men standing upright with their chest proudly thrown out jumped, with closed parallel legs and feet, as high as possible. This was also a way

for young men to put themselves in good evidence before women who normally admired and chose the most acrobatic jumpers. Aysha was among the singing women.

Ricardo and Catherine looked at the jumping men and at the singing women with great interest and admiration and cheerfully clapped their hands at them in accordance with the rhythm of the tune. After a while however Catherine joined Aysha in the group of singing women: after all the months that she had spent with them, among them, as a slave but also as a fully accepted woman of the tribe (as Tuareg had done ever since the time they raided the land of the blacks abducting black beauties to their tents in the desert), she had learnt to behave as a Targuia woman. After the feast was over, Ricardo had to take a decision:... now Catherine was rescued and was back with him again, but looking critically at the situation, Ricardo realised that he could not move home freely with her. In her condition, an advanced eight month of pregnancy, she was absolutely not transportable, she could not manage the four hours long journey by jeep or Land Rover on the difficult mountainous track from Iférouane to Arlit. And afterwards, once there, what could they do if Air Niger, the air company, as it was most probable they would do, refused to take her on board?

No, now the best thing to do was to let Catherine stay as quietly as possible in Iférouane until the delivery of her child eventually took place, and take her and the child safely to Spain later, after the birth of her first baby had happily occurred.

But by that time Ricardo had already spent five months away, far from home and from his office and now that his frantic search was terminated with the happy finding of Catherine, he felt the need to go back to his normal occupations. At least for a while. He therefore said to Catherine:

“Cathy, my Sylph, I have to leave you, because I have been far from home now for five months – this is how long my search for you has lasted! – and I have to go back to the office too in order not to anger my boss who has so generously allowed me a long leave to give me the time necessary for rescuing you. Let me go back now for a short while and take my place in my house and at the office again. I promise I’ll come back in one month, in time for the delivery of your – and my – child. I leave you in good hands: I am sure in fact that Moussa Äg-Mongoufou will do all his best to

protect and help you now that he knows that you are my fiancée (I apologize for this small lie I had to tell people in order to better move their sensibility and raise their interest towards my ardent wish to find and rescue you). He will certainly not let you lack anything you may need!

Also Aysha, I am absolutely sure of it – in spite of a small hint of jealousy that she might harbour in her heart, knowing that you are the lucky woman destined to marry me (would to God it really was like that, instead of your being promised to Pedro!) – since she is an honest, generous and faithful woman, as well as the entire Kel Air tribe will be utterly happy to help you! By the way, I am convinced that Aysha would like to become your friend, so, please, be kind and gentle with her as you usually are with the people you like!”

Three days later, someone was to leave Iférouane heading to Agadez with a Land Rover. Ricardo asked for a lift that was accorded to him.

He therefore said goodbye warmly to everybody, taking leave from Moussa and his family (particularly from Aysha, obviously, whilst Ahmed El-Moktar had already left to go back to In Guezzam riding his dromedary) and tenderly hugged Catherine tight to his chest saying:

“Be calm and take good care of yourself, darling. Remember that you are now in a very particular and delicate status and you must ensure a healthy termination to your pregnancy: so, please, try not to overdo it. I’ll soon be back, you will see, it is a promise! Good-bye, dear Cathy, my delightful sweetheart!”

Although he leant out of the car window to wave his hand with his arm fully stretched outwards, he soon disappeared in a cloud of dust raised on the sandy track by the wheels of the Land Rover.

On the way home, Ricardo stopped at Spanish Embassies in both Algeria and Morocco in order to inform the relevant Ambassador that he had eventually found Catherine and freed her, as well as to try to entrust Catherine to them. He would have liked one of the two Embassies to take care of accompanying her home: he did not want to appear as the man who had rescued her; as a matter of fact, what was his explanation to Pedro going to be for his so enterprising and fatiguing intervention? But in both Embassies he got a gentle but firm refusal: the Ambassador did not want any of his

subordinates to carry out this specific important task. They said to him:

“You have performed alone the difficult task of rescuing her: now it is your job also to take her home! We cannot substitute you in this task: how could we justify our intervention? Although it is outrageous, we admit it frankly, that we did not carry out a search for her, we can’t now boast of having freed her: it would be an enormous lie that we can’t officially and bureaucratically afford to sustain! All we can do for her, if it is necessary, is to deliver her a safe-conduct for the expatriation, since we suppose she is at present without a passport.”

Ricardo had therefore to swallow the bitter pill and to make the best of a bad job, by finding out a way of presenting himself in an acceptable manner before Pedro and his family.

As soon as he arrived in Valladolid he phoned María Ana, Pedro’s sister, who could not believe her ears at hearing him again after so many months spent in absolute silence (she had even thought that he had regretfully succumbed during his perilous mission) and was exceedingly eager to receive news of both him and Catherine. He said to her:

“María Ana, be tranquil; at last, I found her! She is free now. But I had to leave her in Iférouane, where I found her and rescued her from slavery, because she is now nearly eight months pregnant. I would have been happy, of course, to bring her home immediately, but it would be arduous and even dangerous for her baby to transport her in these conditions; so I was forced to give up this desire. The roads in the desert are not tarred, you see, but just simple uneven incoherent tracks, where the jeeps or Land Rovers shake continuously, jerking people from one side of the seat to the other. It would have been very detrimental for the baby’s safety. But Catherine is very well and in good hands, believe me! The Kel Aïrs will take great care of her.”

María Ana had started loving Catherine and was consequently very happy to hear that Ricardo had had the luck to track and finally find her. She knew everything about him and Catherine, since Catherine herself had revealed to her the exact nature of the bonds of love and affection that tied them to one another. She therefore knew very well that Ricardo had been in the past Catherine’s lover. But even though she was Pedro’s sister, closely related to the man now

wishing to marry Catherine, she had thanked Heaven for this love relationship existing between Ricardo and Catherine, if this implied his strenuous dedication to the cause of rescuing her.

And he had succeeded: what could have been impossible for other people, proved to be realizable for him just by virtue of this solid tie existing between them! Only the voice of love could be so strong and imperious to present him with a victorious end to his hard search!

When he narrated her all the vicissitudes he had experienced before being able to track Catherine and locate her final forced hideout, María Ana was horrified and therefore thanked him with words that came from the deepest of her heart:

“Ricardo, you are a really fantastic man and I can now understand why Catherine loved you so much, with such great intensity and dedication: you certainly deserve her love entirely!” then she added thoughtfully: “Now I must inform Pedro that Catherine has been found and that she is well, but she is still in the Sahara desert because her condition hinders her voyage back home. ... How can I speak of you to him? I have never revealed your existence to him ...”

Ricardo interrupted her, saying eagerly:

“Tell him that when Catherine disappeared you called her aunt on the phone to inquire whether by chance Catherine was there with her (just to know whether she had voluntarily left your house and the kidnapping was only a sham devised to throw smoke in your eyes). At her denial you were of course compelled to let her know that Catherine was no longer in your house. Catherine’s aunt in turn advised me of her dear niece’s disappearance – just because I am an old friend of hers – and she requested my help to track Catherine: that’s why I have been involved in the whole affair. But Catherine’s aunt took two months to get hold of me on the phone and this is why I started my investigation so late. I do hope he will believe all this and his curiosity about my intervention be satisfied with this story!” then he added thoughtfully: “Remember however that Pedro must believe that Catherine’s pregnancy is only nearing the seventh month, so that the child she is carrying can without doubt be his own child!”

María Ana found Ricardo’s suggestion very acceptable and retorted happily:

“OK, this is the right story to tell him, thank you, Ricardo. He will

believe it and accept it as good, for sure!”

Ricardo then informed María Ana about his intention to go back to Iférouane one month later in order to be present at the delivery of Catherine’s child and assist her in that important, delicate moment.

When Pedro came back home that evening and learnt from his sister that Catherine had been found and was alive and safe in the middle of the Sahara desert in the Republic of Niger, he felt on his moon nine. He happily asked his sister:

“Who found her? Which of the Spanish Embassies in North-Africa have we to thank for their strenuous work and this magnificent gift: the one in Morocco, or in Algeria, or in Niger?”

“None of them, Pedro, nobody moved from these Embassies to rescue Catherine. The person who tracked and found her is another Spaniard that Catherine’s aunt applied to, being a good friend of hers, Mr. Ricardo de Cortes y Montero. She requested his help to identify the various moves of Catherine’s kidnappers and track her. He started from the criminal milieu here in Spain and discovered she had been sold as slave in Morocco, then tracked her all through Morocco and Algeria, and eventually found her – after a four month search – in a sedentary Tuareg village, Iférouane, in the middle of the Sahara desert, in the Republic of Niger. He was compelled to leave her there, for the moment, as she may not travel because of her advanced pregnancy (she has nearly attained the seventh month of it) and he had to come back to Spain for a while both to be a little with his family and for office engagements which he was forced to set aside during his pursuit of Catherine’s kidnappers. She is in good hands, he said, but he has decided to return to Iférouane next month in order to assist her in her child’s delivery process.”

On hearing about Ricardo’s adventures to rescue Catherine, Pedro was full of admiration for this courageous man and his magnificent job and was pervaded by a frenzy and urgency to see Catherine again soon. He exclaimed eagerly:

“I want to thank this gentleman and tell him all my personal gratitude for what he did, with such dedication, to track and find *my* Catherine right in the heart of nowhere. Furthermore, I want to go with him to Iférouane when he travels back to Niger.”

However, when Pedro phoned Ricardo and, after having thanked him with all his heart for the splendid work performed, expressed

his intention to go with him to Iférouane to assist Catherine in the delivery of the baby he thought to be his own child, Ricardo wanted to tell him frankly:

“Mister Gutierrez, ...”

He was quickly interrupted:

“Call me Pedro, please!”

“OK, ... Pedro, then, I have to tell you in all frankness that I had to tell the chief Moussa Äg-Mongoufou – who detained Catherine as a slave gently offered to him as gift by another chief of a Tuareg tribe, Ahmed El-Moktar – a big lie in order to convince him to release Catherine to me: I told him that she was *my* fiancée and that the child she carries in her womb was *my own* child! Being a fundamentally honest and wise man, when faced with a dilemma of that magnitude, of whether or not to give back a woman to the man she was promised to and who is the father of her child – and who could therefore claim due rights on her – he chose the first alternative. Otherwise, my intervention would have appeared totally inconsistent and inappropriate to his eyes and he could simply have refused to renounce his so-called rights in her! If they now see that another man, apart from me who they already know as her fiancé, is in tender confidence with her, they may think that she is the object of a bargain between me and you and be scandalized. Chief Äg-Mongoufou might revise his cordial and generous attitude and decide to refuse to let us have Catherine. Imagine how disappointed this decision might make Catherine, who now knows that she had been rescued by me and is about to return safely home with her new-born baby! She would certainly hate me, as well as you too for causing this trouble after she thought she was at last free. So, it is better that you don't come to Iférouane and instead wait patiently here till I can come back with her, as soon as she and the baby may travel.

Unless, ... let me see whether there is an alternative, ... oh yes, unless you agree to appear as the assistant of a doctor that I'm going to take with me to check her health and eventually, if necessary, assist her during the delivery. But remember, in this case you must avoid any acts of tenderness and affection towards Catherine, at least in their presence, and moreover you must accept that, as she is *my* fiancée in everybody's eyes, *not yours*, she has to spend the night in my hut, not in yours. Only if you accept these conditions and

promise that you will stick closely to my recommendations, can I take you there with me.”

“OK, Ricardo, I appreciate very much not only what you have done up to now, but also your very wise behaviour; you were in fact very clever to tell the chief of that Tuareg tribe the lie about being Catherine’s fiancé in order to obtain her freedom more easily! And I assure you that I do not want to spoil now your undeniably fantastic work just for the desire I feel of having Catherine back in my arms again soon. Since your departure to Niger is not immediate, let me have the time to think a bit about your proposition. I will let you know my decision in time. In any case, in the meantime, I will request the Embassy of the Republic of Niger to grant me a visa for the entry in that country.”

“All right, Pedro, you have all the time you want. I wish however to remind you that I will travel back to Iférouane in a month.”

“OK, Ricardo. Good-bye for now.”

“Good-bye, Pedro.”

Twenty days later, Pedro phoned Ricardo and said:

“Ricardo, I have decided to come to Iférouane with you; I long to see Catherine again, I can’t wait any longer. I know that she may not travel before another couple of months and this would be too long a wait: I can’t stand it! So, please, let me come with you.”

“OK, but are you ready to play the role I spoke about to you?”

“Yes, I am ready to play the role of the doctor’s assistant, as you said; I shall try to behave as professionally as possible in this guise, in order not to spoil the nice invention that you set up to convince the old chief of Tuareg to free Catherine and to hand her over to you. I will therefore avoid open acts of tenderness with her, I promise!”

“All right, then. Prepare yourself for leaving in ten days. I suggest you bring only a light luggage, a bag, with you and bring summer clothes, suitable for the desert. Bring also one dress for Catherine out of the garments which she left in your house. At present, Catherine is dressed in the Tuareg fashion and she doesn’t need anything, but she may wish to change her dress before re-entering the western civilisation.”

Ricardo then asked a friend of his, a gynaecologist, to accompany him to Niger to verify the status of Catherine’s health and assist her during the delivery of her child.

As agreed, they left Spain ten days later, flying first to Niamey (the capital of the Republic of Niger) with Iberia and then from there to Arlit with Air Niger (which still covered the route with the old Dakota – or DC3 – airplanes). From Arlit, they continued their travel with a Land Rover on the track across the Talak plain and among the hills of the Air range up to the large enclosed plain where Iférouane lay.

When they arrived in Iférouane, the news of Ricardo's return spread out immediately throughout the entire village, as its inhabitants had chivalrously learnt to like him. They mainly admired his courage and his loyalty. Catherine ran as fast as she could (though with a rather tottering and comical bearing because of the big and heavy belly she had to carry) towards Ricardo to embrace him tenderly, but when she saw Pedro she stopped uncertain and incredulous, rather astounded and also a bit frightened: how could it be possible, Pedro and Ricardo together? What had happened during Ricardo's stay in Spain? How did the two of them come to be acquainted and decide to come to meet her together? And who was the third man accompanying them?

Ricardo hastened to take her out of her embarrassment by officially 'introducing' the two men to her:

"Cathy, this gentleman here is a friend of mine, doctor Gustavo Alvarez, a gynaecologist, who came to ascertain your condition and assist you during the future delivery of your child, and the other gentleman is his former assistant, doctor Pedro Gutierrez. He is now a specialist in paediatric surgery, so I brought him here in case your child might need an immediate intervention. Since no echography is possible here, we can't have any idea of how the foetus is. I am very worried about your pregnancy, which is bound to finish in a short time, so I prefer to take due precautions."

The two men said condescendingly:

"Very pleased to meet you, Miss Catherine!"

Pedro, of course, desired to add: "I am so happy to see you again, my lovely fiancée!" but refrained from expressing such a tender thought and only said: "I hope that your pregnancy was not affected by the difficulties you met. From what Mr. de Cortes told me, you have undergone terrible adventures and awful experiences, haven't you, *dear* Miss?"

Catherine replied politely:

“It is absolutely true, *dear* doctor. I am pleased to meet you, Sirs!”

Then doctor Alvarez listened to her breathing and placed his ear on Catherine’s belly to hear the movements of the child inside it and at the end of his careful examination declared that everything was all right.

Catherine was in perfect health, maybe a bit underweight (but this was normal in view of all the stress she had been submitted to), and the baby had already acquired the final position, with its head down in the cervix of Catherine’s womb and legs crossed up. He could therefore state:

“The delivery is very near. Although prematurely (but with all the excitement she was forced to undergo this is absolutely normal), it will certainly happen in the next few days!”

The entire tribe, not only Moussa, bestowed great honours upon Ricardo, who was now considered as a good friend of theirs and, coming back like that accompanied by a doctor, had demonstrated the high consideration in which he kept an African woman (it was really great for them that a European man could be so fond of a *black* woman), the lovely Amenna.

They were all happy to hear the good news about Amenna’s health expressed by the European doctor (also because this confirmed that they had treated her well).

In the night Aysha furtively entered into Ricardo’s hut; she undressed, then pushed Catherine aside and placed herself between her and Ricardo, shamelessly slipping all naked under Ricardo’s blanket.

She had had a thorough wash with water drawn from the well and had also perfumed her body with a pleasant natural scent (for Tuareg, when they are caravanning in the desert, water is a too precious commodity to use for washing, therefore they don’t wash at all, even for many days in a row. But the Kel Air tribe had practically become sedentary living in Iférouane, and enjoyed copious water in their wells – with which they watered their fields and market gardens – and were happy to be able to wash too).

She was not scared by the presence of Amenna (as she still called Catherine) who was sleeping in that same hut; on the contrary, she counted entirely on her feminine solidarity, she knew that solidarity among women is a very strong feeling, on which they can

completely rely.

She clung her splendid body tightly to Ricardo's, embraced him tenderly and whispered (Aysha in her childhood had been at a school in the care of French nuns and was therefore able to express herself easily in this language that Ricardo knew well):

"Dear foreigner, what is your name, oh yes, Ric...ardo?" At his assent, she went on easily: "Dearest Ricardo, then, you have completely conquered my heart! The way you made love to me the other time was so enticing, so enthralling, voluptuous and tender at the same time, not like anything that I had ever experienced before in my life, nor that I will have the luck to relive again for the rest of my days. I utterly wish I could live with you forever, with your fabulous desirable body constantly clung to mine. I literally adore the way you kissed and licked me, it gave me an unprecedented sensation of pleasure and bliss that I know I will never receive from Moussa.

You see, Moussa is a good, right and very brave man, but in making love, compared to you, is a real disaster: egocentric and caring only for his own pleasure, he behaves not dissimilarly from the black Africans, I suppose. I was told in fact by one of our black slaves who, before becoming the concubine of one man of our tribe, was the wife of a black man that blacks also behave in this selfish manner and don't care about the pleasure of their women. You, on the contrary, while making love to a woman, are mainly driven to give pleasure to her rather than searching for it yourself, I could perceive it easily in your action. Your behaviour is so different and pleasant! For me, you are a real man, a very attractive man! Ricardo, believe me, I will never forget you, I feel I love you so much. Please, 'play' with me now, fully penetrating my eager body in depth, and love me as much as you can. I absolutely need your love!"

Ricardo obviously was all in a flutter that this magnificent woman felt so attracted to him and had become so fond of him. He felt a great tenderness and a strong feeling for her pervading him. He hugged her very tightly to his heart and tenderly caressed her, gallantly saying:

"Aysha, you are a delightful and adorable woman: I love you too!"

He then made love to her with the usual intensity and voluptuousness, sending her into ecstasy for the enormous pleasure she experienced.

Grateful, she said to him again:

“You will be forever my secret love!”

Then she slept peacefully in Ricardo’s arms. But she did not let Ricardo sleep long that night. As a matter of fact, before the new morning broke she woke Ricardo up two more times. Each time she grasped his shoulders and stroked them gently, then she sucked his chest tenderly – while Ricardo licked her body avidly, letting her attain a fantastic pleasant orgasm – until he was totally awake and ready to make love to her. In so doing, they gave one another, mutually, an incredibly satisfying pleasure.

They were both transported into a flood of ecstatic bliss that let them lose cognizance of time and place. They didn’t know where they were, so intense was their enrapturing delight.

Before dawn, she stole away from Ricardo’s hut without anybody seeing her.

When they woke up, Catherine was furious: she mocked Ricardo with a harsh voice, skilfully trying to mimic the expression and imitate the loving tone he had been using with Aysha during the night:

“Aysha, you are a delightful and adorable woman: I love you too!” then adding impetuously, nastily bellowing aloud: “What sort of love is yours, Ricardo? You swore I am your only love and now I am compelled to witness your mawkishness towards another woman, this is really too much: I don’t trust you any more, Ricardo!”

He tried to cool her down, saying gravely, but with the most tender tone he could summon:

“Cathy, my beloved ...”

She interrupted him sharply, pointing a menacing forefinger towards his face, just under his nose, and bellowing with evident rage:

“Don’t call me ‘beloved’, this is a falsehood and you know it perfectly well! You are a traitor, a rascal, Ricardo!”

But he continued unperturbed as though she had not harshly interrupted him:

“Darling, you know very well that I love you above everything and everybody: my love for you is absolutely unique and immense, nobody else can receive from me the same sort and the same level of love I feel only for you! But you also know very well that I may not make physical love to you any more, because this is a firm

decision that your good self took independently from my will. And in making love to a woman (another woman, of course, since I'm unfortunately not allowed to make it to you), I can't separate physical implications from sentimental ones: in order to really enjoy the act, I need to say 'I love you!' to the woman I am in the process of possessing. Therefore, don't blame me, please, for having said 'I love you!' to this sweet creature, the lovely Aysha."

Catherine was calmed by Ricardo's wise words; she conceded that Ricardo, provided that his love for her was not growing less because of the presence of another gorgeous woman, had the right to make love to Aysha, as well as, under those circumstances, the right to say "I love you!" to her.

Aysha repeated her nocturnal secret visits to Ricardo many other times during Ricardo's sojourn in Iférouane, giving herself to Ricardo with great intensity and joy. Catherine, for her part, did not protest any more and let them make love to one another under her amiable and complicit eyes, simply observing their interludes, because of her strong yet concealed desire for Ricardo, with desirous and dreaming thoughts – or hopes? – to be in his arms in Aysha's place.

6. *Mother and spouse*

After a few days the first labour pains arrived. Times were ripe. Catherine was assisted not only by doctor Alvarez, of course, but also by the old women of the village (above all Hamla, Moussa's first wife) who had only a very limited faith in the ability of this European man. What indeed did this man know about this matter which was a totally feminine business? Moussa's first wife, on the contrary, having herself brought into the world four children, plus having assisted dozens of their women in childbirth, included Moussa's second wife, had thus acquired a great experience in this special field, and enjoyed everybody's trust. As a matter of fact, being the chief's wife, Hamla carried great prestige among all the tribe's members. They had prepared the best hut for the woman in labour, well swept and neat, with new mats laid on the ground and a neat paillasse specially made for her. Catherine was taken inside it and lay down on a clean indigo dyed sheet. Labour started; the doctor said:

“Miss Catherine, above all don't panic: it is all a simple, natural function pertaining to women. Billiards of women in the world have happily gone through this same experience, some of them, it is true, suffering a bit more, some less, but all at the end happy for having brought the gift of offspring to humanity. The same thing is now going to happen to you: you are about to give life to a new member of the human community, a new future man or woman; imagine therefore what exalting splendid role nature has entrusted a woman with! For sure, no other role in the life of humans, as well as in that of all animals, is higher and more to be praised than this! Now, breathe powerfully and regularly and push downwards forcefully with your abdominal muscles in order to help the baby come out. Go now, push!”

It did not take long. With the assistance of the doctor and, especially, of Hamla, Moussa's wife, and of the other old women, the delivery was easy and without much suffering for Catherine. Doctor Alvarez encouraged her again:

"The head of the child is already appearing. Push, Miss Catherine, push! ... Stronger!"

Catherine followed carefully the wise suggestion gently but firmly given to her by doctor Alvarez, as well as by the old Tuareg women. She felt the wish to weep, but she refrained from it. She did not weep and she did not shout. She just pushed downwards with all her remaining strength. The child was rapidly delivered. Thank God, it was a magnificent baby-girl! In perfect accordance with Mendel's law, it had a very clear complexion as if it was born from an entirely white couple and not be a half-breed child. At this point, Catherine burst into tears for the immense joy and wanted to hug her daughter in her arms. They gave the baby to her.

Keeping it tight in her arms, she looked at it with incredible astonished tenderness: it was her own creature; she, Catherine, had carried it in herself and eventually given it life! How great and wonderful nature is to enable humans to receive such incommensurable gift! Outside the hut, the women of the tribe started emitting their piercing thrills letting their tongue vibrate in their mouth and the men shouted aloud their howls of welcome and greetings to the new-born child, jumping high and stamping their feet on the ground; in so doing, they raised up a big and thick cloud of dust and pulverized sand. But they didn't seem to notice it (apparently, it did not affect their lungs so used to involuntarily inspire sand blown by wind in the desert's open spaces) and went on at length with their fatiguing exercise. Everybody was happy and saluted the new life which had blossomed in the tribe as though it pertained to the tribe itself, even if it did not belong to them; this was a totally irrelevant detail for them: they had willingly adopted Amenna (as Catherine would always remain for them) and, as a consequence, also her child.

Pedro and Ricardo, entering into the hut, took the baby in their arms one after the other happily shouting nearly in unison:

"My baby!"

Luckily Ricardo stopped himself just in time from saying it, not to arouse Pedro's suspicions, and after the initial "My ..."

digressed from his former intention and added:

“... God, how beautiful she is!”

Since everything was going on well and there were no problems either for the puerpera or for the new-born child, doctor Alvarez left Iférouane after a few days, while Pedro who was deeply moved, visibly full of emotion and enthusiasm for the birth of this baby that he thought to be his own first baby, invented an excuse, and remained a little longer with them. He then left with ill-concealed painful farewells. Ricardo, comforted also by the advice expressed by doctor Alvarez before leaving, had calculated that it was necessary to let at least a full month elapse before Catherine and her child could manage the effort of the difficult transportation on the meandering track across the Air mountains range.

When Ricardo and Catherine left Iférouane with their child, the whole tribe gathered and, headed by Moussa Ag-Mongoufou and his first wife, Hamla, came up to the borders of the village to greet them and pay them a vibrant and warm farewell. They were all convinced in fact that by this departure they were losing good friends forever and they would not see them any more for the rest of their days. In their hearts they felt that now that they had learnt to appreciate Amenna's and Ricardo's presence among them, they would certainly miss them a lot. Aysha was not with them; she had already taken her leave from Ricardo embracing him tightly and kissing him passionately, as well as expressing him all her boundless love and her immense sorrow for this alas definitive partition. Now she was, unseen, desperately weeping in her hut. She felt in fact that a great, formerly totally unsuspected love for this foreigner had been conceived in her heart and had taken full sovereignty over it, a sentiment that she would cherish deep in herself forever, the real dream of her whole life.

No, she did not want now to see them departing, she wouldn't be able to stand the terrible shock, she would certainly swoon and, in so doing, reveal to Moussa and to the entire tribe her secret feeling! It was much easier to stand the gloomy separation from the man she desired with all her heart and all her strength by remaining alone, though crying copiously her saddest tears, in the protective semi-darkness of the hut!

Ricardo and Catherine arrived at Arlit and found that the aeroplane to Niamey, the capital of Niger, would land there only the

following day and leave the day after. Ricardo therefore wanted to go around the small mining town to check whether and how it had changed since he had been living at Akokan, in its vicinity, thirty years ago. As a matter of fact, it had changed a lot: the tarred road to Tahoua, by itself, already changed the overall appearance of the town, and Ricardo remembered when there was only a large sandy track heading south to Agadez through the Talak plain and west-north-west towards Assamakka coasting the plant and the mine.

There were many more houses everywhere and the African quarter of it, in particular, had extended so much that now Ricardo could no longer recognize the places he used to go to: where was the old market square? Where was the ugly parallelepiped building serving as Catholic chapel? Where was the department store where he used to buy the various items just arrived from France by plane? Where was the compound through the entrance of which he once saw a magnificent, tall, completely nude, charcoal-black woman piling the millet while he was passing by to drive to the treatment plant?

Since he was staying in the guest-house of Somaïr, the Company exploiting the local uranium mine, he went to its headquarters and paid a visit to the new director. This gentleman, hearing that Ricardo had worked at Akokan thirty years before, wanted to invite him and Catherine – that Ricardo this time correctly introduced as an old friend of his he had come to rescue from slavery – to a dinner in his residence. At the dinner there were other guests, namely the technical manager and the doctor with their respective wives. Catherine, obviously, was the only black lady present, but was undoubtedly the prettiest and the most attractive among them. Apart from Ricardo (whose dedication to her was clearly evident), the other three men were full of admiration for her. Besides talking of the old directors of Cominak, M. Obelianne, a geologist, and of Somaïr, Gen. Noël, a retired general of the French Army, Ricardo told the new director of the incredible circumstances that had brought him there again, after so many years.

The poor man and his guests were surely astounded at hearing all the adventurous story of the kidnapping and selling of Catherine as slave and the consequent difficult search for her carried out by Ricardo. They stared at Catherine with wide-open eyes not believing that she could be there with them now, smiling quietly and nicely while nodding with her head in sign of assent. The host felicitated

and congratulated Ricardo warmly for his courage and for the happy and successful end of his difficult enterprise, making him feel proud for what he had accomplished so well. In spite of the cordial and nice mood created among them, Ricardo and Catherine had to leave the party quite early because of Catherine's engagement to breastfeed her child. They therefore thanked their hosts very warmly for the kind invitation, the delicious meal offered them (it was a real treat especially for Catherine who for many months had not eaten a meal prepared in the almost sophisticated western kitchen fashion) and the agreeable evening spent in their house. After greeting also the other two couples, they left. As foreseen, the following day, they left Arlit and flew to Niamey.

Ricardo wanted to fly to Morocco, on the way home, in order to inform the Ambassador of the successful end of his search and introduce Catherine to him. Full of admiration for the adamant beauty of Catherine, the Ambassador too invited them for dinner in his residence. The residence of the Ambassador was a nice small palace in Moresque style.

While going there, in the evening, however, Ricardo became the target for a couple of rifle-shots, which fortunately did not hit him: he was not even skimmed by the bullets. Luckily, the marksman, after having fired a couple of shots in that imprecise manner, had to run away because of the arrival on the spot of many people and one guard and vanished. It had happened, so he learnt immediately after at the dinner at the Ambassador's, that the police, following-up his report of Catherine's sale as a slave, had made a lot of ambushes and had arrested a large number of slave traders, practically destroying completely this secret, but alas yet absolutely flourishing market. Evidently, somebody still bound to that dishonourable and infamous traffic had recognized him and wanted to have his revenge against him.

The rest of their journey was quiet and without troubles and they happily arrived in Madrid. There, at the airport, having been advised by Ricardo of the time of their arrival, there was a real crowd waiting for them: Pedro, his sister María Ana, a couple of Pedro's cousins, four friends. Only Pedro's mother was not there because, although she wanted to come to welcome Catherine, the doctor, in consideration of her age, had strictly forbidden her to move from home, as well as Miguel, Pedro's brother, for obvious reasons. They

all feasted them with great joy and unbridled happiness: at last, Catherine was back! And, moreover, with a splendid very slightly coffee-and-milk-coloured little baby! All congratulated Pedro for his luck on having become the father of such a marvellous kid. They obviously also congratulated Ricardo for the magnificent enterprise he had carried out, cleverly finding out where Catherine's hideout was and so capably and tenaciously rescuing her.

Pedro was in his seventh heaven for the joy and was really uncontrollable: he rushed towards Catherine, embraced her so tightly that he nearly suffocated her and kissed her passionately at length. Ricardo discretely turned his shoulders to them, feigning not to see their exchange of effusions (also because it would have been a terrible and hard shock for him to see his beloved Catherine held in another man's tight embrace with her desirable lips glued to this man's). He obviously had to make his mind up on this issue: it had to be so; Catherine had given him all herself in her youth, but, as he was not able to assure her a future, she had now to give herself to another man in her maturity. But at the moment, it was still too early. It would take time before he could accept this new situation without feeling a particularly great grief and a hint of jealousy affecting his heart.

After having received Pedro's warmest thanks for his 'extraordinary enterprise' (as it was defined by Pedro himself and all the other fellows), as well as Catherine's most grateful and sweet kiss on his cheek (and a nod of her head which silently meant: "I will always love you, Ricardo, my heroic saviour!"), Ricardo took the first train to Valladolid in order to return home after so many months of absence. The rest of the party went to Burgos by car.

After a while, Pedro decided to give a great feast, a ball, to feast and honour Catherine's return home: since Pedro was a well known and highly esteemed landlord in that region of Spain, the invitees were many hundreds. Among them, as guests of honour, there were the highest authorities of the country, aristocrats, magistrates, members of the Cortes (the Spanish Parliament Houses), the Mayor of the place with the entire county council, the most illustrious landlords and experienced farmers. Even the king of Spain himself would have been happy to participate had it not been for an important State visit, which kept him far from the country. Men wore a dinner

jacket and women wore their best, most sumptuous and glamorous evening dresses, having bought them in the most renowned boutiques or had them made by adroit tailors. No ball had been organized in that region of Spain for many years, and everyone was very eager to have the opportunity to attend such an enchanting and anticipated event. A famous orchestra was engaged for entertaining the guests by playing the music of the most popular, appreciated and requested tunes.

The food was varied in many typical regional ways, abundant and succulent. Pedro, with the approval of his mother and of María Ana, his sister, wanted to organize a feast to be remembered for years in the area, regardless of the expense. Even Miguel agreed on the organization of the party. All people enjoyed the feast very much. Men vied with one another for dancing with Catherine who was really splendid and raised admiration in all the men and envy in all women. She was dressed in a magnificent and rich low-necked brocade which left her splendid shoulders totally naked and had an attractive sumptuous hairdo with a small diadem on it. Ricardo, obviously, had been invited to the feast (which could be organized also thanks to his intervention to rescue Catherine) and he attended it with his wife Soledad with great joy and pleasure. He got his highest happiness when he managed to force his way through the crowd around Catherine and invite her to dance. She was happy and radiant:

“Ricardo, *my beloved hero*, how nice is it to be held tight in your arms again! I have missed this joyous and delightful experience so much for such a long time!”

Ricardo came back:

“As in the old times, do you remember, Sweet Sylph?”

“Yes, I remember it well. It has always been a great pleasure for me to dance with you, my dear Ricardo. You are in fact such a keen, skilled and seductive dancer!”

“It comes to my mind that it was just as a follow-up to a dance night we spent in the ‘City Tavern’ club in Awolowo Road, Ikoyi, after we had had a dinner at Nigel Green’s, that we made love the very first time; can you remember that, Cathy?”

Catherine replied without hesitation:

“Yes, it is well fixed in my memory and I have it very clearly depicted before the eyes of my mind. As any other moment of our

life together indeed. I can't forget any single episode of our splendid relationship and romance, Ricardo, my dear. You were like an invincible knight in shining armour for me: you fascinated me, darling, you blurred my vision and I could have eyes only for you! In no way could I have loved another man but you!"

"Beloved Cathy, it is *you* who fascinated me! How could I resist the attractive charms of a delightful person provided with this enchanting chocolate-like skin, like you? How could I not get totally crazy about you? Since that very first moment my heart was totally yours."

They could not have either a long dance or a long chat together, as they would have liked to do, since they had so many things to tell to each other, because all the men claimed their turn to dance with her and Ricardo was quickly forced to give her to another cavalier.

In a moment when the eyes of everybody were turned towards Catherine and Pedro and people did not pay much attention to them, María Ana took Ricardo aside and interrogated him:

"Ricardo, as I told you, Catherine revealed to me everything about the bonds that tie you to her. I know that you were her lover. Now, tell me honestly: is this wonderful baby your own child or is it Pedro's daughter? Frankly speaking, in fact, although it is difficult to recognize it in such small children, I see no likeness whatever between its features and Pedro's."

Put in front of such a direct question, he could not deny, he felt that it would have been dishonest and even criminal to conceal the truth:

"Yes, María Ana, the baby is mine."

"I just wanted to sate the doubt I had and be sure of it. Considering what you have done to rescue her, you totally deserve Catherine's love and the child as well."

"María Ana, I assure you, since she entered in your house, I have not touched Catherine at all. Furthermore, during her captivity, she made a vow not to think of me in sexual terms any more. And when she has decided something, it is so, happen what may; believe me, I know well how strong her determination is. She and I are only good friends now – real bosom friends, but nothing more than that. Although it might be a tremendous grief for me, she is totally devoted to Pedro, now, and I am pretty sure that she will be a magnificent, honest and faithful wife for him all along her and his

life!”

“I too am fully convinced of it. But let me thank you, Ricardo, because you are a good, serious and right man! I shall never reveal to Pedro that the baby is not his own but yours and I shall try my best to always be a good ‘aunt’ for it, I swear it!”

“Thank you, María Ana, frankly speaking, you are an absolutely splendid woman!”

She smiled openly, with satisfaction:

“Oh, Ricardo, are you courting me, by chance?”

“No, I am not, I would not dare, but only because – I know it – you would not accept my courting. I’m a married man, you know it, María Ana, and you deserve a free man, possibly a bachelor, likely to marry you. But I admire you a lot anyhow.”

“Now I fully understand why Catherine loves you so much and I totally agree with her that you deserve to be deeply loved: you are a marvellous man, Ricardo!”

“What you think of me is not really correct, I consider myself a rather ordinary man. It is *you* who are a marvellous woman, María Ana!”

Grateful, María Ana put her lips on his own and softly kissed him.

In spite of his happiness at Catherine’s return, Pedro was rather reluctant to fix the date of their wedding and he hummed and hawed every time Catherine brought up the subject. It was only a lack of capacity to take an important definitive decision on his side, absolutely very typical of his rather weak and dubious character. But, in Catherine’s eyes, this meant that he was not totally sure of his or her feelings and therefore was not really determined to tie definitively and indissolubly his life to hers. She had expected that he was simply longing to marry her and eager to celebrate the ceremony as soon as possible, after all that had happened, and was therefore sad and grieved by his inconclusive behaviour.

A handsome French man, Mr. Étienne de Villeneuve, Counsellor to the Embassy of France to Spain, who had been among Pedro’s invitees for the fabulous party he had organized in Catherine’s honour, had been dazzled by Catherine’s beauty and started courting her discretely, but persistently. First, he invited her for afternoon tea in his residence, where other people also had gathered under his invitation in order not to discourage her immediately with a tête-à-

tête meeting. Then he invited her for dinner, this time too in the presence of other invitees in order to gain her confidence. Catherine, disappointed by Pedro's irresolute attitude, accepted willingly this gentleman's attention towards her, although taking great care in honestly maintaining their relationship on a pure friendship level.

Étienne was a man of broad culture and had many intellectual and artistic interests. He therefore invited Catherine to visit together museums, galleries and artists' studios, as well as to attend conferences, theatres plays and concerts. Sometimes he also invited her to see a particularly attractive movie. Catherine was very eager to improve her rather limited education with the help of such a pleasant and rigorous teacher (it was a sort of fever engendered in her by her years-long acquaintance with Ricardo) and therefore went very willingly with him anytime he invited her. She understood obviously that Étienne was moved to search her company by a deeper sentiment in her regards, but she did not become fond of him and therefore succeeded in maintaining her feelings towards him in the form of a mere affectionate courtesy. He, on the contrary, started liking so much her always cheerful and jovial company that he was induced to invite her also for excursions outside the towns where they lived, respectively Madrid and Burgos. They went to Saragossa, Toledo and Barcelona, visiting the Town-Hall, the cathedral and the museums of each of these towns and he terminated by inviting her in springtime to go to Santiago de Compostela on the path of the ancient medieval pilgrims.

Catherine accepted willingly to carry out this exhausting excursion, but she wanted Ricardo to join them; so the three of them went together on foot from the Franco-Spanish border near the French town of Perpignan up to Santiago. The mystic aura that hovered about along the path and in the town itself caught them completely unprepared and they lived with great religious fervour the days – nearly one entire month! – spent walking with the aim of reaching this exceedingly captivating target. In the Sanctuary, Ricardo prayed to the Holy Virgin and Saint James to protect him, his family and his friends, among whom and above all, obviously, he counted Catherine, his former girlfriend, Edima Essien, as well as Vivian Odali. Catherine prayed for her child who in the meantime had been weaned, as well as for her proposed marriage (although now no more immediately in sight). Étienne prayed to the Saint to concede

him the gift of Catherine's attention and love.

Although Catherine seemed not to perceive (or feigned not to notice) Étienne's sound adoration in her respect, Étienne got so enthusiastic about her active and joyous participation in his wandering about that he wanted her as a mate also for travelling abroad, across Europe. He therefore invited her on a cruise to Greece. She was not used at all to spending so many days on a sailing-boat, but accepted with joy not only because Étienne was an agreeable and humorous man, but also because she really wanted to visit this country, which she had so much heard of. Both Ricardo and other friends of hers had in fact defined Greece as the real homeland of the sun and she wanted to verify whether such definition was correct or a simple exaggeration of people fond of its endless beaches.

They started their trip from the haven of Valencia and sailed first to the Balearic Islands and then to Malta, where they visited the nice town of La Valletta, to Crete, where they had the opportunity to see the archaeological sites of Cnossus and Festós, to Kalamáta on the Peloponnesus – where they visited Mycenae, the enchanting and somehow romantic ruins of the Byzantine town of Mistra and the famous theatre of Epidaurus endowed with a perfect acoustics (guides recite that the noise of a needle falling on the ground in the middle of the pit can be clearly heard from the highest point of the tiers) – and finally to Piraeus from where they could go around to visit Athens with its glorious acropolis, Delphi and the monasteries perched on the peaks of the Meteors. From there they also sailed to several of the Cyclades Islands, especially Delos and Mikonos, but also to other smaller but equally lovely islands.

It was a marvellous sailing-trip that Catherine enjoyed very much (in spite of a serious fear when they abruptly met a very impressive and dreadful sea-storm); she was therefore very grateful to Étienne for having taken her with him. By this, he certainly gained a good point in her favours. Galvanized by the pleasure he could easily read in Catherine's eyes, Étienne furthermore invited her for a journey to France, his homeland. Catherine accepted with pleasure, because she had long ago heard people literally singing the many fabulous praises of this country and therefore ardently desired to have the possibility of visiting it. They cheerfully travelled far and wide across the country visiting marvellous sites: Provence, with its splendid towns

of Avignon, Arles, Aigues-Mortes, Tarascon, the abbey of Montmajour, the highs of Baux de Provence and the attractive gorges of Verdon, Paris, the capital, the so-called 'ville lumière', with its innumerable treasures, the castles of the Loire valley and the jewel castles of Fontainebleau and of Vaux-le-Vicomte (up to 1875 called Vaux-Praslin, being the property of the duke Choiseul de Praslin).

Eventually, they ended their tour in Normandy, which was the cradle of Étienne's family and where the de Villeneuves still owned an old medieval (but renovated and transformed in the XVIIth century) mansion.

He took her there and introduced her to his relatives. Catherine felt totally the charm of an old residence and of a family of the ancient French aristocracy seizing her heart and was very near to falling into Étienne's arms. It was only the sense of duty and faithfulness towards Pedro that restrained her from conceding herself to this fascinating man.

At this point, however, from a phrase said by Catherine on her return, which, in Pedro's eyes, magnified too much Étienne's role in her enjoyment, Pedro realized that he was about to lose her, should he continue in this stupid attitude of not fixing the date of their marriage. He had therefore to do something about it, taking – at last! – this long-desired decision. He fixed the date of the wedding, which would be celebrated three weeks later.

Catherine was on cloud nine for the joy and ran to inform Ricardo about Pedro's decision and reiterated to him the request to be her witness. Ricardo accepted with great joy: Catherine represented for him an essential piece of his own history, of his life; for nothing in the world would he have left this exclusive task to somebody else!

The time came for Catherine's child to receive its baptism, making Miguel happy with the task of godfather. He was very proud to be the godfather of such a beautiful baby who looked like a doll. The baby was given the name, chosen by Miguel himself, of Isabel. Since it was the name of the ancient queen of Castile, the protector of Christopher Columbus, the discoverer of America, Ricardo liked it also and approved its choice.

The day chosen for the important event of Pedro's and Catherine's

marriage arrived at last. Catherine was splendidly dressed in a pink well-cut calf-long dress, with a marvellous hairdo and a superlative light make-up which rendered her face even prettier than ever and wore in her hand the traditional marriage bouquet.

Ricardo gave her his arm to accompany her to Pedro who was waiting in front of the Mayor and then witnessed the short ceremony and put his signature on the relevant papers. A tear welled up in the corner of his eye at seeing Catherine uniting her life to Pedro's: he would have liked so much to have her bound to himself forever! However, he felt happy for her, since he was an altruistic man and her happiness was also his own happiness. The Mayor uttered a few words suitable for the occasion; he also said that it was the first time that he had to register the marriage of an African young lady with a Spaniard and he was therefore particularly happy to welcome such a delightful black lady in the bosom of the local community. There were many invitees and all were happy to see such a beautiful black young woman becoming a European lady by the effect of her marriage with a white man: they acclaimed her, saluting her as their new queen of hearts.

A rich and succulent reception was offered to the invitees to satisfy their hunger and thirst.

The youngest people who had attended the wedding ceremony insistently requested Pedro, after he had cut together with Catherine the big traditional wedding cake, to give his bride a long passionate kiss:

“Kiss her! ... Kiss her! ... Give her the traditional kiss! ... No, not like that! ... That is a kiss as that between brother and sister! It must be a real *big passionate* kiss! A lovers' kiss!”

Then Pedro, after having been thrown in the air by his closest friends three successive times, gave the start to dancing: there were all sorts of dances, old fashioned ones, such as waltzes, tangos, polkas, charlestons, as well as cha cha chas, rock 'n rolls and twists for elderly people and modern ones, such as shakes, lambadas, salsas and merengues for youngsters; everybody therefore danced enraptured till late in the night.

In this feasting atmosphere, Miguel felt very tormented; as a matter of fact, seeing all that great happiness in his brother's eyes for the recovery of Catherine and her return home, he felt very guilty for having been the cause of her disappearance and of her life as

slave in Morocco, Algeria and Niger. The difficulties she had experienced were indeed even more severe than he had planned for her. Furthermore, if he did not really like Catherine – although he had to admit that now she had come back even more fascinating and seductive than ever – he however developed a real passion for her daughter: he was exceedingly fond of that baby which eventually conquered entirely his heart. He wanted to take it continuously in his arms, to cradle it and sing old Spanish lullabies to it (as well as lots of typical folkloristic mountaineers' songs he knew so well since he had spent his military service in the mountain troops) in order to make it fall asleep.

As soon as the farm engagements let him have a moment of rest or a pause, he immediately ran to Catherine and asked her permission to have the child with himself. He literally adored it and that's why he had asked Pedro to nominate him as its godfather for its baptism. Both Pedro and Catherine (who were totally ignorant of the role played by Miguel in her kidnapping), since he appeared to be so eager to get it, were very happy to concede him this privilege. He was so happy to receive this task – which he considered very prestigious – that he was about to reveal them that he was the cause of all the troubles lived by Catherine and to pray them to forgive him. He was very near to do it, but then he didn't have the courage to implement this in case they became too angry and unwilling to pardon him. In order to discharge his conscience from this heavy burden, he decided however to reveal it to Ricardo when they met at Pedro's and Catherine's wedding. Ricardo exclaimed:

“So you asked the Eta adepts to perform Catherine's kidnapping, eh? Ah, that is why it was so difficult for me at the beginning of my search to track the first movements of her kidnapers! These terrorists are very skilled fighters, not common delinquents, and they know perfectly well how to manage to disguise their tracks! Now I understand better all the difficulties I met to identify whose hands she had been in before my search started!”

“Ricardo, I'm sorry that I caused you too all those problems and those troubles for rescuing Catherine. Probably, if I had imagined all that, how many people would be involved in tracking her and the difficulties that they would experience, I would have not given the start to this odious process. But I was like crazy and my eyes were totally blurred by an inconceivable stupid hatred for foreigners. And,

although I now understand that my position was very silly, Catherine, in my eyes, was a foreigner. But you must have loved Catherine very much to undergo all those tremendous experiences to rescue her!”

“Yes, Miguel, I love Catherine very much: she is my very best African friend and I assure you that she fully deserves my affection. She is a wonderful woman: I am sure that your brother will be very happy with her and will never have the slightest reason to regret marrying her. He is undoubtedly a very lucky man that I envy much!”

Miguel seemed surprised by Ricardo’s assertion:

“Why?”

“Because I would have liked to be in his place and be able to marry her!”

Again, Miguel was caught by surprise. Nearly annoyed, he uttered nastily:

“Do you like, you too, black women?”

Ricardo could only reply enthusiastically:

“Miguel, you have no idea about how lovely and delightful an African woman can be! Normally, she is a passionate lover and is very skilled in giving a man pleasure and, if you are so fortunate to chance on the right one, she can be very romantic and sentimental and love you intensely all your life long. And, if she is wise and cares for her body, instead of becoming a big, fat matron, she can maintain for long time an attractive and adorable silhouette. A body that you must intimately desire to hold tight in your arms, to tenderly caress and to voluptuously possess.”

“How you exaggerate, Ricardo! Or, from the way you speak of them, must I deduce that you knew very intimately at least a certain number of these black ladies?”

Nodding intensely, Ricardo reiterated:

“I did indeed and became, in turn, very fond of a couple or perhaps three of them, in particular. Marvellous women, I assure you, totally worthy, just as Catherine, your brother’s bride, of getting married with a European man.”

“You open to me a new and unknown world, Ricardo! I feel I’m totally fascinated and seduced by your stories and your adventurous experiences: I would like to travel to Africa with you, Ricardo; I am in fact sure that you would be able to discover for my own

incredulous eyes aspects of it that otherwise I would never know.”

“I cannot travel to Africa at the moment, Miguel, I spent a lot of money during the journeys I had to make to rescue Catherine and now I have no money at my disposal to afford the necessary expenditures for another travel.”

“If it is only for this reason, then I can pay the travel fee for both. I have the money necessary for it and if you will accompany me to let me learn something more about that continent, I will be very pleased to give that money out also for you! It is even my duty to do it, since it is my fault if you had to spend all that money to rescue Catherine!”

“Thank you, Miguel; everybody thinks of you that you are a surly man and I discover now that you are on the contrary a generous guy!”

“Think seriously about my proposal, Ricardo, and give me an answer as soon as you can. I promise that I shall behave correctly and I’ll be a good, cheerful and jolly travel-mate for you: for sure, you will not regret it!”

“OK, Miguel, I’ll let you know soon my decision about this issue.”

They then parted to attend to their engagements vis-à-vis relatives and other invitees.

So now Catherine had at last crowned her long-cherished dream to get married to a white man. Now she had become a black European lady, acquiring Spanish citizenship, by virtue of this marriage. She had desired with all strength all her life long realize for herself this extraordinary opportunity. Now, it had happened: she had settled down in Europe, had a white man as husband and had become herself a European lady. It was an absolutely wonderful sensation! She felt proud and happy, on her seventh heaven; it was undoubtedly the most impressive event that had occurred to her since her birth!

Ricardo, thanks to the years-long acquaintance he had with her and to the very strong affinity and identity of feelings cultivated with her, knew very well her sentiments in respect of Nigeria and Europe and felt exceedingly happy for her for the fortunate circumstances that had enabled her to comply entirely with her desire. He knew practically everything of her, her personality, her most cherished wishes, her most intimate desires. He knew that she would be a

marvellous wife for Pedro, both from a sentimental and from a physical viewpoint, because she was fundamentally a faithful and honest woman. He sincerely envied Pedro for having tied to himself such a splendid woman; he would have liked so much to be at his place and have had the possibility of marrying her!

To his eyes, Catherine was the most attractive and desirable woman existing on earth, the most lovable one and he really adored her and was ready to throw himself into the fire should it be necessary to satisfy a need of hers. Even now that he had lost her forever, that she was no more *his* beloved Catherine, since she had devoted her life to another man. In the same way, thanks to the perfect knowledge she had of him, Catherine knew that Ricardo's love for her had not decreased at all because of her marriage with another man and she could always count on him for any necessity that might arise. In the bottom of her heart she loved him with the same intensity as before when they formed a couple in love and no other man existed to separate them from one another.

Although she had promised to herself that she would no longer have sex with him, she maintained all the time a yearning desire for him, for the warmth of his body, for the tenderness of his hugs, for the sweetness of his kisses, for the voluptuous pleasure aroused by his beloved body. No other man on earth, not even Pedro – who seemed to be rather awkward and clumsy, absolutely normal and deprived of fantasy and desire to provoke real pleasure in her – could give her the same level of unbridled pleasure, the same intense bliss, the same great happiness she had found in making love to Ricardo. He had represented so much for her; in her eyes he had really been everything for her, he practically was her life: such a strong feeling towards him could only die with her own death!

In spite of her permanent desire for Ricardo, that she however, honestly maintaining her oath, never satisfied any more and, on the contrary, even tried eagerly to deny its existence to herself, Catherine soon became pregnant again, this time obviously by Pedro. Nine months later she gave birth to a nice baby-boy, who received the name of Vicente. At a distance of more or less two or three years from each other, she delivered two other children, totalling four in the aggregate. The last two children were two baby-girls who received respectively the names of Guendolyn and Concepción. Pedro was really happy to get all these children who fulfilled entirely

his own desire to have a numerous progeny and each of these babies was in fact welcomed with great happiness and joy at its birth.

Apart from giving Pedro all these children, Catherine had worked hard to give a substantial help in the running of the farm and had quickly learnt a lot of things that were totally unknown to her before, since she was not a rural girl, but a real daughter of the town. Pedro's mother, brother (who had now changed his attitude towards her and, at seeing her so active for the good of the farm, in spite also of her numerous pregnancies, liked her a bit) and sister were all enthusiasts of Catherine's performances and were absolutely fond of her.

One day Ricardo called Miguel on the telephone and said that he was ready to accompany him in a journey to Africa. Miguel was so happy that Ricardo had at last accepted his proposal that he was simply bursting with joy. Ricardo asked him:

"Where do you want to go? Is there any place in particular that you would like to see?"

Miguel had thought that Ricardo had already in mind a particular itinerary, therefore awkwardly and shyly replied:

"Actually, I don't know. I personally don't know Africa. You are the guide and I leave you totally master of deciding where to take me. I suppose however that the best would be to go to the places you are accustomed to and, as a consequence, you know better."

"Then let's go first to the desert, where I was recently, while trying to rescue Catherine."

"As I said, I don't know Africa at all. So, for me, one place or the other is just the same, whichever you choose can be OK, provided that they are nice sites fully worth visiting."

"Oh, you can be sure, Miguel, that the sites we shall be visiting are all absolutely fascinating! By no way, would I take you, who are a neophyte, to a place which is less than fantastic! You will see, you will certainly become crazily fond of those sites in the same way as I myself love them. I therefore propose you to go first to the desert, where, on the occasion of my search of Catherine, I made new friends."

"OK, then. Let's go to the desert first!"

"We could go straight to Algeria and head immediately southwards, but Morocco is so beautiful that, taking into account

the fact that you have never been there, I suggest spending some time on a short visit to this fabulous country. So buy air tickets to Casablanca. From there it is advisable to rent a Land Rover up to In Guezzam at the extreme southern point of Algeria. Supposing that my friend Ahmed El-Moktar is in his camp in the outskirts of this locality, we can leave the car there and ask him to accompany us to Iferuane by means of dromedaries. In this way, you will live a fantastic adventure as a real man of the desert, as a 'Blue man' as Tuareg are called because of the tint left on their faces by the tagoulmoust and other kerchiefs dyed in the indigo. We can travel by airplane again from Arlit to Niamey, Abidjan and Lagos to pass from Niger to Ivory Coast and finally to Nigeria. At this point you'll have visited the North and part of the West of Africa (excluding then the whole East, i.e. Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, Ethiopia, Somalia, Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique and Madagascar which all deserve a special journey). If you are content with that, we can come back to Spain. If on the contrary you wish to visit other countries, then we can travel southwards to Gabon, Congo, Zambia and South Africa. Is a programme of this sort satisfactory for you? Does it match with your expectations?"

Miguel had shining eyes for the excitation now mastering his whole being. He replied:

"I think it is a wonderful programme and I long to initiate our tour!"

"All right, Miguel, let's say we can leave next week." then, feeling a hint of disappointment in Miguel's voice, he added: "Why not before? Because, we have to prepare an adequate equipment and everything has to be well organized and ready at hand: in order to make all the planned trip, we are going to stay away from our respective houses for a long time. I have to prepare my wife and my sons for being left alone again. Moreover, personally, I must say, I hate to travel like a tramp."

"OK, Ricardo, I catch your point and agree with you. Let's do things correctly. No haste."

"That's good. See you next week at Madrid airport. Let me know anyhow when you have the tickets, in order to inform me about the exact date and time of departure."

The following week, after having said goodbye to their relatives, Ricardo and Miguel left Spain heading to Casablanca. Catherine was

particularly happy that Miguel had planned such an interesting travel together with Ricardo, because she still felt in him a certain animosity towards her and she thought that spending a long holiday with a positive man as Ricardo was would only be beneficial for Miguel, in order to ameliorate the bad sides of his character.

In Casablanca, they rented a Land Rover and travelled across the main towns of Morocco, Fès, Medina, Marrakech, Meknès, Rabat. This time Ricardo was no longer in the same painful situation as when he was in the frantic search of Catherine and could therefore really enjoy the visit to these fabulous so-called 'imperial' towns. They made a thorough sightseeing of the various sites touched in their wandering about, especially paying a visit to the market squares, the main mosques, the high defensive walls and the souks of these renowned localities. In Rabat, they also paid a visit to the Ambassador of Spain who was happy to receive them very warmly – he was in fact particularly glad to see the adventurous Ricardo again – and invited them to a dinner in his beautiful residence.

The Ambassador, obviously, wanted to have news of Catherine and they told him that she had at last got married to Miguel's brother and was well and happy. The Ambassador, who had been struck by Catherine's beauty, rejoiced very much at hearing that she was well and in good form. As always, they could spend a very pleasant evening in the Ambassador's house, because he was a very amiable person and a witty and shrewd conversationalist. As it was to be expected, part of the conversation dwelt on the enterprise carried out by Ricardo to rescue Catherine from slavery. Miguel was impressed by hearing the accounts, full of formerly undiscovered details, about Ricardo's adventures made by the Ambassador and his guests and in his heart felt particularly guilty at having caused him so much trouble.

They spent ten days in Morocco, then they crossed the border and travelled to Algeria: there they left out the capital, Algiers, because as it was situated right in the most northern corner of the country, it would force them to make a large detour. They drove instead through the numerous magnificent oasis of the country, taking particular pleasure in walking far and wide across them to meet the autochthonous inhabitants, especially the Berbers and the various tribes of Tuareg and, among them, especially the smiths who used to forge splendid silver jewels, real masterpieces of art: in this way, they

got well acquainted with the desert marvel-sites of Ghardaïa, Ouargla, El Golea, In Salah, up to the small town of Tamanrasset.

How different it was for Ricardo, compared with the former time, to wander across these wonders of nature, these fantastic enclaves of rich and luxuriant vegetation in the very heart of the Sahara desert! Whereas the former time all his thoughts had been concentrated on his tiresome and difficult search for detecting Catherine's tracks, this time, on the contrary, he was totally relaxed and tranquil: he could therefore entirely enjoy his trip and discover the many-sided aspects of the centenary-old life in the oasis.

When they arrived in Tamanrasset, Ricardo showed Miguel the bordj where the Père de Foucauld was killed and his hermitage, then took him to the market place to buy fresh dates. These dates were so unbelievably different from the dates that it is possible to buy in Europe: these were in fact full of juicy pulp, soft and sweet like honey! It was a real pleasure to eat them and Miguel had to admit that Ricardo was absolutely right in his definition of fresh Algerian dates as Gods' nectar. Ricardo in fact used to compare the dates in Africa to the chestnut in Europe and said that in both cases it is a matter of dealing with very complete, strongly energetic food; though unfortunately for the chestnut it is necessary to cook it in order to make it edible, whilst it is simpler and more direct in the case of the date as it can be eaten straight by plucking it from the palm-tree producing it.

Since nobody was chasing them and they were therefore totally free to plan their trip as they wished, they decided to make the tour to the Assekrem, the mountain where the Père de Foucauld had established his hermitage. They chose the anticlockwise way of circulating on the annular track heading to such mountain, therefore passing, just outside Tamanrasset, near the impressive lonely peak Laperrine. The hermitage was made of coarse, but rather flat dry black stones simply put one over the other, without cement to tie them to one another: it was long and narrow (the space inside allowed only one person to go through), but with a really unique mystic aura! Inside it, one felt to be so close to Heaven that thanking God for the precious gift of life was an immediate and spontaneous thought surfacing in everybody's mind and soul. Looking out at the landscape lying in front of the Assekrem peak gave the impression of being immersed in a mineral world where the various peaks of the

Hoggar mountains range, the majestic Takouba peak in the foreground, rose lonely or in groups as far the eye can see.

On the way to the Assekrem, they could see the various peaks formed by prismatic columns of basalt, in the typical form of organ pipes, which were the remains of the lava effusion mounting and crystallized in the volcano chimney, after the volcano conical body itself had been eroded and weathered away. They also had a view over a couple of nice and interesting 'gueltas' (pools of spring water), where humans and animals could drink and water.

They then continued their travel to In Guezzam, waiting, as usual, for the arrival of other cars heading to the same locality, in order to caravan in safety and not fall into the treacherous traps of the desert. Once arrived to In Guezzam, they went straight to the Kel Ajers' camp. It had been moved a little since the former time, but they found it easily with the useful directions of some youngsters who appeared as from nowhere as soon as they stopped their Land Rover in the old camp site.

On seeing Ricardo, Ahmed El-Moktar thought he was under the effect of a spell and could not believe his eyes. Ricardo, this European friend he had warmly greeted nearly one year before, thinking he would never see him again, was there in front of him again! How great is Allah who allows men to have these exceedingly pleasant joys from life, where friendship and togetherness are essential components! Ahmed, in spite of his advanced age (he was slightly older than Ricardo), was in the innermost part of his heart a jovial youngish man, as strong as a palm tree, and was so happy to see Ricardo that, despite his severe and apparent surly disposition, he nearly cried for the intense joy. Ricardo started, as necessary with Tuareg, if one wants to be kind to them and follow their ancestral habit, the usual interminable greeting ceremony, abundantly mentioning all his relatives, as well as his tent, his animals and all his belonging in his request for news. Ahmed cheerfully said to Ricardo:

"My friend, you know very well the rules of hospitality we have. I am therefore pleased to ask your young friend, who has come for the first time to our camp with you, to honour my family and my house by playing with my wife (which is how Tuareg gently refer to making love to somebody), who is very young, the last one I married and is the only one whom I still have; the other two I had have both already died. I am sorry that because of their death I now have no

more wives to play with yourself too: I apologize for the poverty of my welcome and hope you will forgive me, but so was Allah's will!"

Ricardo answered emphatically, fascinated by Ahmed's generosity and open sense of hospitality:

"You are a great chief, Ahmed, and I pray for all blessings from Heaven to fall on you and on your family. My friend, you cannot obviously offer what you have not, so, please, do not worry for me; actually, I do not really need a woman at present!"

Ahmed, who had noticed the nice and tender understanding born between Ricardo and Aysha, Moussa Äg-Mongoufou's third wife, and had therefore imagined the insurgence of a strong feeling and of a consequent romance between the two, retorted:

"I can easily imagine why, Ricardo: you are already anticipating the pleasure of playing with the lovely and sweet Aysha, aren't you?"

Surprised, Ricardo exclaimed:

"What are you thinking, Ahmed! I cannot know whether she still bears a liking for me: maybe she is fed up with me and she doesn't want me any more! Or maybe she can have fallen in love with another man."

"Being the wife – though the third wife, she is anyhow his wife – of the potent chief of the Kel Air Tuareg, I don't think that she can have fallen in love with another man, Ricardo! Moussa is a man endowed with by far superior qualities than other men to make a different choice possible. With you it is a different matter, because Moussa himself gave her to you to respect the hospitality rules. Then, if she, as a consequence, nurtured a particular sentiment for you, it is her business and Moussa's fault! No, I am absolutely convinced that she is still fond of you and that nobody else could entrap her heart!"

"OK, Ahmed, I must admit that I long to see her again! By the way, Ahmed, would you agree to accompany us to their village, Iférouane?" then, knowing to make him a great gift, by proposing him something alike, he added cheerfully: "By riding dromedaries, of course, it goes without saying!"

"It is always a pleasure for me to pay a visit to my old friend Moussa Äg-Mongoufou, but I confess I am getting old and therefore less inclined to long journeys alone across the desert; therefore the occasions to see him have substantially decreased. I therefore take with particular pleasure this opportunity to travel with

you to Iférouane, also because you were such a pleasant travel-mate when we rode to that place the other time, Ricardo!”

Ricardo had noticed Ahmed’s eye lingering over one of the women of the Kel Air tribe while they were there and suspected that Ahmed could have a particular personal interest in travelling to Iférouane. He therefore quizzed him putting forward his suspicion; he said very cheerfully:

“Tell me the truth, Ahmed: isn’t it there another reason why you willingly travel with us to Iférouane?”

Blushing intensely, Ahmed protested vehemently, but in a friendly tone:

“Ricardo, you are a real pest! With you it is impossible to keep a secret hidden! Well, as a matter of fact, I put my eye on Hamla’s younger sister, Hawa. As a matter of fact, I am left with only one wife now and I think she could be another good wife for me!”

Ricardo had had the opportunity to know Hawa; she was in fact one of the younger women helping Hamla when the latter was busy with Catherine’s delivery of her child. In his eyes, she was not a very attractive woman, but certainly very active and efficient. He therefore cheerfully replied:

“Why not? I personally think that it is a very good idea, Ahmed. Hawa is certainly the sort of woman you need to make you happy and to have more help in your tent.”

Ricardo then addressed Miguel out loud, who appeared to be very surprised by Ahmed’s offer to sleep with his wife and, as a consequence, was very hesitant about what to do:

“Miguel, please, honour chief Ahmed El-Moktar’s great gift, granted to you as a sign of his benevolence towards us and in full respect of the traditional Tuareg’s rules of hospitality and take Tamou, his charming wife, to bed.” then added sotto voce in Spanish, in order not to be understood by Ahmed: “You like it or not, you *must* make love to this woman. Should you in fact refuse, you would deeply offend Ahmed and offences, among Tuareg, are often washed in blood. Therefore, in spite of his mild temper, he could kill us! So leave protests aside, go on and behave bravely, as a real man. To fully satisfy her and, together with her, also her husband, you must let her enjoy an agreeable and pleasant night of unbridled love!”

Although reticent and half-heartedly, at least at the beginning,

Miguel took Tamou to bed with him and made love to her. She probably was a keen lover, because the following morning he did not appear displeased at all for the night spent with this Kel Ajjer woman. She too seemed to have particularly appreciated Miguel's love performances. That's what Ricardo presumed from their satisfied smiles and their keeping reciprocally hand-in-hand.

Ahmed chose two good dromedaries – or, as Tuareg use to call them, two meharis – for Ricardo and Miguel and gave Miguel the first rudimentary teaching on how to mount such animal. It was very comic to see how funnily Miguel responded to Ahmed's lessons, risking a fall from the high back of his dromedary a thousand times. It has to be said that dromedaries have a very uncommon way of rising to their feet from the squat position: first they half raise their hind legs, then they raise up fully the front legs and finally they extend their hind legs to full length. In this way the rider, who mounts on its saddle when the animal is squatted, is violently shaken first forwards, then backwards and finally forwards again. It has to be noted that the saddle is placed before the dromedary's hump, therefore leaning a bit downwards on the animal's shoulder.

Tuareg, who always mount their meharis barefoot, attaching their sandals to the saddle, use also a more difficult technique to climb onto the dromedary's back: while the animal is standing, they put one foot on the dromedary's front knee, then the other on the hollow of their neck and finally they pivot to sit. The right posture on the saddle is to stay well seated on the saddle circular (like a disk) plate, with the legs in front of the rider, contouring the saddle front mast and rested on the animal's neck, one foot over the other. Possibly, the toes of one foot can be parted to pitchfork the dromedary's big and strong neck nerve. By putting more or less pressure on this nerve, the rider can push the animal to walk and speed it up.

Saddles have different shapes and sizes in the different countries of the Sahara, but the most typical (and beautiful) one is the so-called Iférouane – or Agadez – saddle, with its three arms front mast (said to recall the 'Southern Cross' constellation) and its high straight back engraved with leather geometrical patterns. Once the rider is installed on the saddle and the animal simply walks, the equilibrium is easily attained and there is no danger of falling down in spite of the dromedary's strange walking way; but difficulties increase when

the animal is pushed to trot, because there is no point to hold onto its body and because the dromedary's rolling amble gait (it walks by pushing forward the two legs on the same side, not alternating them like other four-legged animals) throws the rider up in the air at every step. Not to mention galloping, which is extremely ungainly, with the animal swinging and leaning down from right to left and vice versa. Only an experienced adult or young male Tuareg can ride a galloping dromedary!

At last, Miguel learnt how to mount his mehari and they were ready to leave the In Guezzam Kel Ajers' camp. So as not to bore Ricardo by following the same track as the former time, when he still was in search of Catherine, Ahmed chose another track, a much more northern, though longer one, which took them to In Azaoua north of the extreme northern ramifications of the Air mountain range. From there they came down southwards to the Adrar Bous (where they could collect from the ground some beautiful arrow-tips in green jasper) and then to the Temet circular ridge with its phantasmagorical high pale-yellowish sandy dunes. Right in the middle of the Temet stood an old dead tree the trunk of which resembled a caracoling gryphon. On the plain outside that typical circular ridge they could see a herd of ostriches. Many lonely gazelles were met along the track. Miguel was sorry not to have a rifle with him, to enable him to do a little hunting. Then, passing at the foot of the Greboun Mountain and going around it, they headed straight to Iférouane. They completed the journey in six days. At night, that they spent in the open desert with only a small piece of cotton cloth that Ahmed had brought with him for shelter (but they had blankets closely wrapped around them), the daytime high temperature dropped so abruptly that they had the sensation it fell below freezing point. Miguel said:

"I never imagined that it could be so cold in the desert, Ricardo! What can it be? 32 °F? Below that?"

Ricardo, who had already experienced the rigid night-temperatures of the desert, replied smiling amused:

"It is not really necessary for the temperature to drop to 32 °F or below that to give you the impression of freezing. The human body, you see, Miguel, is a very low and slow heat condenser: when the temperature drops so suddenly by 50 or 60 degrees Fahrenheit from the 95 to 110 °F of daytime, in the shadow (the air here is very terse

and, moreover, the Sahara desert plateau is at an average altitude of 1200 to 1500 feet above sea level), you immediately feel as if ice is penetrating into your bones. Personally, I must say, I never suffered the cold so much as one night I spent here, in the desert, also because of the light garments I was wearing.”

When they arrived at Iférouane, the news of Ricardo’s return (more than that of Ahmed El-Moktar’s arrival) spread out rapidly throughout the entire village. The whole tribe gathered immediately. Ricardo had left a real imprint of himself during his former sojourns: everybody liked him and considered him as a brother, as a strict member or a part of their community and was therefore extremely happy to see him back, when they had thought he was gone forever. Moussa and Hamla came out of their hut to revere him. He was even too embarrassed by such a warm welcome and shyly thanked everybody for their kindness towards him.

Aysha, who was watering at the well, dropped her half-full gourds instantly and ran like a mad person to the main village centre and stood immobile, as though she were paralysed, admiring the man she had learnt to love above everybody and above everything. She would have liked to fling herself into his adored arms, those arms which had been capable of holding her so suavely and tenderly in their most soft embrace, to hug him tightly to herself, to caress him, to kiss his beloved face. But she had to refrain, she could not do it so openly in front of the whole tribe, she was Moussa Äg-Mongoufou’s wife, the woman of the honoured chief of the Kel Äirs and she did not want to throw dishonour and shame on him. He did not deserve at all such hateful behaviour by her; in spite of the sinful and treacherous desire she felt for Ricardo, she was fully conscious of it. If she had to betray him, as she was obviously eager to do, because of this passion now harboured in her heart for Ricardo, it had to be done in the secret of the night, not openly in front of everybody.

She therefore simply smiled at him with her heart jumping and leaping in her chest, under the highest emotion. She waved her hand at him vigorously, nodding with her head and winking at him to let him understand that she was still the same woman he had known and loved nearly one year before. And that she still utterly desired him.

Miguel noticed that the beautiful woman behind the crowd was

winking at Ricardo and asked:

“Who is that superb woman over there who is nodding at you? She is the most delightful woman I ever saw!”

At first Ricardo strutted for the admiration raised by Aysha in Miguel; then replied quietly:

“She is Aysha, the Kel Aïrs’s chief, Moussa Äg-Mongoufou’s, third wife.”

“Is she in love with you? You did not tell me anything about her, but from her frantic and joyful gestures towards you, I must deduct that she has a strong feeling for you.”

“Yes, I presume she is. She was given to me by her husband as a hospitality gift when I first came here to rescue Catherine – you know, Catherine was Moussa’s slave, destined to become his concubine after the delivery of her child – and we made love. She is a sumptuous lover and we made love again and again, many other times afterwards. I like her much, or, better, I think that maybe I even love her. In any case, I am certainly very fond of her. She deserves entirely a sound sentiment towards her.”

“You are a very lucky man, Ricardo! I think that a woman of that incredible beauty is something very rare to be seen. I frankly envy you.”

Ricardo felt happy that Miguel considered Aysha of such high value and replied solidly:

“Thank you, Miguel. But don’t envy me, because there are plenty of very attractive women here with whom you can try your chances. And wait to see her young sister, Dessine. If possible, she is even more beautiful than Aysha. Dessine is very young, much too young for me, for instance, but she is a woman that any man would get crazy about and eager to have for himself forever.”

“If you tell me this and I am convinced that you are a fine connoisseur of the virtues and charms of a woman, then I really want to know this Dessine.”

“All right, Miguel, let me discuss this issue with Aysha when we meet. I think that Aysha will be happy to introduce you to her sister.”

“Thank you, Ricardo. But tell me one thing: how could you make love to Aysha despite Catherine’s presence. I noticed, from the way she looks at you when you are in her presence – her eyes literally enlighten and become brilliant as diamonds –, that she harbours in

her heart a strong feeling towards you, which goes much beyond the gratitude and the admiration she obviously must feel for the man who has amply shown his affection for her by bravely rescuing her from captivity and slavery. I think that Catherine is maybe secretly fond of you ...”

Ricardo interrupted him, worried:

“For God’s sake, Miguel! Do not express these considerations in the presence of your brother! He might get jealous and maybe even kill me on suspicion of an affair between us!”

“Keep calm, Ricardo, I will never reveal to Pedro my personal impressions and deductions about Catherine’s behaviour. You know, at the beginning I really detested and nearly hated her (that’s why I did what I did), but now I understood what a lovely person she is and, if this can give you personal pleasure, I tell you that I will soon be able to love her. This notwithstanding, I’m convinced that Catherine, at the bottom of her heart, loves you and, in spite of her affection for Pedro, considers *you*, not Pedro, as the man of her life.”

“What I can say is that I loved Catherine very much since the beginning of our acquaintance: she is a very charming and delightful person endowed with countless virtues. She is my very best friend and, frankly speaking, I sincerely envy with all my heart Pedro who has got the chance of marrying her!”

“OK, Ricardo. But you did not answer my question: how could you manage to make love to Aysha, while Catherine was there? She must have been upset and absolutely furious; I’m pretty sure that she was jealous of you! How could she accept your making love to another woman in her presence? No woman, under any circumstances, can accept that the man she is fond of makes love to another woman, moreover just under her eyes.”

“It was in her presence indeed, since we were living in the same hut. But she kindly accepted it.”

“Knowing her strong and forceful temper, I must say that I am very surprised to hear this. Among all your praiseworthy characteristics you must have also that of lion tamer, Ricardo: I own up that I have great difficulty in believing it! Catherine subdued and allowing you to make love to another woman near her, in the same bed! Frankly speaking, it is unbelievable!”

“Catherine knew very well she could not have any aim in my respect. She was pregnant by your brother and officially his fiancée.

Moreover, she had made an oath not to have sex with me. For her, I was out of the picture. Apparently, in the eyes of the entire Kel Aïr tribe and not merely in those of its chief and his wife, we had to sleep together because in order to obtain her freedom I had to tell Moussa Äg-Mongoufou a lie and pretend she was my own fiancée, bearing in her womb a baby of mine. Only under these circumstances, since I arrived here after a long and difficult hunt, full of hurdles which would discourage other men from the pursuit and he admired my tenaciousness and perhaps the courage, he consented to free her. Had I said that I came here to rescue another man's woman, he would have treated me as a madman, maybe mocked me and refused to deliver Catherine into my hands.

So we had to share the same hut. But Catherine knew the Tuareg rules of hospitality and the fact that Moussa had given me his wife to make love to and could not hinder me from performing my guest's duty. She tried to protest later, when Aysha and I made love other times, of course, but I convinced her that Aysha needed and deserved this act of reward from me. She proved to be very understanding and she allowed me to make love to Aysha every time the latter secretly and silently slipped away into our hut."

"I firmly believe that you are an exceptional man, Ricardo, and very warmly congratulate you for your successes!"

"Thank you, Miguel. But I am not as exceptional as you seem to believe, I assure you."

"No, ... no, let me say it. You really are a great man! The simple fact that you subjugated Catherine and obtained her complicity is an exceptional result. I fully admire you."

In the night, Ricardo received Aysha's secret visit. She had carefully washed to clean her body from dust and sweat, as well as, as much as possible, from henna and indigo and was agreeably perfumed with a fragrant natural scent.

She clung tightly to Ricardo pressing her splendid naked body against his own, which glowed with pleasure and happiness, quickly attaining the apex of libido and desire. She murmured softly:

"Ricardo, I thought I had lost you forever. I avow that when you left, the last time you came to Iférouane, I wept disconsolately for days. Now, you are here again: I have no words to express to you how great my joy and my happiness are! But, please, my dear, do not take me for a shameless, untrustworthy and unfaithful woman:

believe me, with no other man would I ever betray Moussa as I'm doing with you, but it is his own fault if I became so fond of you: he *gave me* to you as hospitality gift! Then I really fell in love with you, Ricardo, because you are such an exceptional man! You are now my only love, the *only man* I want *inside me*! Thank Allah, the Almighty, now Moussa neglects and ignores me, because he is very busy making love to his new very young wife, Mariamá.”

Ricardo replied tenderly:

“Moussa is a silly man and doesn't know what he misses if he leaves you alone and doesn't make love to you. You are a real fire, provided with exceptional womanhood. I, contrary to him, utterly love you and want you, with all my heart, my mind, my senses!”

So said, he hugged her tightly to himself; they stroked their bodies against each other, softly, and they exchanged the softest and most tender and voluptuous caresses.

She sucked his nipples – rather prominent for those of a man – with pleasure and passion until he could no longer resist from waiting passively for her action. Ricardo therefore kissed and licked intimately her face, firmly but tenderly enclosing her lips between his teeth and roughly stroking them with his tongue, while he aspired and avidly ingested her breath. She abandoned herself entirely to the enormous wave of bliss and pleasure wrapping closely her whole being, mentally and physically, in his hug.

She came suddenly with a short but clear cry that failed to wake Miguel up, while her body was strongly shaken by vivid and vigorous blows as under the effect of epileptic convulsions. Then Ricardo lay on her marvellous body and made love to her, gently entering into her genitals. She had been longing for a long time to be penetrated by him and was therefore on cloud nine at feeling that vital part of his beloved body inside hers. They came again warmly with unspeakable joy and happiness. To avoid waking Miguel up, Ricardo hindered her from shouting aloud, by keeping her mouth closed with his own glued to hers in a long, passionate kiss. Sotto voce, he then asked her:

“My beloved Aysha, has your sister Dessine a man?”

She was immediately alarmed that he could have put his eyes on her young sister and reacted wildly:

“No, she has no man yet. But why do you want to know it? Do you want her?”

“No, darling, what are you thinking? She is too young for me and you are more than enough for me! I love only you! But Dessine is certainly suitable for my friend Miguel: he has a bad relationship with foreigners and in particular with African people and I want him to change his attitude towards my beloved African friends. What medicine to heal him can be more successful than a fabulous young woman as your sister cheerfully agreeing to spend some time in tender chatters with him? Can you please introduce him to her?”

“Yes, my love, I can certainly introduce Miguel to Dessine. But she is still virgin, she has never played with a man yet and I wonder which sort of woman Miguel needs? A woman to make love to or a young woman to simply talk to?”

“What I personally feel Miguel needs is to get crazy about a beautiful African woman and Dessine is so pretty and attractive as to let a man be head over heels in love with her. So, for the moment, what I want for him is that he meets her. Then, if there are flowers, they will blossom and if Dessine will decide to concede him her graces, the better. But it will be totally up to her to decide whether she really wants it: she is a grown up girl and can do it.”

“OK, Ricardo. I will introduce Miguel to Dessine today, let’s say in the afternoon, when Dessine is freer from home engagements.”

Later on, when Aysha introduced Miguel to Dessine, he remained breathless, with the impression that his heart had gone crazy: at times it stopped its regular beating for several seconds, then immediately after it beat at an incredibly fast speed, then it stopped again: in his whole life, he had never seen a beauty of that sort! She was *beauty* itself, materialized in an angelic face and in the perfection of a statuesque body. As a matter of fact, Dessine, 19 years old, was really delightful: she had a perfectly oval face with enormous grey eyes and a regular very attractive mouth with small but fleshy lips, a long neck fiercely kept erect on a body of absolute perfection: full, round shoulders, magnificent, plump, hard and erect breasts, a thin waist, round, well shaped hips, slightly tubular, graceful thighs, straight long legs. Her complexion was very clear, though slightly tanned. A divine, sublime creature, no doubt! Nature had been very generous with her, superbly gifting her with the most sought after fascinating virtues, not saving greedily any of the seduction’s charms that it uses to endow some rare women with.

As foreseen by Ricardo, love at first sight sparked in Miguel’s

heart for this magnificent young woman. Although more cool and reserved, Dessine too liked immediately the foreigner who had been introduced to her by her elder sister: though virgin and freehearted, she was obviously coquettish as any beautiful woman rightly is; she accepted willingly the close courting he started in her respect, listened to his jokes, laughing heartily with a joyous argentine laugh that instantaneously warmed Miguel's heart, talked amiably to him and, though keeping him at the right distance in order to show she was not ready to fall in his arms, openly and clearly declared her pleasure and satisfaction in talking to him. Miguel was enraptured. Later in the evening, when they remained alone, before going to Moussa's hut where they had been invited to share food with him and his family, Miguel confessed to Ricardo the troubles of his heart:

"Ricardo, when I saw her, I remained speechless, she was like an unreal vision: I could not believe my own eyes, so much perfection in only one single being was absolutely inconceivable! How is it possible that angels of that extraordinary beauty exist in such remote and hidden recesses of the earth like this village surrounded by mountains?"

"I had advised you, Miguel, do you remember: 'wait to see Dessine'. Wasn't I right? Is she not a real and unique splendour? Have you ever seen anybody similar in Spain?"

"You were perfectly right. She is the most terrific, fabulous woman I ever met or saw."

In Moussa's hut they met Hamla, his first wife, whom they greeted and honoured, as due, with particular emphasis giving her a small gift brought from Spain – a hand-mirror and a comb encrusted with silver – then Tana, his second wife, Aysha and his fourth wife, the very young Mariamá. Mariamá had finally arrived in Iférouane accompanied by her father during Ricardo's yearlong absence. She had been received with full honours and was very happy and proud to become one of the most renowned Tuareg's chief's wife. The only people who dared complain for Moussa's choice were his two elder sons, the same ones who had competed with him for Catherine's possession.

Mariamá had immediately become pregnant and had already given birth to a child, to Moussa's obvious great happiness and pride (because in this way his virility, in spite of his advanced age, was enhanced in front of his own grown-up children and of the whole

tribe). When Ricardo and Miguel entered into the hut, she was breastfeeding this child of hers – a nice fattish baby-boy – quietly and not-bashfully showing a marvellous firm and hard breast. The four men (Ahmed, obviously, had been invited as well) sat in the foreground and the four women stayed in the background behind them, normally silent or chit-chatting among themselves under their breath. Though Ricardo would have liked a lot to talk to the exceedingly charming Aysha, the four men only very sporadically addressed them.

The food, mainly roasted goat (the so-called fabulous ‘mechoui’) and poultry meat with brown beans, was good and well cooked; Ricardo and Miguel enjoyed it very much and warmly thanked Moussa for his kind invitation: Moussa, encouraged by his guests and by the women, was happy to show his riches and his power and strutted like a peacock; he even gave an example of his musical talent, starting a Tuareg song which was then sung in choir by all the Tuareg present in the hut. The evening passed very pleasantly for all of them.

When they left, rather early, but such were Tuareg customs, Ricardo and Aysha exchanged a wink to one another, meaning that she would join him in his hut later on. In the night, when everybody was deeply asleep, Aysha slipped surreptitiously into the hut which had been assigned to Ricardo and Miguel and flung herself into his arms. Ricardo was obviously awake, since he was waiting for her arrival, but Miguel too was not yet completely asleep, because they had been chattering long time up to few minutes before her entrance. When she came in, he heard her and, turning his back to them – who were already enlaced in a tender embrace – in an act of courtesy not willing to disturb their love effusions, grumbled:

“Good luck, love birds!”

Rolling and re-rolling on one another on the paillasse, in order to keep in succession a dominant position on the partner and to fully sense the other’s body, Ricardo and Aysha made love to each other impetuously and passionately. He was every time astounded to have the luck that such a magnificent body was tightly held in his arms and that it should be so eager to receive *him* inside it: each time he feared it could be only a splendid dream destined alas to terminate as soon as he awoke.

Ricardo never thought that physical lovemaking was an act due, a

special reward by a woman that he deserved: he was indeed fully convinced that he did not merit anything and nothing was *due* to him; a woman who conceded him the precious most intimate graces of her body, who allowed him to penetrate her, was therefore making him the greatest voluntary gift a woman can endow a man with. He felt moved every time and was exceedingly grateful to his partner – whether he was in love with her or simply having a sex session – for such a marvellous gift.

To make love to an extraordinarily beautiful and tender, romantic woman as Aysha had for him the same high value as touching the sky with his finger! Furthermore, since he was a man incapable of separating sentiment from physical desire and lovemaking, how could he not be fond of an extremely graceful and passionate woman like Aysha, who had so freely and fully devoted herself to him? He surely felt for her, together with a sincere sentiment of gratitude, also a true, deep affection and, maybe, real unbridled love.

In the following days Miguel was more and more busy in courting the delightful Dessine who had now accepted him as her cavalier. He spent most of the day with her helping her in all the activities she had to perform for the routine running of living in a Tuareg village: he drew water from the well, he helped her in washing their garments, he even helped her in the preparation of the daily food and stayed hours listening to her stories.

She was delighted for the attentions paid to her by this handsome European man and little by little perceived that a new up to then totally unknown feeling was taking place in her heart. Eventually, she let all residual hesitations fall and revealed to him her love. She swore that she had never felt a similar sentiment for any other man before, that he, Miguel, had completely conquered her heart, that she, Dessine, would love him and only him for the rest of her life. Miguel, who, also because of his rough and, sometimes, nasty character, had never had such lovely girl, was literally enchanted and became totally crazy about her. They made love with maximum tenderness, but also with great ardour, impetuosity and voluptuousness, as can happen only between young people. The pleasure they both felt was indescribable. They felt as if swallowed into a profound endless spiralling whirlpool from which it was impossible to escape. The vortex of libido and passion had captured them together in its sprawling hole making them revolve whirling

fast like defenceless puppets. They made love again a hundred times in the following days, always with the same intensity and tenacity and proving the same marvellous sensations of pleasure and bliss.

Ricardo and Miguel remained a full month in Iférouane, which was a far longer period than they had planned at the beginning of their journey. It was for both a period of unrestrained romantic love. The two sisters, Aysha and Dessine, were so fond of them that they would have done everything that was in their power to retain them there, not to let them continue their travel. The day of the pitiful farewell arrived anyhow and they had to part from one another. It was a real sad and gloomy moment when they had to inform the two young women of their decision, but Ricardo had asked Miguel:

“Miguel, what do you want to do? Do you prefer to remain here in Iférouane all the time, in order to be enabled to continue ad lib your relationship with the lovely Dessine or do you want to go on, discovering other places in this immense continent, as we had planned in Spain before starting our journey?”

And Miguel, though with enormous difficulty and great sorrow, as well as with resistance against his deepest desires, had replied:

“Frankly speaking, Ricardo, I find myself in Paradise here: everything is so nice and attractive and Dessine is a superlative woman, the right one to have a tender romance with; but I strongly wish I could know something more about this fascinating part of the world, this endowed Africa. Let’s move along with our programme, then!”

They had taken their irrevocable decision, they would therefore leave. It was not easy at all to implement such decision because they were both living an incredibly entrapping season of love, but they had to gather their residual weak mental strengths and resist the bewitching blandishments of their passionate delightful mistresses. Also because Moussa Äg-Mongoufou had noticed that Aysha was leaving his hut every night and once, spying her movements, had discovered that she slipped into the hut reserved to Ricardo and Miguel. It was not difficult for him to imagine what was the aim of this surreptitious behaviour. Although now totally captured by Mariamá’s graces, he felt a bit disconcerted and bitter at the unexpected discovery that his third wife, his favourite before Mariamá’s arrival, might like making love to one of the two European men so much. ‘By the way, was it Ricardo, the man he

had destined her to for hospitality reasons one year ago or the younger one, what was his name, oh yes, Miguel, who had captured and therefore taken full possession of her heart and, as a consequence, of her body?’

Moussa felt wounded and displeased: it was indeed the first time that one of his women – and Aysha, being his third wife, was a woman fully and officially belonging to him – was covertly (or non-covertly?) preferring another man to him. It was a real affront, an insult, a scandal! Only for politeness vis-à-vis a highly honoured foreigner endowed with great qualities did he not say anything to Ricardo. Had it been another man, caught red-handed like that, Moussa surely would have not hesitated to punish him very severely! And everybody knew well how severe his punishments could be! Ricardo however noticed a certain masked coldness in Moussa’s behaviour towards him and thought that he had perhaps discovered that Aysha had become his mistress and he did not like it. Ricardo therefore thought that this was a further good reason suggesting they should go. The sooner the better. But for certain, the days spent in Iférouane had been impressive, thoughtless and marvellous. In one word, unforgettable.

When the moment of separation came, the two women burst into tears. They were really desperate. They loved those two men with all their heart and felt that a piece of their own life was going away with them. As the former time, Aysha did not want to show publicly her sorrow for Ricardo’s departure and remained hidden in the hut where she could give free place to it by shedding scalding tears. Dessine, on the contrary, who had no engagement with anybody and was therefore free to show openly her sentiments, even in front of the whole tribe, went out to greet Miguel in really desperate tears. She cried aloud, without reticence. The tribe had gathered at the border of the village and all its members were sad that these two European men who had lived rather long time in strict brotherhood with them should now leave them, very probably forever. Ricardo and Miguel went down from Iférouane to Arlit from where they could take the aeroplane to Niamey.

They spent three days in Niamey till the next flight to Abidjan. During these days they visited the colourful, very crowded market place – where they bought some gold filigree jewels from the Senegalese goldsmiths, as well as some mahogany objects from the

Curio sellers –, the small zoo, the Kennedy bridge on the Niger River, on which they even made a pleasant trip on a pirogue (during which a big fish, a so-called ‘Capitaine’, jumped from the water into the boat and was immediately captured by the lucky boat skipper, happy for this unforeseen catch) and the museum with the interesting complete skeletons found in the cemetery of dinosaurs at the Gadoufaoua site in the Ténéré desert.

From Abidjan they could get a flight to Lagos via Accra. To be back in Lagos, where he had spent many pleasant years, was a real joy for Ricardo who always felt very attached to Nigeria (which he sincerely loved and considered his second homeland).

Although now he could not meet Catherine there any more, since she lived happily married in Spain at that time, and he felt that he was missing her tremendously, so that Lagos itself appeared as a different, much less attractive town without her, this megalopolis still exerted its bewitching power and showed openly its magic charms.

Ricardo said to Miguel that he absolutely had to pay a visit to his best Nigerian friends, the Kanu family and went with him to their flat in Victoria Island. They were all full of enthusiasm at seeing him again, they all loved him with all their heart, especially Floss and Dakky. Dakky, in particular, who had had three children by an awful white man, incapable of loving her as she deserved, who often insulted and even dared rising his hands on her, had a real hidden passion for Ricardo, whom she considered the best existing man in the whole world. A real man, with all the best prerogatives of manhood. She would have liked to have had a romance with him, rather than with her actual man.

On his side Ricardo, although he had to own up that she was not really his preferred type of woman and he had a vague suspicion that she – despite producing three children – might be rather frigid in making love, would have literally adored to make love to her and, possibly, to get equally marvellous kids from her. He admitted openly that she was a very beautiful and attractive young woman, fully desirable even now, in spite of the birth of her three children. These little girls – all Dakky’s kids were indeed females – were very cheerful and not particularly shy vis-à-vis those foreigners; on the contrary, they were very excited as children always are when they feel they are at the centre of adults’ attention; they therefore let

Ricardo and Miguel play with them at length, they mounted and even jumped willingly on their laps and embraced them laughing like mad people, making a lot of noise and behaving as turbulent cyclones, under the amused eyes of the whole family.

Ricardo and Miguel (the latter had been impressed by the warm welcome reserved for Ricardo by the Kanus) went and saw them several other times, always raising in them the same enthusiastic sentiments of pure and unbridled friendship, as well as of great happiness for having them together with them at least for a short while.

7.

Another marriage: Catherine's brother-in-law gets a bride

On the third visit they paid them they met in their flat a friend of Meme, Floss's second daughter. This girl was without question one of the most glamorous young black women Ricardo had ever seen in Nigeria, perhaps second only to the girl once met at Motherland, at Lágbájá's concert^(*). She had an absolutely fulgent beauty: a face of a perfect regularity with big brown eyes and small European-type lips, a splendid high standing bosom, round and perfect shoulders, a straight back, a narrow waist, round and perfectly proportioned buttocks, and straight, long, well shaped legs. Sublime statuary shapes could be guessed under her national attire. Naked, as the two men immediately tried to imagine her, she must have been a real wonder of nature. They nearly ate her with their flaming and mesmerised eyes that they could not divert from her for a single minute. She felt entirely the magnetic power of those four eyes constantly laid on her and blushed very intensely: although she was often, obviously, the object of interested observation also among black men, she was not used at all to be watched with such evident demonstration of admiration and pleasure.

Coquettishly, as it happens to all women, especially to beautiful ones, she felt happy to have raised so much interest and attraction for her person in these two handsome white men. They were in fact the very first 'oyinbos' she made the acquaintance of and was therefore very pleased that they might like her. Ricardo and Miguel were about to fight between them to gain her preference for one of the two, but Ricardo soon understood that he had to give free way to Miguel: it was too important, also in respect of his future behaviour towards Catherine, that he should have a romance with a black woman. Especially, if possible, with a black woman of that incredible beauty! He therefore gave up and left Miguel free to court

her. They then invited her and Meme to go out for dinner in a restaurant of the town. This fantastic girl's name was Jennifer Ameche. The two girls accepted enthusiastically.

The opportunity of going out with a white man was in fact the dream of any Lagosian black woman; to be seen by other women, surely envious of her luck, in the interested company of a white mate, maybe enlaced with him in whirly dances or tightly courted by him, was a target aimed at by the great majority of African girls in the town. At least, by all those who in one way or the other had the possibility of getting in touch with an 'oyinbo' and had experienced his usual courtesy. Meme Kanu and Jennifer Ameche were therefore very happy to have this opportunity, it did not matter at all how the evening might evolve.

Ricardo chose to go to the 'Bacchus' restaurant/nightclub on Awolowo Road, Ikoyi. The food there might not be of very first quality, although the restaurant was a renowned one, but the place there was rather dark, provided with a dance floor, very apt to have the necessary romantic and cosy mood for courting a young woman. Since it was one of the most renowned clubs in Lagos, the two girls accepted the choice with a happy howl.

The food was slightly better than Ricardo had expected it to be: the meat was a bit hard, but not bad and the baked potatoes not perfectly cooked, but in the average everything was doubtlessly acceptable. The two girls however were too excited to be there with two white men and did not pay much attention to the quality of the food: they found everything exceedingly good and ravishing. Ricardo, though not really meaning to fascinate Meme – but he had to admit that, growing up, Meme had become a very beautiful girl, maybe as nice and attractive as her elder sister, Dakky and then totally worthy to be made love to –, because she was a close friend, the daughter of his beloved friend Floss who fully trusted him, gently courted Meme at length. She liked his nice way of courting a woman and was all in a flutter about him.

In the darkness of the hall, while dancing tightly enlaced to one another, they exchanged little passionate but friendly kisses. She had a sweet fragrant mouth that drove Ricardo to madness. He felt a sentiment growing in himself and a liking for Meme that he had never suspected it could have place in his heart. He was frightened, he felt in fact he desired her. How dreadful! She was the little

daughter of his great friend, Floss, who had an infinite faith in him and had personally entrusted her to him; his personal code of conduct therefore prohibited him to make love to her and make her his mistress!

He had as a consequence to exercise a strong effort on his own will not to take her immediately to bed in his hotel room. Meme had entirely felt the power of his seductive desire (made fully evident, while dancing, by the hardness reached by his male attributes through the fabric of his trousers and underwear against her abdomen) and was nearly ready to give up with her defences: she liked him a lot, indeed; he was such a good and beloved friend of her mother and her sister, who better than him could deserve to pick up the flower of her virginity? But she was grateful to him for his wise decision to maintain romantically their relationship on the level of a pure though affectionate friendship. It can be said that she loved him even more for this kind and benevolent behaviour and his regard for her.

Miguel in the meantime had started a tight courtship with Jennifer: he courted her freely, sensing that she liked his manners and his attention toward her. As a matter of fact, it was, as said before, the first chance for her to make the acquaintance of an 'oyinbo' and she was not used at all to the exquisite manners and behaviour white men have towards women on their first date; she was used to the wild aggression of African men and found Miguel's ways extremely attractive and praiseworthy. She liked him more and more, she felt she was ready to give him her heart.

They stayed together a long time in that nightclub, dancing, drinking, chatting, then dancing again, drinking, chatting: they were so well together, they liked each other so much, that they did not even notice that time was flowing rapidly away. Perhaps, to their eyes totally lost in the eyes of their respective partners, too rapidly.

In the heart of the night, Ricardo and Miguel accompanied Meme and Jennifer back to the Kanu family's flat (Jennifer also would sleep there that night, as it was too late to go home in Surulere on the Mainland) and then went back to their hotel. Miguel was very excited and on cloud nine. Although Ricardo had become exhausted, willing to sleep and silent, he did not stop a moment from telling him what had happened between him and Jennifer:

"Ricardo, don't you find that Jennifer is a marvellous, magic,

unique girl?” then, without waiting for an answer from his friend, he went on: “She is such a wonderful creature, ... there is no nicer woman on the face of the whole earth, ... she is absolutely and by far the number one. And you know, Ricardo, she is not only the beauty you too could notice, she is also so naïvely good, nicely-tempered, brightly intelligent, adroit, sincerely honest in revealing her sentiments, passionate, romantic and sentimental ...”

Half-asleep, Ricardo interrupted Miguel’s flood of lovely adjectives sung in Jennifer’s honour, saying mockingly:

“... And what more, Miguel? If I have to believe you, she is endowed with all the best qualities that might exist in this world: she is certainly a very privileged person! I congratulate you; you found the rare pearl in a rotten system such as this unworthy world!”

But Miguel retorted hastily:

“Stop pulling my leg, Ricardo: what I’m saying about her is true, it is the pure truth! I don’t invent anything and I don’t magnify her praises: Jennifer is a real treasure, a very precious creature that I’m very happy to have made the acquaintance of. I confess willingly that I am totally fascinated by her, in a way that never happened to me before.”

Ricardo seized the opportunity to throw the memory of a different behaviour in his face:

“Well, you understand now then that when I was speaking in such enthusiastic terms of Catherine, your brother’s wife, but also a member of a family I am really proud and honoured to be a great friend of and the woman I admire most in this world, I was right and did not tell you a lie?”

“It might be so. But I am convinced that Jennifer is unique and no woman can stand a comparison with her. She is even prettier and more attractive than Dessine and this is self-speaking! Anyhow, when I’ll go back to Spain I’ll have an eye of reward for Catherine and I will treat her much better than I treated her in the past, I swear it, Ricardo!”

“I am happy to see that you have changed your attitude – which formerly, let me say it, was absolutely unjustifiable, unfair and odious – towards black people, especially women, who, on the contrary, deserve entirely all our most respectful regards and are really splendid creatures, worthy of our consideration and deepest love and also of marriage, if the case is.”

“Yes, I agree completely with what you are saying. I have the highest esteem for Jennifer who is so bright and can be a totally praiseworthy wife for a European man and I respect her. But I also want her, I mean I want to make love to her, because she is exceedingly beautiful, highly desirable and absolutely very sexy.”

“Well, you will see that tomorrow. Now is a good time for sleep. Good night, Miguel!”

So said, Ricardo, who had really become exhausted, turned on the other side and fell asleep.

The following day Miguel asked Ricardo how it would be possible to meet Jennifer again. Ricardo remained thoughtful for a while, then said:

“I think that the best way to see her is to invite our two partners of yesterday night to the beach. Being with Meme, Jennifer will probably feel more protected and not exposed defenceless to your ardour and advances. Also if she likes you, I am sure that she prefers not to be in the situation of being forced, though because of her own will, to concede you immediately her precious favours.”

“OK, Ricardo. I think that your idea is a very good one.”

Since there was no telephone in Floss's flat, Ricardo went there by taxi and invited Meme to go together with her friend Jennifer Ameche to the seaside with them. She accepted with pleasure and said that she could take the engagement also for her friend; Jennifer certainly would also be happy to get to the beach in such a good and cheerful company as that represented by him and Miguel. Ricardo went back to their hotel and informed Miguel about the girls' joyful acceptance of their proposal. Miguel was beside himself for the happiness at the thought that he would have the opportunity to meet this lovable creature again.

They therefore rented a car with driver and fetched the two girls at the Kanu's flat, then headed towards Eleko Beach, where Ricardo had been so often in the past, feeling so homely, formerly with Edima^(*) and then with Catherine. They found a shelter with deckchairs and a small table in a suitable side of the beach, where it was possible to have a complete view on the beautiful strand, the palm-trees grove and the foaming surf. The two girls were really crazy about jumping in the foam near the strand, while Ricardo taught Miguel how to dive into the frightening disrupting wave and therefore took him behind the breaker, in the open ocean where

they could give ample show of their swimming ability.

Meme and Jennifer were full of admiration for them and welcomed them with high howls and cordial loud claps at their return to the beach. They happily and enthusiastically applauded the two men. If possible, these latter grew even more in the girls' consideration: 'These 'oyinbos' were really capable of any enterprise, nothing could frighten them!' Even other vacationers and sunbathers applauded them very warmly for their adventurous character and their dexterity. Only very few Lagos' swimmers in fact ever tried to go beyond the breaker.

They bought *suya* and *boli* from open-air native cooks and ate them with great gusto and pleasure. Then they played all four beach volley with a ball that they borrowed from some exhausted youths, making the two girls enjoy their stay at the beach very much. At each change of their position, the two couples, Ricardo with Meme and Miguel with Jennifer, embraced one another very warmly for some seconds. An exceedingly romantic mood had been engendered among the four of them: they felt they loved their respective partner very much. Again Ricardo was assailed by the desire of possessing Meme, but he had the wisdom to tell her:

"Meme, you are an enchanting young woman: I must avow that I am like mesmerised and bewitched by your sex-appeal. I love you and I utterly desire you. In this moment my greatest desire is in fact to make love to you, to penetrate you and stay inside you: I'm sure I would get only happiness by entering you. I do not know whether you feel the same sentiment for me; maybe you do or maybe not, but I can get really crazy about you, since you are such a fascinating person and I feel I would be mad for holding you tight in my arms, for caressing you, for kissing and licking you!" then breathing profoundly to get new fresh air into his lungs, he added: "But exactly for this reason, because you are so beautiful and delightful and desirable, I want you to remain as such and not to be somehow spoiled by becoming my mistress: you are indeed much too young for me and your mother, Floss, my great good friend, would certainly not approve a love relationship born between you and me and would for certain blame me if I had not this sort of regard for you. I am sure, even if she would not dare say anything to me – thanks to her kind politeness, as well as to her sound friendship and the nice sentiments she feels for me –, in her heart she would

anyhow blame me! And I am too proud of the friendship of your family towards me to be willing to run the risk of missing it! Though I love you very much, dear Meme, let's then remain simple good friends."

Meme felt a great knot in her throat, she would have wanted to weep, because she felt she loved him and she desired him as well with all her strength. She perceived in fact that he was not refusing to take their relationship to its most obvious conclusion because, for instance, he did not like her; she could gage from his eyes how much he liked and desired her and she would have liked to abandon herself in his virile hug and make love to him.

She understood however that his behaviour was the wisest one and, fully appreciating it, firmly said:

"Ricardo, you are the very best man I ever met and you have a great, unselfish heart: had you been another man you would have certainly taken advantage of me to possibly rape me by sensing that I love you in the way I love you and that I desire you so much. You, on the contrary, take care of my future good and refrain from the idea of possessing me, in spite of your pressing desire of me that I can fully sense is very strong and even in spite of my own wish! Ricardo, my very best friend, OK let's remain good friends, real bosom friends, but know that I really love you with all my heart and wish you were my lover!"

While Ricardo and Meme had exchanged between them these clarifications regarding their mutual relationship, Miguel and Jennifer had started a real love skirmish: they hugged one another in a delightful tight embrace and kissed each other passionately. When they succeeded in separating their mouths from one another, Miguel declared to Jennifer all his immense love and she responded that she had never given her heart to anybody up to that moment, but she was now happy to concede it entirely to him who was the man she loved now with all the strength of her young age.

In strict confidentiality, but with evident pleasure, she even confessed to him that she was absolutely ready and fully determined to concede her body to him, that her greatest desire now was to lose her virginity in his arms.

Miguel had become like crazy and wanted to leave the beach and go back immediately: she was a too wonderful sweet and juicy fruit that had to be picked without losing any more time!

They left the beach and went back to their hotel; Ricardo took Meme to the bar near the swimming pool and offered her a drink: she chose a beer and Ricardo then ordered two beers, taking a lager Gulder one for himself and a dark Guinness for Meme. They chatted amiably at length. Meme demonstrated that she was an intelligent young woman, a young intellectual, so confirming Ricardo in his firm belief that women in Nigeria are not only very bright and can easily talk about and discuss any topic, but are also provided with great good sense and are up-to-date and informed people.

To talk with her was for Ricardo very agreeable and fascinating. As a matter of fact, he liked to talk with women, because he always found discussing with them extremely enriching and enchanting. It is really astonishing to notice how prepared, educated and instructed women in Nigeria are! This is a special prerogative they are absolutely endowed with. Meme was a perfect specimen of Nigerian womanhood: clever, cunning, sharp-witted in spite of her young age, she could easily hold a conversation with a man on the most diversified topics, which made Ricardo happy to have the opportunity of spending some time with such an interesting and charming interlocutor.

Miguel, in the meantime, took Jennifer into his room where they gave free vent to their desire and their lust: they made love tumultuously and voluptuously. It was the very first time that Jennifer had given her body to a man, the first time that she allowed a man to enter her, but she did it with great impetus and pleasure, disclosing to Miguel the access to her most precious treasure, her splendid yet unspoiled virginal genitals. Miguel was totally captured in the contemplation of the magnificent beauty and the perfection of that body that she was so munificently dedicating to him and loved her with great intensity and voluptuousness. He penetrated her with great care, trying to give her as much pleasure and bliss as possible.

Miguel had never known a prettier girl than Jennifer and decided she was the right woman for himself. He wanted her so intensely that they went on making love continuously for three straight days and three nights, stopping only to go to the hotel restaurant for eating at mealtimes (though abundantly out of the exact timetables established by the management). They were both totally bewitched by one another and the reality of the surrounding world disappeared entirely from their sight and from their cognizance of times and

sites. They were lost in the enrapturing vision of one another and could see only each other. They looked into one another's eyes and could read there just the silent expression of a mutual immense love and desire for each other and this was enough for them. It more than amply warmed their hearts and their souls. Nothing existed any more, outside their two bodies in frantic love. No relatives, no friends, but the two of them alone. They expressed to one another the most tender and most romantic phrases of love and a boundless passion inflamed their hearts and their minds.

They swore to one another eternal love and the wish not to leave each other for the rest of their life.

Miguel gave the impression, to those who knew him, not to be the same man as before any more, but to have changed drastically and substantially a lot. He had become softer, sweeter, more tolerant, he accepted being contradicted, he respected other people's different opinion. He was surprised himself by this new attitude of his personality.

When, after three days and three nights of continuous lovemaking, he succeeded in leaving Jennifer alone for a short while, he ran to meet Ricardo and exclaimed emphatically:

"Ricardo, Jennifer is the most marvellous creature existing in this world ..."

Ricardo gently interrupted him:

"You expressed this concept already, Miguel, but are you sure of what you are saying? I think you had a different opinion about black women just some short time ago:"

Miguel retorted ardently:

"It is true, Ricardo, but I behaved like a silly man at that time and I despised, for a principle and a stupid prejudice, what I did not know at all. Now I could see Africa with my own eyes and I found it a splendid and lovely reality. To make love to Jennifer is simply an extraordinary experience, to have her only for me is absolutely sensational and fascinating: I feel I love her more than my own life! I never loved a woman so much in all my life!"

"I am happy to hear this from you, Miguel, and I must add that in my heart I was pretty sure you would change your attitude towards black women once you knew one of them intimately. That's why I urged you to come to Africa."

"I'm very grateful that you didn't limit yourself to tell me that *you*

loved African women, but you also pushed me to live this experience *myself*. Now I happened to have unexpectedly met an extraordinary creature who deserves entirely all my most tender love. *I love her* with all my heart and *want her for me!*” then, with a luminous blink in his eyes, Miguel added: “Ricardo, I want to take Jennifer home to Spain with me, I want to *marry her*.”

“Oh no, my Lord, you too! I can hardly believe it! So, imagine, you and Pedro, the Gutierrez brothers, both married to black women, moreover to two Nigerian women, though one of Edo ethnicity and the second belonging to the Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups: you will certainly become the fable of your village, Miguel! All people will accuse you of heavily contributing to immigration from Africa and, especially, though, frankly speaking, absolutely unfairly and undeservedly, from one of the most ill-famed countries of that continent!”

“I do not mind at all what the villagers in my homeland say! They can gossip as long as they want, it will only be wind blowing in my ears for me; I don’t care! All I want is to have Jennifer all the time with me! And since this is possible only through marriage, I am absolutely ready and determined to marry her!”

“Well, Miguel, since you appear to be so willing to marry her, I can only approve your decision and your choice and I must also say that, in the depth of my heart, I am very envious of you because Jennifer is a really magnificent young woman, a splendid beauty ...”

Miguel hurriedly interrupted him:

“By the way, Ricardo, what did you do with Meme, what happened between you and her? I was so concerned about my own affair that I forgot completely to ask you news of your relationship with that lovely young woman. Did you make love to her? She seemed indeed to intensely wish you to take her – at least so did she appear to my eyes.”

“No, Miguel, though she is a very desirable woman and I must own up that I desired her very much, I assure you, I could not take her to bed for two basic reasons: first, she is the daughter of a very good friend of mine who might disapprove and blame me for such action – and I can’t bear the shame of being blamed by her – and second she is really too young for me. It wouldn’t have been correct and fair on my side to profit from her desire, however strong it might be. One of the two of us had to behave wisely and it came

luckily in time to my mind that, because of my age, it was a task which was up to me. We therefore are now very good friends, real bosom friends, but just friends and nothing more than that.”

“Ricardo, how could you resist? I saw the nice romantic mood engendered between you and Meme and I was convinced you two would finish by making love to one another! I admire you very much for having been so able and strong to desist from taking her to bed!”

“Don’t admire me, Miguel, I don’t really deserve such a sentiment and I did only what was right I should do. I must also frankly say that between the two sisters, Meme and Dakky, the one I really desire and would be happy to make love to is not so much Meme, despite her undoubted attractiveness, but rather Dakky. Meme has in her favour not only her beauty, but especially her youth, the ingenuity and freshness of her young age, but Dakky is a fabulous young woman, very complete and still desirable in spite of her three deliveries. I always desired to make love to her, since the first time I met her, I confess it.”

Then Ricardo considered the materialistic aspects connected with Miguel’s decision to marry Jennifer. He said to the young man who, though at the beginning of their journey was only the brother of his beloved Catherine’s husband, now, after such a long travel and so many adventures lived together, had become his own friend:

“Miguel, if you want to marry Jennifer, you must go and see her father. Did you already inform Jennifer about your wish to marry her and your decision thereabout or not yet?”

“Yes, I already discussed this issue with her and she accepted with enthusiasm my idea.”

“Do you mean that she agreed to become your wife?”

“Yes, that’s what I mean. She was exceedingly happy to receive my marriage proposal.”

“OK. Then you absolutely need to meet her father and ask him her hand ...”

Frantically Miguel asked Ricardo, interrupting him:

“Do they go through such formalities here too?”

“Oh yes. Traditional formalities are more important in Africa than in Europe. And what is more – and here is where my role can turn useful to you, since I am the only other person who has a relationship with you in this far away country – you have to discuss and agree the content of the dowry to be paid to her parents in

order to be allowed to marry her!”

“Discuss the dowry to be paid! Is this the matrimonial habit here? Is it compulsory? Will you then accompany me to see her father?”

“Of course; this role is normally played by the potential bridegroom’s father or by an uncle, but since none of your relatives are present here, the task of performing it will compulsorily fall on my shoulders. I’ll have to play the role of a sort of godfather of yours.”

The two men let Jennifer inform her father that they had the desire to meet him and to attain this aim they should go to his place the next day by 3.30 p.m.. The following afternoon, after Miguel asked Jennifer her family’s address, they moved by taxi from the hotel in time for getting there, as established, by 3.30, bringing, as prescribed by the tradition, two kegs full of palm wine as an introductory homage-gift for Jennifer’s father. In addition, in order to get more accepted in her parents’ eyes, they gave her mother a gold bracelet encrusted with gemstones out of those acquired in Niamey from the Senegalese jewellers. They were fast and arrived in that far corner of Surulere earlier than foreseen, so they had to wait a bit, strolling in the adjacent street to pass the spare time. At 3.29 p.m., very punctually, they rang Jennifer’s parents’ house doorbell.

They were welcomed by Jennifer’s mother who introduced them into the living room. Jennifer’s father was a rather proud and brisk man, who did not like foreigners – and, in particular, white men – very much. He therefore treated them with cold courtesy (they were in his house and he, for the duties of hospitality, was obliged to be kind, but he did want to manifest in one way or the other his dissent and his independence from external influence and judgement). After having nicely asked news of his health and that of his family, Miguel went straight to the point that he had at heart and asked him for Jennifer’s hand. He said that he was absolutely fond of his daughter that he considered the prettiest girl in the entire world and assured him that he would do his best to make Jennifer happy.

Contrary to his expectation (he thought in fact that Jennifer’s father would be happy to give his daughter as a wife to a white man), this African gentleman started shaking his head from left to right and vice versa and appeared to be unsatisfied and rather seriously vexed; he then said that he was not happy at all to entrust his daughter to a white man, because he had heard that white men

are depraved and very often unfaithful people not deserving a woman's love, soon seeking for divorce and several times decidedly free with their fists against their women.

At the end of a long train of accusations against white men's behaviour, partly right (Miguel and Ricardo honestly admitted it), but for the major part absolutely untrue and absurd, Mr. Ameche thanked Miguel for his kind request to have Jennifer as a wife, but he denied his blessing for the marriage of his daughter with Miguel. Miguel was very upset and furious for the bad turn taken by events and thought that that man was making fun of him. Or had he some personal resentment against him, maybe for having deflowered her?

Miguel thought also that the only way he had to overcome the impasse was to kidnap Jennifer, obviously with her consent. But how could he take her out of the country? He could certainly not entrust her to smugglers liable to take her to some neighbouring country! He did not rely on those persons at all: should they do anything bad to Jennifer, he would then repent for the rest of his life. To ask the Spanish Consulate to release her a temporary Spanish passport? Would they be willing to help him in this way? Would they consent to deliver a passport and a visa to her, knowing that her father was contrary to their union? Maybe he could ask the Consul of Spain to Nigeria to register their marriage, in order to make her become a Spaniard by effect of the matrimonial oath and therefore make the delivery of a Spanish passport to her a legal act that couldn't be refused to him.

This was for certain the most practicable way, but it required time to implement the whole process and in the meantime how could Jennifer live hidden in Lagos? Certainly not in the Kanu family's flat because Jennifer's father knew where they lived and their residence was therefore the first place to submit to investigation and special observation. Not in his hotel room either, because it would be an easy job for the police to find out which of the town hotels he was lodged in and come there, making a rightly oriented raid in order to 'free' her. To find a right and convenient hideout for Jennifer against her father's research proved to be a cumbersome problem which required a lot of reflection to be solved. At this point, Ricardo, seeing that Miguel was about to burst out – which could only worsen the mutual relationship with her kin – had to intervene in his favour and plead the cause of his friend vis-à-vis Jennifer's father, in

order to try to find out an acceptable solution to the impasse. He therefore took Mr. Ameche aside and gently but passionately said to him:

“Sir, I see your preoccupation in Jennifer’s regards and personally I can only praise your worrying and your reticence to give Jennifer as wife to a man who is a completely unknown stranger to you. This wise attitude only brings honour to you. As a matter of fact, if I were in your shoes, I would behave exactly in the same way. The point however is that this man here is really profoundly fond of your daughter and loves her immensely, with all his heart. I have known him for a long time (this is, for the truth, a small lie that he had to say to help Miguel), he is a good friend of mine, and this is the first time that I have seen him all head over heels for a woman as he is in the present situation. Note, please, that he does not want to make Jennifer his mistress, i.e. his concubine, but *his wife*. His intentions therefore are very serious and laudable.

You are perhaps right to think that many white people are not serious when they decide to marry and soon ask for divorce – alas, it has become a very frequent habit among us in these last times – but this crazy and senseless behaviour should not be generalized. It will certainly not be practiced in this case. Furthermore, I can tell you that his elder brother also is married to a Nigerian woman, a girl coming from an Edo family of whom I am honoured and proud to be a good and old friend. And this is a very happy marriage, blessed with the birth of several children: two are already there and a third one is on the way. If Jennifer will marry Miguel, thus becoming his wife, this Edo woman will certainly be happy to welcome and help Jennifer in her new family; believe me, I know her quite well!” then, seeing that Mr. Ameche was now wavering, he went on to give him the coup de grâce: “You must also take into account Jennifer’s desire, Mr. Ameche; you cannot disregard her wish, you can’t punish her for simply being in love with a white man, giving her a sorrow and a chagrin which will inevitably mark, with no doubt in the short, but maybe also in the long term, all her life!”

With this last reference to Jennifer’s wellbeing and wish, Ricardo had hit the target: Mr. Ameche loved indeed his daughter very much and was very sensitive on the topic of her contentment and happiness. He would not have voluntarily caused a chagrin or a discontentment in her for any reason in the world. On the contrary,

all that he wanted for her was joy and happiness; he would have given away the entire world to be able to make his daughter the great gift of a brilliant and happy life all the rest of her days. His preoccupation and his consequent hesitation derived straight from what he had heard about white men's behaviour, not from a real racist sentiment that he might feel towards them. If Miguel was the man she really wanted with all her heart, then Miguel was welcome in his family and he was happy to give him his beloved daughter. Mr. Ameche and Ricardo then joined the others who were anxiously waiting in the living room and Mr. Ameche announced his consent to consider Jennifer and Miguel as engaged people, destined to marry soon, and asked his wife to uncork a bottle of French Champagne to make a toast.

Then Ricardo, as the man nearest to Miguel (since no relatives of his were present in Nigeria), in order to comply entirely with the local traditional customs, had necessarily to discuss with Mr. Ameche the kind and size of the dowry that Miguel had to give to Jennifer's parents as a compensation for taking their daughter away from them as his bride.

They had a short discussion, for, of course, Mr. Ameche considered Jennifer of high value (and, dealing with a white man, it was nearly compulsory to raise the bride price to the highest level that could be requested). On the other hand, Ricardo himself had to admit that Jennifer was a young woman of great virtue and full of commendable praises, among which (although not very important for Nigerians) was an extraordinary beauty. But he had to safeguard Miguel's interest in keeping the value of the dowry as low as possible.

The traditional form of dowry in Nigeria was to assure the bride's parents with a herd of cattle, plus sheep and goats, but Ricardo and Mr. Ameche agreed on a certain amount of money that Miguel ought to disburse in Jennifer's family's favour. Mr. Ameche had in fact the wish to refurbish entirely his house, especially the furniture and equipment, and needed a great amount of money to do this. What better occasion then to do it than his daughter's wedding and the consequent income from a dowry? Ricardo and Mr. Ameche eventually agreed on the sum of 450,000 Naira (about 2,000.00 Pounds, a real nonsense for Miguel who would have given out much more than that amount for his beloved Jennifer), to which Miguel

himself generously and voluntarily added 50,000 Naira (to round the figure, he chivalrously said).

Having received Mr. Ameche's consent to the marriage and reached an agreement on the dowry due to Jennifer's parents, the only outstanding issue was the decision about where to hold the wedding ceremony and the date on which to perform it. Miguel, fully supported by Ricardo, wanted a big ceremony to be indicted and organized at home, in Spain, in order to give to it full validity and ample prominence in his own country. As a matter of fact, Miguel had reached the conviction that a special emphasis had to be laid on the fact that he, second in his family and notoriously an anti-foreigner and, in particular, an anti-African, was also marrying an African young woman: in his opinion, this would help a lot to create in his compatriots a new mentality in favour of racial integration.

As Ricardo had expected and hoped, this journey to Africa had produced an astonishing change in Miguel's mind: he looked in fact like having recovered his wits. Being now in love – and what a strong love! – with a lovely and delightful *black* girl, he had indeed completely undermined his old ideas about racial differences and taboos: in the new vision and perception he had now of the world and its populations, skin colour was absolutely meaningless and should not influence, by any means, the choice of a life-partner! He had however to take into account also Mr. and Mrs. Ameche's exigencies, who wanted to celebrate the marriage in Lagos to let all their friends and acquaintances see that their daughter had officially and honourably become the wife of a European man, an 'oyinbo', and not simply his mistress.

Since it frequently happens in fact that African young women are very easily taken away to Europe as concubines by white men and, for this reason, are condemned by everybody at home, this was for them an important issue, which deserved maximum respect and attention. To match everybody's wishes and combine both Jennifer's parents' and Miguel's requirements, it was then decided to perform a short civil ceremony before the Lord Mayor in Lagos and a much more important and pompous religious ceremony in one of the beautiful Spanish monasteries later on in Spain.

Everything took place exactly as established: three weeks later (the time necessary to organize all the ceremony and its annexes), Miguel and Jennifer were in front of the Lord Mayor, in a blaze of joyful

colours and an enormous noisy crowd of applauding and feasting relatives and friends, to take the oath which would unite their lives for the rest of their days. The two of them were deeply moved, though strong enough to show externally a certain imperturbability, and Jennifer's mother, as well as some of her aunts could not refrain from weeping copiously and aloud. Ricardo, as obvious, was requested by Miguel to play the role of his witness. Although he was, himself, highly moved because it came to his mind that he had been unable to perform a similar ceremony with his beloved Catherine, and also because he was admiring the beauty of Jennifer's black face standing out clearly against Miguel's white (but now deeply tanned) face, he did that with great concern and compunction.

After the ceremony a big reception was organized at the 'Flamingo' club on Kofo Abayomi Road, Victoria Island, where all the attendees received good food and a lot of refreshments of various kinds (alcoholic, mainly, and non-alcoholic, such as 'minerals'). The bride and the bridegroom, walking arm in arm, went to all tables greeting and thanking all the guests who commented in return on how beautifully and splendidly they looked together. Miguel and Jennifer felt at the highest peak of happiness and joy and could not quite understand what had happened to make them one single flesh.

Ricardo had asked Miguel whether at this point their travel should be considered as terminated and they ought, as a consequence, travel back to Spain, but Miguel answered keenly that no, he wanted to continue their travel southwards through Africa and this would be their honeymoon journey, provided that Ricardo agreed to stay with them (though without an equivalent feminine counterpart). Ricardo accepted that he would accompany them to the south-western countries of Africa he knew, in order not to abandon a couple of neophytes of this continent like Miguel and his spouse, who had never travelled outside Nigeria before, and to disentangle them from difficulties and cast off the fetters possibly rising in unknown countries. Miguel put forward a nice proposal to Ricardo:

"Why don't you ask the lovely Meme if she wants to join us and travel to countries she certainly does not know? Should she accept, in fact, you could enjoy a female companion yourself and not feel alone and be embarrassed in front of us two."

But Ricardo had promptly responded:

“No, please, Miguel, for God’s sake, let Meme stay alone. I succeeded with a great effort against myself in not taking her to bed. It was difficult, because you know well enough how much I like and desire her, but I could refrain from making love to her. Should she now come with us, continuing our togetherness, I am sure I would not be able to behave and I don’t want the irreparable to happen. No, for her sake, it is much better we don’t take her with us! Much better so, I will have to forcefully live in full chastity.”

They therefore left to Libreville, Gabon the day after the wedding ceremony had taken place. The former day, after the ceremony was over, all three of them went to the Kanu family’s flat to take leave from them. Whilst Dakky stayed isolated and apparently immersed in other thoughts in order not to incur in her man’s rage should his spies’ report any ‘reproachable behaviour by her’ (i.e. particularly friendly behaviour towards Ricardo), Floss and Meme, especially Meme, embraced Ricardo with great evidence of sincere love. Both of them wept abundantly and Meme, who showed real despair in her eyes, nearly swooned for the intense emotion felt on learning that he would leave the following day:

“Why, Ricardo, so soon? Were you not well here, with us?”

“On the contrary, Meme, I stood too well! To be with you and spend time chatting with you, as well as hugging you tightly in my arms while dancing was a marvellous experience that I will never forget. But laxity was about to overcome me and to master me completely, so it is better I move along with Miguel and Jennifer who have to perform their honeymoon journey. Lovable and delightful Meme, I will take you always in my heart and never forget you, believe me!”

For the very last time in her life, she kissed him passionately on his mouth, raising an amused smile in Floss, who considered Ricardo her very best friend, and a hint of jealousy in Dakky, who felt for him a covert sentiment of affection and, perhaps, of love, at seeing how much passion there was in this graceful gesture of her sister towards the man she too desired. Miguel and Jennifer too said very warm farewells to the members of the Kanu family.

The flight to Libreville had a stopover in Douala, Cameroon. Many new passengers embarked there. The seat beside Ricardo was free.

He hoped it would not be occupied by some extra-large person, overflowing on his own place. A nice young African lady came forward and he made her a sign to indicate that that seat was empty, having not been occupied by anybody, and silently inviting her to seat there. The young woman thanked him and sat beside him. They started talking: Ricardo asked her whether she was Cameroonian or Gabonese and she answered that she was Gabonese; then Ricardo wanted to inquire about the reason that had pushed her to go to Cameroon and she replied she had flown to Douala just for shopping, because she would find there items which were lacking in Libreville or costing less there than in her country. She explained to Ricardo that she was working as physiotherapist in the hospital of Libreville and had taken one day leave to fly to Douala. Ricardo, in turn, told her that he was on a holiday trip to Africa with a couple just married, the bridegroom being a European, a Spaniard like himself, and the bride being a young Nigerian woman. In so saying, he indicated them to her.

He furthermore told her that they had planned to spend five days in Libreville, staying at the Okoumé Palace Hotel, where they had booked two rooms, one single and one double room (but afterwards the rooms turned out to be all double rooms with a large, so-called 'matrimonial' bed). His name being too long and difficult to be easily memorized, he handed her his business card. Her name was Nadine Missongo, which, being easy to pronounce, remained well fixed in his memory. They said goodbye to each other very warmly, when they landed at Libreville airport; it had been nice company during the travel indeed, they had pleasantly chatted in French (her official mother-tongue – apart from the native language she spoke at home with her kin –, as her homeland is a francophone country) all along the flight from Douala to the capital-town of Gabon.

The following day, when they all came back from a sightseeing trip around the small but agreeable town, Ricardo found a message waiting for him at the hotel reception: it was from the 'little physiotherapist' as she defined herself, Nadine, who would like to meet him again. She would ring him up by 6 p.m. to check whether a meeting was possible. Later on, when she rang again, Ricardo told her that he had no programmes for the evening and would therefore be waiting for her arrival and gave her the number of his room.

She knocked at the door of the room when she arrived at the

established time. Ricardo opened the door for her to come in. He let her sit on the room's small armchair and ordered the room service to bring him tea for two people and some cookies. While drinking their tea, they continued amiably the conversation of the former day. Although not really very beautiful, she was in fact not tall, but not even very small and had a large face, with a large nose, a high forehead with a noticeable birthmark, long fluent and shiny, soft hair, chubby cheekbones and a large mouth with fleshy lips; altogether she was a pleasant and attractive woman. All of a sudden, Ricardo said:

“Nadine, you are a pretty woman. I like you!”

She blushed intensely; then she said:

“Thank you! You too, I must say, are a very handsome man.” then, after a short pause, she added: “That's why I wanted to see you again: I find you charming and I like you too!”

They kissed one another. At first their kisses were light and vaporous like soap bubbles, then they became more and more ardent, explosive and passionate. Ricardo helped her to take off her dress and drew her onto the bed. She stayed tightly enlaced in his arms, kissing him passionately but did not want to slip off her bra and her panties. She gave herself totally to his kisses, as if enraptured and to his most tender caresses, but did not want to go beyond this. During the night however, which she decided to spend in his bed, Ricardo succeeded in removing off her bra and panties in the darkness and, in this way, to have her completely naked in his arms. In spite of his expectations and doubts, since she appeared when dressed as being rather round, she had a sufficiently slender and rather attractive and desirable body. Her most astonishing features were however related to her breasts.

These were in fact quite lovely, rightly sized, pointy and plump, but endowed with the most incredible unexpected nipples; her nipples indeed were absolutely gigantic, the largest nipples Ricardo had ever seen (even bigger than those of Amina, the young Hausa woman from Kanu once met in Lagos when he lived in Nigeria^(*)): they could easily have the circumference of a two-pence coin! Also in this case, as in Amina's case, their large tops were totally flat. Much to Ricardo's true enjoyment and pleasure in sucking and biting them gently, they stood up from the even tops of her pear-shaped breasts like precious dark broken gemstones. He sucked

them. They made love at length, but she appeared to be really insatiable, like a nymphomaniac: she did not stop for a moment wanting him inside her, but, unluckily for her, he was not that sort of indefatigable stud; he therefore had to manipulate her with his fingers to sate her unquenchable hunger for sex. But she did not even notice it: she was as in a trance and, while - when caressing her vulva - he was kissing her, she waved her arms a lot in the air as if caressing his head but without really touching it as if, perhaps, she was afraid of hurting him, whilst she hastily murmured contemplatively:

“Je t’aime, je t’aime, je t’aime, je t’aime, je t’aime, je t’aime (I love you) ...!”

To Ricardo’s obvious surprise, she came four straight times before deciding it was time to sleep. In the morning, however, when they woke up, she did not appear to be disappointed by his poor performance; on the contrary, she looked totally satisfied and contented; she was happy, nice, appeased, full of simpering towards Ricardo and asked him gently whether they could spend the day together since she did not have to go to work that day, which was her rest-day. Ricardo said that he couldn’t see any problem with this, since he thought that the two ‘love birds’, as he defined Miguel and Jennifer, were probably very happy to spend one day being on their own. He therefore slipped a piece of paper under the door of their room, simply advising them that he would be out all the day for a personal business and went out with Nadine.

She showed him part of the town still unknown to him and the hospital where she worked, then had to go for a brief business to a place in the old and most popular district of the town and finally they met a cousin of hers who, owning a car, gave them a lift and wanted to show to Ricardo the poorest outskirts of Libreville, practically a shantytown. They had a short brunch in a cheap restaurant and then went to the shore. They spent half a day there, bathing joyously and playing in the sea, whose small waves came ashore calmly, not with the violence usually seen in Nigeria, and looking at the other swimmers and sunbathers people, most of the time criticising and mocking them for some unusual or comical behaviour.

At the evening dinner, in the hotel restaurant, the food was prepared and displayed in big casseroles on a table, where the

customers had to help themselves in a self-service way. Ricardo saw that in front of a casserole there was an inscription indicating: 'python'. He had happened to eat boa snake once in a restaurant in Congo and had liked it. He therefore thought that the python snake's taste might not to be too different from the boa's flavour and took a piece of that meat which appeared as being very red, probably because stewed in red wine, and cut into big slices. He found it absolutely delicious and went three times to take more and more slices of this tasty food!

Nadine was very amused that he could like so much a rather typical food of African forests and woods, to which he was certainly not accustomed and liked him even more for his evident adventurous character. They spent the night together, making love with great intensity and pleasure. She clung tightly and passionately to him and appeared to be maddened by his loving action; totally crazy about him, she repeated the same gestures and the same words of love already expressed during the first night they had spent together in love. This night, too, she was not contented and did not want to sleep until she attained four straight orgasms. She left him very early the following morning, in order to go home and change for going to work.

Ricardo met in the hotel lobby two very nice girls, by the names of Antoinette and Mireille Engonga who told him that they were sisters, working as waitresses in a nightclub of the town. Especially Antoinette was a real beauty, a girl who could easily win any beauty contest: tall and slender, with the right proportions, richly fleshy in the right and appropriate points, an angelic face with European-like features, big eyes and small lips, in one word, simply splendid. Mischievously, Ricardo asked her whether she flirted with any young French man, but she astonishingly replied she did not. Ricardo wondered how it could be possible that French youngsters were not highly aroused by a black beauty of that sort and did not wish to have a romance with her. What a shame! Had he lived there, he would have never behaved like that! He snapped gaily some nice photographs of the two sisters and of Antoinette by herself when she went to his room to be photographed in different poses with different garments. For this purpose, she even asked him to lend her a pair of his shirts with which she wanted to be immortalized by his camera.

Nadine came again to spend the night with him on the evening of the following day, which was the last they spent in Libreville: they had indeed planned to leave the following morning, heading to Brazzaville in Congo. She was very sad and she felt like having been murdered because she had started liking him much, perhaps even loving him and had therefore hoped, though knowing well that he would spend only few days in her country, to be able in one way or the other to have a nice romance with him.

Ricardo promised he would write to her, but afterwards very shamefully and guiltily never did.

In Brazzaville, they put up at the Meridien Hotel: it had now become rather old, but was still cosy and they were given nice rooms looking out onto the garden and the swimming pool. Ricardo took Miguel and Jennifer around to visit the town and its most renowned sites, especially to the big market place as well as to an area where nice craft objects, especially in ivory, were sold at affordable prices. The most glamorous object that Ricardo saw was however sold in the hotel's small shop: a fabulous, very well carved, complete chess-game in ivory, where the knights were replaced by squirming crocodiles, the castles by big African huts and the pawns by native warriors with shield and spear. It was really very beautiful and minutely carved, a real precious masterpiece of ivory carving art, but the price requested for it was exorbitant and far too high to make it affordable by Ricardo, who had not sufficient money with him, but anyhow left his eyes and heart on it.

They also went and had lunch in the restaurant on the river bank, just in front of the rapids, where the sharp descent starts and the Congo river loses 35 metres in a very short distance, so hindering its complete navigability (the river is in fact easily and fully navigable only either upstream of these rapids or downstream of the Livingstone's falls up to its estuary in the Atlantic Ocean) and had an excursion by boat on the immense and attractive river, spread with all sorts of large and small engine-powered boats, from ferries to outboard-propelled pirogues.

In the restaurant on the river they could eat caiman meat; it was not bad, but a bit stringy. As usual, when Ricardo saw that in the menu there was the indication of an exotic dish, as in this case that caiman meat was one of the dishes of the day, he immediately wanted to taste it; whilst the other two, Miguel and Jennifer, rather

reticent and dubious about new unknown dietary experiences, were only drawn to order it by his example.

After having spent some pleasant and thoughtless days in Brazzaville, which made Jennifer fully appreciate the differences existing between this country and her native homeland, Nigeria – though both African nations, differences are in fact noticeable –, they continued their journey heading towards Lusaka in Zambia.

Lusaka was still a town on human scale, it had not become a metropolis like Lagos, was still very green and construction speculation had not transformed it in an agglomeration of cement and bricks, or of steel and glass. The building space in the various compounds did not forcefully occupy the entire surface of the involved area, but allowed room also for gardens and vegetation, which made it a very agreeable town. Also Jennifer had to recognize that it was a totally different and much more attractive concept than the furious building habit reigning in Nigeria, where spaces are normally completely invaded by all sorts of constructions. They stayed at the Intercontinental Hotel, which had been recently renovated and had a pleasant atmosphere of real international level and good restaurants.

In one of the shops of the lobby there were two big splendidly carved statues (the head of a man and that of a woman) in verdite, the typical magnificent South African stone, which has a very characteristic colour: pale or dark green, very often with small yellow inclusions. Ricardo, who knew this stone very well and was aware of the fact that its exportation in coarse pieces out of South Africa is strictly prohibited, was deeply fascinated by these two very beautiful specimens of sculptors' ability to produce fine and attractive objects in this splendid and gaudy stone. It has to be said however that, because the stone itself is very hard, compact and devoid of cleavage planes, it is also easily workable, without the risk of sudden involuntary breakage (unlike, for instance, when carving the delicate malachite, which is however not a stone, but a mineral – being a copper carbonate – although used for the same purpose of producing nice statuettes and other ornamental objects).

In Zambia, Ricardo took Miguel and Jennifer on some interesting excursions and surprised them by greeting the local population in Ci-Nyanja, the second most common language spoken in that

country. He had in fact studied a bit of this language's interesting grammar. In using their greeting expressions, he raised great hilarity and contentment among natives. He used to cheerfully greet them saying:

"Uli bwanji (How are you)?"

And they, surprised, happily answered:

"Muli bwino (I am well)!"

Or vice versa.

Renting a Land Rover with the services of a 'white hunter', as guide and driver, they went to the Kafue National Park, where Miguel and Jennifer could see for the very first time in their life wild animals such as lions, elephants, antelopes and giraffes. At a bend in the track, they met two lionesses lying quietly as though bathing in the afternoon sun right in the middle of the track and unwilling to move: it was necessary to stop the car and wait until the lionesses - in all calm and disdaining these human intruders - decided it was time to retire to the bush and disappeared. At a certain moment a frenzied swarm of big flies attacked the car; the white hunter shouted promptly:

"Shut the windows, they are tsetse flies!"

They closed all windows immediately but could not stop the flies from penetrating into the car and so they were all stung by those annoying gadflies; luckily, they must have been new-born insects or, at least, they had not yet pastured on some animal carcasses, because none of them was subsequently affected with the sleeping sickness.

Passing along a tuft of forest, their driver/guide told them that many years ago, there had been a hunters' camp there and he had had to intervene with a small airplane to rescue and take to the hospital in Lusaka an Italian lion-hunter who had been half devoured by a lion.

The story was that this hunter, whose name was Mr. de Cavalieri, was on a hunt safari trip when he and the accompanying guide (another so-called 'white hunter') shot at a lion but only wounded it, without killing it; since a wounded lion cannot be left around like that because it becomes extremely dangerous for defenceless human beings - especially old or weak villagers (women, in particular) -, they got out of the Land Rover and started looking for it among the high grass. Suddenly, the lion jumped out of the grass and put the white hunter out of combat while the Italian shot with his rifle but

missed the lion; the lion then jumped on the Italian throwing him onto the ground and lying on him – but, being wounded, with limited mobility – tried to savage him on his face. In order not to be wounded in his face, the Italian gentleman offered the lion his left arm which he kept in front of his face to protect it and in the meanwhile with the other hand he recharged his rifle; then he fired at the lion point-blank, killing it instantaneously. The lion had devoured a good one and a half kilos of the flesh of his left arm up to the bone and with its hind paws had scarified his legs, so they were afraid of serious septicaemia when he was brought into the hospital, but luckily for him the lion's claws were clean and devoid of animal carcass remains so no septicaemia occurred and he recovered.

The strange fact about this shocking story told them by their guide was the unbelievable coincidence that had happened to Ricardo in the past: he had in fact once met this Italian gentleman at a party, a couple of years after the happy conclusion of his unfortunate misadventure; the man appeared very tranquil, not upset by troubling memories and wished to go hunting lions again. He told the astounded onlookers who had milled around that the most horrible and revolting memory he had of the whole event was to have been compelled to smell the awfully stinking breath of the lion so close to his face!

Ricardo, Miguel and Jennifer visited also the Kariba dam and lake, as well as the Victoria Falls. The dam was a very impressive work: it had been built by an Italian construction company in a gorge on the Zambezi River as a massive very beautiful arc-shaped handiwork. It had thus created the lake which had the same name (Kariba Lake), a vast extension of water surrounded by bushes and meadows. The strangest fact that they learnt about the lake was that the local autochthonous population had not changed at all its ancestral customs following the creation of the lake itself and had not felt the need to convert themselves into a community of fishermen. So although the lake was full of big and tasty fishes, fishing activity took place only on the Zimbabwean side of it (for a long stretch of its course, the Zambezi River marks the boundary between Zambia and Zimbabwe). On the Zambian side, on the contrary, there were no fishermen at all.

The visit to the Victoria Falls was really impressive: it is a sudden

cut in the rock on which flows the Zambezi River with a drop of about 343 feet (104 metres) on a very vast front: the width of the chute attains in fact one mile (1,600 metres) and the river water falls into a very narrow crevice with a devastating roar and a columnar cloud of pulverized droplets of water which remounts toward the sky for about 150 feet (50 metres) and can be seen from far rising above the thick forest's top. Very often, looking at the Falls from the surrounding forest, two spectacular superposed rainbows can be seen in the thick droplets cloud; they come out well on photographs too.

The trio flew by airplane to Livingstone and could clearly see, with an aerial vision, this heavy water 'mushroom' above the wood while approaching Livingstone airport. From the airport, they took a taxi to the hotel constructed in close proximity of the Falls, which had the pompous and resounding name of 'Mosi-oa-Tunya', meaning 'The smoke which thunders' – referring to the high column of vaporized water similar to smoke, especially when seen from afar – which is also the original name that natives give to the Falls.

They spent three days in this very pleasant vacation hotel where small monkeys came to play among the external garden chairs and tables and begged something to eat from the amused guests. They could therefore also cross the nearby bridge and watch the Falls also from the Zimbabwean side, which on one hand is even more spectacular, because there is less water falling on that side and, as a consequence, a good half mile or even longer view on the chute is clearly possible. They were fully fascinated by this spectacular and fabulous natural show, which is really unique and one of the most impressive sights offered to visitors by this world so full of intriguing marvels.

One afternoon they visited the small Livingstone National Park, where some wild animals (in particular, the warthogs that they had not seen in the Kafue Park) could be observed. Jennifer was enthusiastic about this travel that had permitted her to see a previously unknown part of the continent of which she was an ignorant and unaware citizen, and heartily thanked Miguel and Ricardo for having taken her around to those fantastic, wonderful sites.

They were now ready to pay a short visit also to South Africa. From

Lusaka they flew to Johannesburg, on the South African highlands: it was a pleasant town, in a region which was very similar to Switzerland (to make a comparison with an equally mountainous European country lying on highlands). Johannesburg, as a matter of fact, is situated at more than one mile (1,800 metres) above sea level and enjoys therefore a mild climate.

In the territory under the jurisdiction of this town, they could visit one gold mine and some interesting industrial factories.

At this point however they decided that it was time to go back home; the rest of South Africa, with its capital Pretoria and the interesting and beautiful Cape Town and Durban cities, being such a vast country, deserved to be the object of a special journey. Up to Johannesburg, Ricardo had shown to Miguel – and, partially, to Jennifer – all the countries he knew in the western part of the huge African territory. He had therefore entirely fulfilled the engagement he had agreed upon with Miguel in Spain. Ricardo and Miguel were away from Spain for more than two months.

Their return home was therefore marked with particular enthusiasm and joy. They were seen as having merited a real triumph, as it used to be attributed to ancient conquerors. As a matter of fact, they had not conquered anything, but cognisance. The alas only partial cognisance of an immense, different, but fascinating continent, with so many attractive aspects and, especially, interesting populations and, among them, magnificent and delightful women.

There was a thundering noise around them, because everybody was exceedingly excited and shouted aloud. Practically, a real ovation was attributed to them by their kin and friends.

Miguel was feasted in particular for his long-awaited decision to marry and got a lot of compliments and congratulations for the splendid choice of Jennifer as his wife, since, they said, she was as beautiful as a ‘Madonna’, ... perhaps a black Madonna, but, in all respects, a real Madonna. Jennifer herself was cuddled and fondled like a doll and felt particularly happy for the warm treatment received from her husband’s family, bound now to become also her own family.

Of all the members of the family the happiest was however Catherine for two reasons: the first was that another Nigerian young woman had come to make her good company in their respective

husbands' family and the second was that Miguel had now probably changed or would change his attitude towards foreigners and, in particular, towards black people and, as a consequence, towards her too. As she was absolutely convinced since their departure to Africa, Ricardo had once more succeeded in carrying on to a happy end the task that Catherine had secretly entrusted to him in her heart: with his persuasive action and his good example, he had changed Miguel's bad character, he had drawn him to look at things he didn't know with new eyes, under a new perspective, he had let him appreciate the peerless fruits of Africa, he had convinced him to taste their savoury pulp and finally to pick them for himself. New horizons were now opened, a new life was about to open up also for Catherine: with a black wife, as she herself was, how could Miguel now misbehave towards her? He had to change completely his attitude, it was absolutely evident! Catherine was very grateful to Ricardo for what he had performed (which she defined a fabulous miracle).

They now had to organize Miguel's and Jennifer's religious matrimony. Although there are in northern Spain many very mystic and artistic monasteries where a solemn wedding can take place, Miguel wanted to pay a homage to Ricardo – who, by taking him to Africa, had provoked and favoured his meeting with the delightful Jennifer – and chose the same sanctuary where Ricardo's own marriage had taken place many years before: San Juan de la Peña. The monastery was literally bursting with flowers: as a matter of fact, it looked like a real greenhouse or, better, a fantastic garden filled with all sorts of multicoloured splendid specimens of this marvel of nature; the old organ of the church played the mystic compositions of famous music composers of the past: Bach, Händel, Mozart, Schubert, Dvořák and, to close the ceremony, Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's wedding march; the friars of the monastery wanted to honour the Gutierrez family by singing one or two Gregorian choruses. Miguel's and Jennifer's wedding took place in a real cheerful and phantasmagorical jubilation of relatives, friends and acquaintances and a blaze of the most joyful colours of dresses and sets of jewellery. Jennifer, who was exceedingly moved, was, by all accounts, the most glamorous and fascinating bride seen in that county of Spain for many, many years.

All the invitees thought that Miguel was a really lucky man for

having met such a delightful young woman and all the men envied him a lot. Though Jennifer had often dreamt of having a splendidly moving ceremony for her marriage, she had never imagined it could be so sumptuous and with such an incredible feast.

She had asked Catherine and Ricardo to be her witnesses; they had performed this task with great joy, not only for the pleasure of being useful to her, but also for the immense happiness produced by sharing, side by side, a common important engagement. In that moving atmosphere, they could not resist and at a certain moment they surreptitiously joined their hands intertwining their fingers as though in a warm, intimate and secret embrace. They both felt a shiver of thrill pervading them and penetrating into their bones, since the old passion uniting their hearts and their bodies had never really extinguished.

After a rich and succulent dinner, where all the most renowned Spanish food specialities, together with some African special dishes were served to the hungry crowd and an enormous wedding-cake was cut by the newlyweds and distributed to every single fellow guest, the just married couple made the tour of all the tables thanking the various guests for their attendance at their wedding and for the gifts received. They spent some time chatting joyously with all their friends.

Afterwards, dances were opened by Miguel and Jennifer. The two of them showed openly so much happiness and joy that nobody could even notice the difference in their respective skin colour: to the eyes of all invitees they appeared as a single entity, as an harmonious ensemble endowed with the gift of unity and perfect accord.

What a joy it was for Miguel to be able now to introduce Jennifer to somebody saying, with immense pride:

“This is Jennifer, my wife!”

What a pleasure was for Jennifer to have now the possibility of saying, all proud for her new conjugal state:

“I am Jennifer Gutierrez.”

The feast went on for long, practically all the night: in the early morning a breakfast (hot chocolate, tea, coffee and croissants) was served to the very last late-night revellers who had survived up to the dawn in whirling dances and deep, engaging conversation (though some, most probably drunk or, at least, tipsy, had slept on

the sofas).

Miguel and Jennifer had already had their honeymoon journey, touring Africa together with Ricardo, but they wanted anyhow to perform a pilgrimage, offering their marriage as a vow to Saint James' blessing and went therefore to the sanctuary of Santiago de Compostela, walking along the pilgrims path, as Catherine and Ricardo had done with Étienne de Villeneuve some years before. It was really astonishing and encouraging to see how bound to one another this couple was and how quickly had Jennifer caught and made her own all the most intimate aspects of European life!

Among the guests at Miguel's and Jennifer's wedding there was a young Nigerian lady, a very gracious Efik woman of 37 from Calabar, Cross River State (she had therefore the same ethnic and land origin as Edima Essien, Ricardo's former girlfriend) and also a known lady in her hometown, being begotten by a high Chief's family.

She lived in Madrid, where she worked as Justice of Peace, having graduated in Spain, in the ancient and world-renowned University of Salamanca. She had come to Spain when she was only thirteen and she had remained there since then. Obviously, after so many years spent in Spain, she spoke perfect Spanish, fluent and rich, although – strangely, after having lived there so long time! – with a persistent little foreign accent, which made her speech a bit extravagant and exotic. Ricardo saw her kissing another invitee (who afterwards she told him was a priest) while she was moving from the large living room to the garden just at the moment he was himself entering into the house from the garden itself.

So, when, immediately afterwards, she passed by him, he said to her cheerfully and hopefully in a joke-like manner (though doubtful of receiving what he was requesting from her):

“That man is undoubtedly a very lucky one: I too want a kiss from you!”

She looked surprised, but amused by the unexpected request of this temerarious unknown man and willingly condescended to place a kiss on his cheeks. Ricardo, for the truth, let his lips slide on her cheek in order to draw them as much as possible near her mouth which he found absolutely delightful for the particular shape it had and very attractive: absolutely worthy to be kissed! Later on, during the party in the Gutierrez's nice country residence, even more

beautified with enormous bunches of magnificent tropical flowers expressly ordered from Africa, Ricardo had the opportunity to see her again while she was happily in conversation with a small group of men. He felt struck by the beauty of her nice breasts only half-hidden in her décolleté. He approached her and said sweetly though emphatically under his breath:

“Do you know that you have a splendid pair of legs?”

Luckily, he was aware in time that showing an open and too ardent admiration for the undisputable beauty of her unequivocally glamorous glowing breasts, spectacularly globular and endowed with a fine very even skin, which were triumphantly peeping out above the décolleté of her party-dress, would have sounded too impolite and irreverent towards such a nice mannered lady! Although only meant to render a due homage to her charms, this audacious compliment might produce an adverse effect, such as her discontentment and resentment towards him (which, of course, he wanted to avoid at all costs, being rather interested in approaching her), if she took offence at his words. It was better to refrain from manifesting his admiration and his desire for this lovely but almost exclusive part of her body – as he was strongly tempted to do – and make a simpler though delicate reference to a more mentionable part of her, such as the lovely line of her legs!

She blushed instantaneously; this man in fact who had already scrounged a kiss from her with a kind and delightful wording, was apparently not afraid of taking a chance by using slightly impertinent, but at the same time very gallant and agreeable expression (women always like to be admired and praised, including verbally with nice manners and passionate words, for their physical characteristics). She appeared confused and just murmured:

“Thank you!”

Shortly afterwards, she approached him and said amiably:

“My name is Sisi. Can you, please, give me your telephone number in order to enable me to call you if I have to come again to Burgos or to your town if you live elsewhere?”

Ricardo replied that he would be happy to receive her call and told her that he did not live in Burgos but in Valladolid. In order to help her remember his long difficult name, he handed her his business card on which he added by pen his mobile phone number.

Some three weeks later he received a call from her:

"I am Sisi. I'll have to come to Valladolid to meet a colleague of mine in three days time. I wonder whether we can meet; I would like it very much, if it is possible for you, without disturbing your programs and your engagements."

Ricardo could only be happy at this call, although he feared she might have called him mistakenly, having confused him with another of the guests at Miguel's and Jennifer's marriage.

He decided therefore to put in place a tactic for her arrival, in order to ascertain whether she was really interested in him. He arranged anyhow with her that he should go and fetch her at the railway station on her arrival, pretending that he had no other commitments.

He decided in fact to take one day holiday from his office duties in order to be at her full disposal and spend it entirely with her. In order however to discourage himself from making up hasty and unjustifiable plans of conquering her (which anyhow were not appropriate, as their success was very unlikely), he ruminated over and over: 'After all, she is not that beautiful, ... she is not that beautiful, ... she is not!'

On the established day, as agreed upon with her, he went to the station in due time and was there waiting for her at the beginning of her arrival platform. They exchanged a couple of kisses on the cheek. She had not confused him with another invitee to Miguel's and Jennifer's marriage: it was really he the man she desired to meet. But, when they were seated in the car, before starting up the engine, he decided to put anyhow in place the tactic he had worked out the day before and asked her kindly:

"Sisi, you have a very beautiful mouth. It looks so charming indeed! I would like to taste the flavour of your lips: I'm sure in fact that it must be exceedingly sweet. May I kiss you?"

She was surprised by his audacity, but condescended to let him kiss her, though saying:

"Ricardo, please, be nice and behave chivalrously: I am a *married* woman!"

She was indeed married, as she explained immediately afterwards to Ricardo, to a Guardia Civil militiaman, named Helenio Suarez – who however lived far from her, being posted in Huelva, in the far South of Spain, where, after an unfortunate experience at the time of her marriage some twelve years before, she did not want to go again.

They had no children and her marriage was meeting a serious crisis.

She was not happy at all about its progress.

Ricardo kissed her as suavely and tenderly he could, just skimming over her lips. As he had rightly suspected, they were warm and sweet, her mouth being very well shaped, beautiful, agreeable and terribly seducing. She was impressed by his delightful manners and attractive way of kissing. 'This man is a real gentleman, but he is also a true dangerous seducer!' she thought. Being herself an educated Chieftainess, a real lady, even though African, men's manners and behaviour were very important for her and she looked at them carefully. Afterwards, while he was driving, she slid her hand in his own and intertwined her fingers tightly with his. He found her gesture extremely tender and seductive.

She told him that her full name was a long one, just as long as his own: Sisi Ngozi Fitzgerald Williams Etim-Etim.

They went in search of a hotel (she had not made any reservation from Madrid), but were unable to find any as all the hotels they applied to were fully booked. She said that her colleague had proposed putting her up in the small studio-apartment that he owned and was ready to put at her disposal as he had to leave Valladolid to attend a congress in another town.

Since they had not found a convenient hotel, she decided to accept her colleague's proposal. They therefore went to this magistrate's studio to collect the keys of the flat. She was now free from engagements and happy to spend the rest of the day with him.

Then they went to a bar where they got a big sandwich and a drink. She asked for a coke and he ordered a lager beer for himself. Having in this way somehow appeased their hunger with this quick brunch – but he promised her that he would take her to a restaurant in the evening for dinner –, Ricardo took Sisi around the town in a sort of lovely sightseeing, showing her the most important monuments and impressive treasures of Valladolid: the Cathedral, the Iglesias (churches) of San Pablo, of Santa Maria la Antigua, of Las Angustias – where they could see the very fine sculpture of the Virgen de los Cuchillos (the 'Virgin of the Knives') – and the Casa de Cervantes (the house inhabited in the last years of his life by the famous Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, author of the well renowned novel 'El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha'). In visiting those places they were tightly clasped to each

other.

In front of the Iglesia de Santa Maria la Antigua, Ricardo (who had in the meantime completely changed his former opinion about her innate sure charms) said to Sisi jokingly:

“My Chieftainess, I give it to you as a due gift to your beauty and as a homage to your high social rank in Nigeria. It is yours; you can take full possession of your property!”

She was impressed by his hilarious gallantry and laughed amused.

At a parking place, on the side of the last of the visited churches, where they remained at length sitting in the car, she told him a lot of things concerning her own life since her first arrival in Spain many years ago, her family of origin, her marriage with a southern Spaniard lacking high grade education, which soon turned out to be unlucky and the difficult relationship she experienced with his narrow-minded and provincial-thinking family, her profession, first as a debutant and then as an affirmed Court's magistrate, a judge: Ricardo literally drank everything she told him attentively listening to all that she was expressing to him. He felt totally fascinated by this extraordinarily charming woman, so beautiful and clever, with extremely fine and polite manners.

He liked her more and more while her tale was unwinding and as it went on he felt more and more that his feelings towards her were developing in a dangerous way. As a matter of fact, he started literally devouring her with his eyes and felt that a strong mixed-up sentiment of love and admiration for her had been engendered and was nurtured in his heart. He appreciated entirely the amplitude of this feeling and understood that he had become fond of her. In his eyes, she was a really fantastic woman, endowed with qualities that only rarely can be so clearly detected in a human being, in general, and in a woman, in particular: she was in fact not only very beautiful and fascinating, so that a man could lose his head for her, but also exceedingly intelligent, interesting, gentle, passionate, extremely sensible, jocose, elegant and a very valid professional, all gifts that made her an exceptional woman. Gifts he utterly liked to see in a woman. He strongly feared however that his love feeling could be unrequited. But she too felt an enormous wave of tender sentiments for this handsome, long-nosed man, so full of understanding for her misfortune and so ready to sing her praises, overwhelming her totally and over-flooding her heart.

Before the end of the evening, before looking for a restaurant to get their dinner, they had already candidly confessed each other to be reciprocally fully fond of one another, to be hopelessly in love for one another. It had been a real sudden 'coup de foudre' (love at first sight) that had fallen between them and seized them tightly.

After they had a very late dinner (but this is absolutely a common habit and a normal practice in Spain) in a small but good restaurant, Ricardo took Sisi around the town for a nocturnal visit to the joyously illuminated city monuments, such as the theatre and the Museo Nacional de Escultura (the 'National Museum of Sculpture'), then he returned to the place where her friend's flat was. They stopped there and remained a long time sitting in the car kissing and caressing each other at length and expressing to one another, reciprocally, sweet and tender words of love. After a lot of time had elapsed in this tender and romantic way, she suddenly said:

"Ricardo, park the car properly and accompany me. I feel tired of staying sitting in the car like that and want to go and be more comfortable in my friend's house."

Ricardo parked the car more conveniently along the sidewalk (he had formerly stopped on a passage way) and followed her to her colleague's flat. He helped her entering into it. Once inside, while Ricardo went to the bathroom to empty his bladder (he had not done it since he had woken up in the morning and his bladder, at that point, was therefore really full to burst), Sisi went to the bedroom.

When he also went there, looking for her, she had already partly undressed and was half naked. He had to admire her ardently: although not slender (Catherine, for instance, was certainly by far slimmer than she and Ricardo could even notice some cellulite affecting it), her body was absolutely majestic and fascinating, exceedingly attractive and desirable. A real celestial and delightful vision for his eyes. The darkish colour of her skin could just contribute to make her whole figure more beautiful, attractive and somehow mysterious. Strangely, although the skin of her face appeared to be more or less chocolate-like in colour, the complexion of her body was much paler, rather similar to milk with just a bit of coffee poured in it.

In Ricardo's eyes, Sisi was no more a terrestrial creature, but a real radiant goddess, the true goddess of feminine beauty and love, much

more worthy of receiving men's veneration than the ancient mythical goddesses such as Venus, Diana or Minerva. She slipped under the bed-sheet and blanket as though preparing to sleep. Ricardo asked shyly:

"May I come under your cover as well and stay for a while near you, holding you in my arms?"

Her answer sounded cold and impersonal:

"If you want."

Ricardo promptly undressed, keeping only his underwear on him, and slipped at her side under the bed-sheet and blanket, then held her tightly in his arms hugging her tenderly to his chest while whispering into her ear the sweetest words of love that easily came to his mind. In return, she said such tender things to him that, in his whole life, he had never heard from any other woman; she was so different from the young girls for whom up to now he had felt an incredibly tender sentiment of affection: she was a real woman, she knew perfectly well – surely, much better than them – how to express her love to a man! And how marvellously sentimental and romantic was she! Certainly, a lovely mature creature of inestimable value!

They liked and loved each other too much to be capable of resisting their desire for one another.

Soon afterwards they were making love, impetuously and ravishingly. It was a marvellous and delightful, absolutely unequalled sensation: inside her, Ricardo felt that the world did not exist any more, that they were the only human beings existing on the planet and he had never experienced such a great and voluptuous happiness, such a joy of being alive and gifted with the extraordinary gifts of her love and of her splendid body. All the happiness, all the love diffused on the earth was now concentrating and converging on him! On him, only on him! He forgot he was on earth; he had the impression of living in heaven on vaporous and fluffy clouds. Bliss and pleasure touched the highest peak, but were obscured by sentiments. He thought he was the luckiest man on the face of the planet and, despite his enormous sins, must have been necessarily blessed by Heaven to be endowed with that wonderful precious gift. How great, he really had her love! This thought made him become like a madman: was he living a real live experience of crazy love or had he unexpectedly and mysteriously penetrated into a fantastic

fairytale and become one of its characters?

Proud and happy to be able to show her that he knew and could express at least a sentence in her own language, he said joyfully and emphatically to her:

“Muma fien, my beloved Sisi, muma fien (I love you)!”

She liked very much this declaration of love in her own native language and felt, if possible, an even deeper sentiment of adoration for such a sweet, clever and thoughtful man.

He went back home very late in the night. The following day they met at 3 p.m., because Ricardo wanted to go to office and do some work, whilst Sisi had to meet her colleague to give him the papers and the congress documents she had brought from Madrid for him. When they met in front of the Cathedral, he took her to the very centre of the most elegant business and shopping district of Valladolid until she had become tired of walking. They sat in a cosy bar in the town-centre where they ordered a tea for him and a chocolate with whipped cream for her. They stayed there for a long while looking straight into one another’s eyes, saying little nonsense and literally adoring each other.

They then went back to Sisi’s colleague’s flat where they made love again, at length. In order to show her how much he liked her and how devoted he felt to her, Ricardo even did something he had never done in the past with any other woman: he took her feet, one after the other, and, after kissing them, introduced them into his mouth, sucking her toes and intertwining his tongue between them.

In turn, she kissed and sucked his prominent nipples and then, while enlacing fondly and delicately his face with a soft gesture of her elbows and forearms, she even said to him, though in a mocking tone that highly alarmed Ricardo (since it sounded as turning back on him his own first admiring sentence to her ‘Do you know that you have a splendid pair of legs?’):

“Ricardo, you are very handsome and your long nose, to my eyes, is *so* beautiful: I *adore* it!”

Despite his doubts and fears that she might not be really fond of him, this assertion threw him into ecstasy; he asked her eagerly:

“Are you sure? Do you really like it?”

“Yes, I do, ... I really do.” and, after a short pause, she added: “There is something else I want to tell you: if you asked me to do so, I’m ready to divorce from my husband. I could go immediately to

the Court or Town Hall and file a petition for such purpose. ...Tomorrow, ... even tonight! Ricardo, Honey, I feel I wish to marry you, if only you wanted me!"

Because of her declaration of unlimited love and passion for him, Ricardo could have lost his wits: what a unique and delightful person she was! She certainly deserved to be loved in the most delicate, dedicated and passionate way and Ricardo intimately felt he would do it with all his heart and his soul. He felt himself as totally bewitched, but happy as he had never been before. He had to admit that, in spite of all the previous delightful experiences happened in his life, he had never loved a woman so much as he now loved Sisi.

When they decided to go to the restaurant for dinner they discovered that it was extremely late, much later than the former day. They had been making love for more than four straight hours! Everything had been so enthralling, so exhilarating and their love so blinding and seizing that, enveloped in it, they had not noticed at all the passage of time! It was for them as if only a few seconds had elapsed. Luckily, they found the same restaurant of the previous evening still open and could have a good big pizza there together with a draught beer for him and a coke for her. After dinner, Ricardo accompanied Sisi back to the flat which had been their splendid alcove, but as it was already very late had to leave her.

He left her with great despair and death in his heart, because he knew that she was leaving Valladolid early the following morning and he had no opportunity to see her for a good while and the constraint of living far from her caused the insurgence in him of an inconsolable sorrow. He knew in fact that this new-born irresistible feeling for her had been sudden and unexpected, but he was unable to think and accept that now he would have to live far from the source of his joy.

He was however happy, because an unbelievable sentiment was now deeply rooted in his heart and he had fully enjoyed her own love for him. He could hardly believe that all this was real and true and not the sweet product of a dream or of a vision he had had. A splendid and unique young lady had fallen in love with him, *with him*, a now rather *elderly man*: how this had been possible, it was really mysterious and difficult, if not impossible, to understand!

A few days after her return to Madrid her husband arrived there from Huelva. She informed Ricardo about Helenio's arrival, in order

to warn him not to call while he was present in her house. Ricardo afterwards had to suffer a tremendous hint of jealousy in Sisi's husband's respect, because when he asked her:

“Did you make love to your husband?”

She candidly and honestly replied:

“Yes, once.”

Ricardo's jealousy was not so much motivated by the physical act she had performed with her husband (obviously, she was his wife; therefore she had to concede him those acts which are normally considered as 'conjugal obligations'. Moreover she was, of course, the master of her body and could freely concede it to anybody she wanted without any right from Ricardo's side to interfere or complain about). It was mainly provoked by the fact that he knew very well how sincerely passionate and honest she was and was therefore convinced that, in those moments at least, she had conceded herself entirely to her husband, dedicating to him all her heart and her mind. To his greatest vexation and sorrow, he felt, as a consequence, he had been completely expelled from her heart, forsaken and excluded from her most intimate thoughts. She must have completely forgotten her claimed love for Ricardo! He could not stand this worm-thought gnawing his brain. It was too painful! She however intervened to calm him down, assuring him that her love for him was consistent and very strong and had not changed at all.

Some ten days after their meeting, Ricardo had to go to Lisbon, Portugal on a two-day-long mission. He hoped with all his heart that she could join him in order to spend with her those two days in that romantic town, but she had already confirmed her attendance at a magistrate's convention taking place in Malaga and therefore was in the absolute impossibility of staying with him in Lisbon. They were both very sorry to miss this wonderful opportunity for being together again, especially because the room he got in the hotel had a large double bed! They phoned each other continuously, exchanging sweet words of love and assuring each other of their profound love for one another.

Hearing from Ricardo's tales that he had had the occasion of meeting and loving other Nigerian young women before her, she felt jealous of them and of his success with her female compatriots; she feared indeed to be considered by him – who she considered to be a

thoughtless 'playboy' or a real Casanova and vehemently accused him of trying to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds, since for her he was still deeply fond of Catherine (if no more of Edima, especially because now eventually faithfully married to a German man and the happy mother of three kids) – just as one among his many conquests.

He assured her however that she did not have to worry at all about the sincerity of his tender love sentiment for her, since he considered her, on the contrary, as the most precious treasure he had ever had in his whole life and the real queen, as well as the only absolute true owner of his heart.

Ricardo's and Sisi's wonderful love bond happily lasted many years, until her husband one unfortunate day discovered and read some letters that Ricardo had written to her and she had jealously saved in her drawer, instead of tearing up and throwing away in the dustbin. Sisi's husband obviously got furiously angry and wanted to face his rival. Ricardo and Helenio had a clamorous and violent argument at the end of which they challenged each other to a duel to be fought on a Saturday morning, before dawn, behind the Escorial, King Philip the second's renowned palace located a few kilometres outside Madrid. Ricardo won the challenge by succeeding in wounding – although, luckily, not really very seriously and, especially, certainly not deadly – his opponent.

At the sight of her wounded husband, who was all covered with blood when the latter was taken home by his godfathers, Sisi felt guilty at having caused this great inconvenience and of being the origin and reason of such bloody clash between the two men. For this reason – praying fervently for her husband's life, which she thought in extreme danger, considering the abundant loss of blood he had suffered – she firmly decided to make a vow to the Almighty: in exchange of her husband's life and prompt recovery she would renounce her passionate love for Ricardo. Although very half-heartedly and reluctantly, she therefore interrupted her delightful love relationship with him.

Ricardo and Sisi, though not making love to one another any more, remained however very good friends, even more than real bosom friends and a great affection always harboured in their hearts for one

another all their life long. In both of them however persisted the consciousness and conviction of having lost forever a magnificent fairytale opportunity, a unique tender sentiment that could have intimately taken them to an eternal happiness, and had remained instead incomplete and unachieved.

* See *Living in the Land of Love*

8.

The old dream eventually comes true

In the meantime, Catherine's life was now flowing regularly: she took care of the house needs together with María Ana and Jennifer and of the raising of her children and, at times, she also helped Pedro in operating their farm. She was busy all day with cutting and sewing garments for her children: as a matter of fact, she had certainly become a good tailor for children.

Her children were very beautiful, especially the first girl, Isabel, who was also intelligent, very lively, forward and courageous: often she behaved like a boy, climbing trees with great dexterity and jumping down from their branches or from rather high walls with ease and simplicity. As she was in continuous movement, she had been nicknamed 'Earthquake' or 'Turmoil'. In the family, they used to address her normally with these nicknames. This notwithstanding, because of her beauty and her nice temper, she won everybody's affection. Ricardo, who was her secret natural father, obviously loved her very much and went to see her every time he could, with the excuse of paying a visit either to Catherine and Pedro or to Jennifer and Miguel. Isabel called him 'Uncle Ric' (she was the only person to call him like that, he had never been called with a nickname produced by simply abridging his name and she was therefore particularly proud to have invented a nickname for him) and always played with him with great amusement and pleasure. They usually laughed aloud together like mad people at any little nonsense and there was a sort of magic understanding and conspiracy, as well as mutual liking between the two of them.

Catherine and María Ana who knew that he was her real father were not surprised that there was this fantastic, confidential mood between them, but the others, when seeing them playing together,

were astonished every time that the little girl was so attached to their friend and that the latter could enjoy keeping childish behaviour.

Every time he arrived at their house, she ran towards him stretching out her small arms and flinging them round his neck, after having jumped into his lap, and embracing him tight she shouted with her soft voice:

“Uncle Ric, you are here for *me*, aren’t you?”

Ricardo, to make her particularly glad, invariably replied:

“Of course, my lovely Earthquake; if not for you, for whom else do you think I could come here?”

Sometimes, she counter-battered without malice (since malice cannot be harboured in so small children):

“I don’t know. Maybe you came for Mum?”

“Of course, I came also for her. But she can be only the second target of my visit. You, my delightful beloved Turmoil, are number one in my list.”

“Thank you, uncle Ric. I am so happy that you came to play with me!”

And they immediately immersed themselves in their games and jokes.

Some years later, during a summer holiday at home, when she was 14 or 15 and her slender body was undergoing that marvellous metamorphosis process that would drive it from the just rough-hewed childish appearance to the splendid shape of a desirable young girl, something happened to make Ricardo get crazy. Her heaving breasts had in fact started to develop and blossom out sharply round with pricking pointing nipples – like little unripe but hard dark springtime-buds (the only part of her body that clearly denoted her kinship with a black lady as her mother was) – capable of piercing and devastating a man’s chest when rubbed against it and her pubis had begun to cover itself with hairs developing a lovely down, and her intimate parts too were therefore warm and swollen with unconscious desire.

One day she embraced him very warmly, clinging him tightly to herself. He had to jump backwards suddenly, blushing abruptly, because his virile organ had grown up erect at the contact with this wonderful juvenile body, also because she had naïvely started rubbing her pubis lovingly against the pleasant hardness and the stiff turgidity of this protuberance of his body which she could fully

sense. Her enchanting but subconsciously and instinctively perverted motion was so voluptuous and ecstatically erotic, even though she still knew nothing about either voluptuousness or eroticism! And the more she felt his member grow swollen and hard, the more intense and nearly violent became her rubbing action against it.

It was totally normal that her first woman's desires and sexual – though yet unconscious – impulses were for the man she loved so much and for whom she felt an extraordinary, great admiration and affection. But Ricardo felt extremely embarrassed and ashamed at becoming aroused by the delightful and exciting contact with his own daughter's body. He felt horrified, in fact, as if having performed a real incestuous act and nearly as having raped her. He therefore withdrew abruptly, sharply curtailing the delight she was fully sensing by this enthralling and lovely contact, thus leaving her dumbfounded and disappointed by a move that in her naïf eyes looked as a treacherous and hideous repulse of her.

Although at school some more experienced mates had told her how men and women make love, she was still too innocent and genuine to harbour in her heart evil and devilish thoughts. For her in fact, up to that moment, a man's penis was only that small funny pipe she had seen in front of her little brother's low abdomen used simply to convey pee out of his body. Now in 'uncle' Ric this strange pipe had totally unexpectedly to her eyes grown hard like a rod or a baton and was engendering in her bliss and happiness when her pubis and, consequently, her virginal vulva rubbed against it.

But was it really his low abdominal pipe, the so-called penis, which had become so monstrously huge and hard or was it something else that he had hidden in the pocket of his trousers? No part of his body had in fact ever in the past reacted in this way, becoming so swollen and stiff – oh, what a marvellous and exciting turgidity it had attained! – while she was embracing him. She therefore slid a hand furtively in his pocket to ascertain the nature of this object which was giving her so much delight, but found that there was nothing else therein than the handkerchief. So it surely had to be something attached to his body! And what is there in front of a man's low abdomen, if not this small fleshy pipe normally used for conveying pee? But how could this funny pipe then transform itself into that astonishing marvel of nature, a real garden of delights for a young blossoming woman like herself?

She was herself surprised that the contact with Ricardo's body could give her such incredible and unspeakable enormous physical and mental pleasure and frankly wondered whether this could only be produced by contact with 'uncle' Ric's body – because of the great love she felt for him – or also with other men's.

Blissful juvenile unawareness and amorous virginal unconsciousness! Innocent frivolity and fatuity of yet unripe youngsters! She was, obviously, totally unconscious of what had happened to him and, not knowing the mechanism of a man's virile erection, nor, not having yet had any experience in the field, how sexual excitation and consequent instincts act, could she not even imagine raising in him such a terrific cataclysm. Seeing him with closed eyes for the ecstatic pleasure in which she had thrown him and with the effort of resisting his perverted desire, she mischievously asked him whether he was tired and wanted to sleep but he, actually with a strangled voice, had replied that he was not tired at all. Though opening herself to adult behaviour for the first time in her yet young life and experiencing for the very first time adult bliss and pleasure, rubbing her body and particularly her throbbing desire-full pubis against this hardened rod he strangely brought in his trousers was still like a childish game for her.

She would have actually liked to grasp 'the thing' with her hands to feel its consistency and hardness better, as well as to take it out of his trousers to see it, but luckily for Ricardo she did not dare push her adventurous curiosity so far.

But what a devastating experience it was for Ricardo! He freely felt the engendering in him of a strenuous conflict between the incommensurable bliss she was raising in him with her provocative action and the awareness that, as her natural father, he was going to taste an absolutely prohibited fruit, guiltily infringing an insurmountable taboo. Therefore, all red for shame and deeply appalled, he had withdrawn.

On her side, although still vaguely and imperfectly, by virtue of the pleasure felt from the contact with this man's body, she had discovered that she was becoming a real woman. In spite of her often boyish attitude in her turbulent behaviour and character, she certainly was very different from a boy. In no way was she a boy! Now, this sudden parting of their bodies had however provoked great sorrow in her, as she was enjoying that contact very much, and

left her deluded and frustrated as a child becomes when it is suddenly and unreasonably deprived of the toy it is playing with. It made her think: 'Why is he repelling me? Doesn't he like me any more?' But then, not minding his treacherous and disappointing act any more, she had looked straight in his eyes with her most tender, passionate and coquettish smile on her lovely face and exclaimed in a very sweet and romantic tone, as if conjuring up something that she had to share only with him in secret:

"Uncle Ric, you must promise me one thing!"

"Yes, my sweetie, my beloved Little Nymph, tell me, what do I have to promise you?"

"You must promise me that when I become a grown-up girl, let's say 18 years old, you will marry me!"

He blushed again feeling the desire to tell her the truth, but yet was he determined not to break the oath made to Catherine, disclosing her that *he* was *her* natural father. He therefore replied, simply and quietly:

"Delightful Little Nymph, you know well enough how much I love you. I would therefore be the happiest man on earth if I could marry you. But I cannot marry you, unfortunately. You see, when you will be 18, I shall be a very old man, really too old to match with your young age. No, Little Nymph, all circumstances will hinder a marriage, it would not work: you need and deserve a much younger companion for your life! I am already considered to be too old for your mother, imagine then how much older I would be for you!"

"But Mum is already married with Pa!"

"Yes, I know, she is married indeed. But this, unfortunately, makes our marriage really impossible, also because I'm already married too. What shall we do moreover with 'aunt' Soledad? Being my wife, she has every right to disagree. In your opinion, isn't it reasonable?"

Since this simple explanation, though not really clear and exhaustive to her eyes, came from 'uncle' Ric, a more than fully and rightly trustable man, in whom she had always placed all her trust without being ever deceived, Isabel accepted his answer without daring to argue further.

Times became hard and gloomy for agriculture in Spain, as in many other countries of Europe. Even Pedro's and Miguel's farm started suffering the after-effects of the general negative period and the

overall economic recession.

Pedro became more and more sad and peevish: he was in fact greatly disappointed at seeing that all his efforts and the incessant indefatigable work he lavished on the running of the farm were in vain and in this negative trend there was no glimmer of hope that better conditions would appear on the horizon. More and more often therefore he was speaking of emigrating: he was thinking of leaving Spain and settling in the USA or in South America.

Little by little, it became his obsession; this fixed idea did not leave him any more and he kept turning it over and over in his mind: he had to try his chance in the new world! With the sound knowledge of all aspects of agriculture he had acquired and the vast practical experience he had personally made, he was ultra-convinced that there would not be any difficulty for him to have success in those far away countries. There, sure, he would certainly get richer!

After having reflected much upon the matter for about two years, one day he finally took his decision: he sold a part of the land that belonged to him alone and was not common property shared with Miguel and María Ana, gathered the rest of the money he had saved in his current account at the bank and flew to the USA, after tenderly embracing Catherine and his children, saying with assured calmness, but also with a certain dose of thoughtlessness:

“I go alone first. Let me find out whether the conditions exist for settling down properly there; then, if I see that it is suitable, you all will join me there!” then he added cheerfully: “Catherine, since you are a black woman, you will not have any difficulty in living in the USA: there are plenty of black people there and you will be easily taken for an autochthonous inhabitant, an American woman! I am sure that you will certainly adapt yourself very easily to American standards of life and, as a consequence, you will enjoy living there.”

Catherine, heartbroken and with the saddest look in her beautiful eyes, replied feverishly:

“Pedro, I don’t like this separation at all, you know it! How long will we have to wait before you call us to come and join you?”

“Honey, it is only momentary! As soon as I’ll have found a good place (possibly a rich farm) where we can live well, I will let you come.”

It was a very gloomy day for everybody when he flew from Madrid airport heading to New York. Catherine and her children

were in tears, Miguel exceedingly nervous and angry, looking around with a truculent face, María Ana closed in herself. To make the day even sadder, it rained cats and dogs. In New York Pedro found a friend of his, another Spaniard who had left Spain in search of good luck some years earlier and had in fact made a modest fortune in the USA, who had been advised of his arrival and was therefore waiting for him.

Since he was an able and stubborn man, very active and skilled, it was not long before Pedro found that there was a good opportunity of buying a very vast farm in Minnesota, about 10,000 acres large, which represented small land ownership by American standards, but was an immense property by European.

He made all the arrangements necessary for the acquisition with the former landlord, making a down-payment in order to block its sale and have a first option, and then went to see the property. He was enchanted: maize and wheat grew as far as the eye could see; why did the old owner wish to get rid of such luxuriant property? A real nonsense to his eyes! Under a shelter there was perfectly working (and in good conditions) agricultural machinery in abundance; so, he would not need to make recourse to other people for renting the necessary tools and means for running the farming enterprise.

The annexed house was an immense 18th century brick mansion, with 6 high stone columns in the front and a wooden veranda on one side and, moreover, very finely furnished: a princely residence! Pedro was really in ecstasy: even his ancestral house in Spain was not so big and so beautiful! In a separate building, belonging to it, there were stables with boxes for horses – with several horses already stabled therein – and habitations for workers and peasants. Coming back to New York, after the visit to the estate, he promptly and eagerly interrogated the old proprietor:

“Excuse me, Sir, but why are you selling this magnificent property? Frankly speaking, if I were in your shoes, I would never sell it!”

The old man replied at once:

“Because I am too old to continue working hard all day on the land as my father, my grandfather and my great-grandfather did and I have no children or heirs to take care of it in my place. I want to settle in a big town provided with all modern comforts before it is

too late and spend my last years there cheerfully and respectably. But you are still young enough to fully enjoy that estate. And, I must say, you look like a good worker, full of energy and enthusiasm, a man who really likes agriculture and is alert to its laws and its requirements. I am therefore particularly happy to leave my old property in good hands! I know that you will keep good care of it: you will see, it will give you – together with the unavoidable fatigue – also a lot of satisfaction!”

Pedro paid to the landlord the balance of the sum required for the acquisition of the estate and got the relevant ownership documents. He could finally touch the sky with his finger: he was now the owner of a wonderful farm, where agriculture had not the heavy and slow rhythms that characterized agriculture in Europe, but the fresh, fast moving exploits typical of the new world; new cultures and new methods awaited him. He was fully aware of the necessity of being on his guard as vast lands like that which now belonged to him required great attention and a lot of care also because of the heavy and sometime terrible and adverse meteorological events that frequently happened there, but he was ready to work hard in order to avert the occurrence of too harsh dangers and tragedies.

Pedro rushed to call Catherine:

“Honey, I have it! It is a wonderful agricultural estate with an impressively splendid house, you will see: I am sure that you will like it and find yourself very well in it! Come with all our children as soon as you can. Or do you prefer me to come back to Spain to help you packing up our belongings and expediting them to the USA?”

“No, Pedro, it is not necessary that you come back, if your presence is required there. I’ll be able to manage all the actions necessary to leave Spain and come as soon as possible. Let me check what is the best I can do, also in respect of our children’s schooling.”

“OK, then. In a short time harvesting will take place here and it is better that I am present here during these important agricultural operations. I therefore shall not come back. Ask Miguel to help you: I am sure he will be pleased to give you a hand for all the necessities related to your leaving our house and departing to the USA.”

However, since children’s school was abundantly over mid-term, Catherine decided that it was better not to move them out of it and not to transfer them to an American school before the end of the

term: it would have had too much impact on them to be so suddenly catapulted in a totally unknown new system. Catherine and her children therefore did not leave Spain for several months.

When the day came, there was copious weeping everywhere; Catherine's children in fact had learnt to love their aunt Jennifer in a very particular way, even more than aunt María Ana, because she was a black woman like their mother and this had a strong impact on them.

Furthermore, Jennifer had in the meantime delivered a baby-boy and they were all astonished at noticing the continuous progresses that this child made on the path of life; it was like a living doll for them and they were full of small attentions for it and liked it very much. To leave them now, without knowing if and when they might see them again, provoked in them a sincere and great sorrow. They left them with enormous pain. Isabel, in particular, was crying aloud, holding onto aunt María Ana's gown not wanting to let her go (Isabel was indeed María Ana's preferred 'niece' – in spite of her lack of real kinship, as she was Ricardo's, not Pedro's, daughter – and the child had always felt perfectly well all the strong affection the young woman had for her, clearly returning it to her 'aunt').

Catherine managed eventually to detach her children from uncle Miguel and aunts Jennifer and María Ana and they embarked on the aeroplane taking them far away, to the fabulous and so much bespoken America. It was their first flight and, curious as any child is about novelty, they were very intrigued about being transferred in few hours to such a distant place. In a short instant they had forgotten uncle and aunts and moved around among other passengers' legs, exploring the astounding airplane or playing with a small high bouncing rubber ball.

Pedro was waiting for them at their arrival at New York airport. The encounter of Catherine with her husband and of the children with their father was particularly moving. The five voyagers were very tired for the hours spent in the airplane, but the sight of Pedro let them forget immediately their tiredness and they all flung into his arms submerging him with sweet caresses and kisses. He had not received such delightful manifestations of love and liking for a long time and was therefore particularly happy that they had at last come to join him in this new stretch of their life in a foreign country (but that he had already started feeling as his own country).

When Pedro took them to their new property and they entered into the immense austere and impressive house, there was a literal volley of: “Oh!” of astounded surprise and joy by all of them: everything seemed unreal and gorgeous to their eyes! Furthermore, Pedro had prepared a mocking joke for them: he had put in the washtub of his bedroom’s bathroom a small living caiman, quietly swimming in a low layer of water!

When Catherine saw it she nearly swooned and shouted aloud, but when the children, who immediately rushed in on hearing their mother screaming, saw it, they thought that the caiman was a normal inhabitant of the house and they prepared themselves to see other wild beasts appear from the dark corners of the huge mansion. They did not want to bathe in order not to disturb the baby-caiman which they immediately wanted to keep with them as a pet. It took a lot to persuade them to return it to the exotic animals’ shop from which Pedro had borrowed it.

As Pedro had foreseen, Catherine liked the new house very much. The house was however very big and she was exceedingly busy in keeping it in good order, especially because the children – who could each enjoy their own room – did on the contrary their best to create everywhere an enormous disorder, a real pandemonium, in particular in this period which coincided with their school holidays. In order to give her some help in the housekeeping job, they engaged a middle-age, fat Mexican woman, who was very jovial and liked the children very much. In a short time she became very affectionate to them and they willingly returned this affection towards her, not least because she, though strongly scolding them all the time, cheerfully spoiled them. That first year the harvest had been particularly rich and there had consequently been an enormous production of maize and wheat.

Pedro was very happy: he could in fact sell the huge quantity of these products – what a joy, all that had been produced in *his own* farm! Simply, a real Eden on earth, for Pedro! – at a very remunerable price, thus earning a conspicuous amount of money.

When the new term started, the children were sent to school. The first day, since they did not yet know either the school itself or their new teachers, they were accompanied by their parents, but then, starting from the following day, they managed to go there alone. In spite of an initial slight diffidence by their schoolmate at seeing

them, because they were foreigners and because they – apart from Isabel who was so pale-skinned as to seem the daughter of a totally white couple – had a noticeable coffee-and-milk coloured skin, they soon got to know those children and, thanks to their congenial good temper, generosity and joyful behaviour, became good friends of them. In the morning some three or four of them got into the habit of coming to their house to pick them up, whistling hard and aloud to call for their attention and draw them out, in order to go happily to school together.

They were all happy and satisfied. But a bad event noticeably upset the serene atmosphere reigning in their house: one evening, about 10.00 p.m., three crosses burning in flames appeared on the hilltop on the other side of the valley facing their house. It was the symbol of the Ku Klux Klan, the ultra-racist white men's organisation hostile to black people! Since Catherine was the only black woman residing in the area, it was evidently directed against her. Pedro was appalled and incredulous:

“How is it possible? The Ku Klux Klan here in Minnesota? We are not in the southern States of the Federation, where adversity against black people still exists and is strongly influential, sometime bursting out with acts of unheard-of violence. Here, things like this should not exist!”

He started worrying for the safety of Catherine and his children. The children however enjoyed totally the favour and the full support of their schoolmates who loved them, as well as that of the latter's parents who had learnt to appreciate their politeness and good character. Luckily, there was therefore nothing to fear on their side. ‘But what about Catherine? Was she in real danger? Who could be so perverted as to wish evil on such a delightful and good-hearted woman? Who was so insane to stage that maniacal and dreadful ritual? Which perverted brain is behind this horrible and fearful signal?’ Pedro was breeding and breeding again in his mind these tormenting and exceedingly painful thoughts. Although years had elapsed, Catherine was still a magnificent, very beautiful woman capable of attracting men's desire and interest; Pedro therefore came to the conclusion that there might be sexual implications rather than serious murdering or social and racial intent in the infamous act.

He stayed on his guard. Then one day, some time later, while Catherine was coming back home from some shopping in the

nearest village (she had to buy seeds for her vegetable garden), her car was stopped on the road by another car from which two big masked men, hooded like Ku Klux Klan members, came out and approached her car. Without saying a word, they violently pulled her out of her car and threatening her with a long knife, stretched her on the ground where one of the two men kept her fixed with all his strength and his weight on her. The other man pulled down the zip of his trousers which he lowered together with his underwear, thus submitting the poor, terrorised Catherine, towering over her, to the horrid and humiliating vision of his erect quivering and menacing member and then tore her panties off her. Despite Catherine's efforts to free herself (she struggled like a wild entrapped lioness) and her shouts for help - that the man busy with keeping her laying on the ground only partially succeeded in blocking by putting his hand on her mouth, which she ferociously bit making him shriek in anguish - he prepared himself to rape her. He laid on her and was about to penetrate her, when Pedro, who had returned from the work in the fields, came up just in time and, taking advantage of the masked man having his trousers lowered which hindered his movements, beat this man very powerfully with a big and heavy monkey spanner taken from the dashboard drawer of his Bronco 4 wheel-drive truck.

The first blow hit with extreme violence and a roaring noise his naked buttock, maybe breaking his sacrum, the second, equally violent, his penis and testicles, and the third, when he rose on his feet, was aimed at his head.

When he was so violently and fiercely hit in his head, the man - who was already suffering all the pains of hell for having been so harshly hit on his testicles - was ipso facto knocked out.

His companion, setting Catherine at once free, tried to jump in their car to rush away, but Pedro was more rapid than him and cut his retreat path: with the spanner still held very tightly in his hand, he hit this man too again and again until he fell on his knees and, literally terrified that he was about to lose his life, having seen an unquenchable fury in Pedro's blood-shot eyes, asked for mercy. Pedro, who was certainly furious and wanted to give them an unforgettable lesson and an exemplary punishment, but had no real intention to kill them, calmed down and conceded a truce, withdrawing from pursuing further his violent reaction.

At this point Catherine, who had been very strong and brave up to that moment, burst into tears and, clinging herself tight to Pedro to seek protection in his arms, said in a very weak voice while sobbing:

“Pedro, my dear Pedro, you came just in time to save me from this awful offence!”

He calmed her caressing her head tenderly and softly fondling her hair:

“It is really lucky, Honey, that I had to come to our warehouse totally unexpectedly to collect this big spanner needed for repairing the tractor that had experienced some troubles, so I was able to catch in the act those criminals while carrying out their hideous action against you and stop them from implementing their dirty and infamous wish!”

He then took her home and remained with her for a good while, to give her good protective company and let her slowly recover from her great fright.

The two men, both white, were delivered to the local sheriff who put them in jail, waiting for the due trial for sexual harassment and private violence. They confessed that the burning crosses were a cunning trick devised by them to frighten the Gutierrez family – and, especially the *black* Catherine – into believing that they were the target of some criminal act conceived by the ill-famed Ku Klux Klan.

Apart from the strict courting that men usually exerted on her (especially on the occasion of the feasts and the dancing parties held in the nearby village) that was regularly gently, but categorically rejected by her, Catherine did not undergo any other act of violence or of tough misbehaviour towards her.

After some peaceful years, during which labour in the fields was full of satisfaction for Pedro, with majestic harvests and consequent earning of substantial amounts of money and also Catherine’s work at home and in the vegetable garden was fruitful and satisfactory, adversities and troubles started to happen. Torrential rains hit in fact the east side of USA; Minnesota too was fiercely affected by that adverse meteorological event.

As a consequence of the heavy showers incessantly pouring from a gloomy dark sky, there were floods everywhere and fields and meadows were literally devastated. As everywhere, even the little

river which crossed Pedro's property swelled out of all proportions, taking downstream uprooted trees which were entrapped in whirlpools and, putting an abnormal enormous pressure against them, broke the embankments. Water invaded the major part of the cultivated fields, spoiling all the young plants of maize and making all the wheat rotten. The village which was situated in the lowlands downstream the river was also affected by the flood. The houses built in its outskirts were completely flooded and those at the very centre of it had water at their doorstep or at their threshold.

All men came therefore to the broken embankment, to try to restore it, with all sorts of mechanical tools: bulldozers, graders, mechanical shovels, plus spades and hoes. They all worked hard, also creating a wall with sand bags, for one full day and part of the night. At the end of this hectic work they succeeded in stopping the water from spilling over the reinforced embankment. But the crops for that year were completely destroyed. Pedro was not ruined, from a financial viewpoint, only because the former years were good years with exceedingly luxuriant harvest and he had made good savings of the huge quantity of money he earned by the sale of his products. But for certain he received a hard blow from the inclement weather.

As though this were not sufficient to create a crisis in a man, passionate farmer and indefatigable worker, as Pedro was for sure, the following year there was an invasion of famished locusts which invaded the crops and ate all the young sprouts of wheat and maize. Pedro and his workers went around the fields creating smokescreen, as well as making a lot of noise with any sort of tools (mainly beating with metallic rods on empty petrol barrels) to frighten the locusts and therefore try to hinder the terrible swarms from alighting on his property, but there was nothing to do: they were too many and his fields, so green with young soft small plants, appeared to them too attractive not to feel immediately the need to rest there and eat all that God's grace.

Agricultural work was, as anybody knows, full of ambushes caused by local climate and seasonal weather, but also of great satisfactions for a passionate farmer as Pedro undoubtedly was. He had indeed a motto he scrupulously followed and put regularly into practice: "Innovation, but carefully and cleverly". He enjoyed participating in all the agricultural events and contests which were regularly organized every year in the county. Usual competitions concerned:

the nicest and strongest pair of oxen, the best and most copious milk-producing cow, the biggest and most regular maize-cob, the biggest turkey, the best and most fleshy pig, the most copious harvest per acre, as well as, of course, the best and most attractive couple of square-dancers. Pedro, as said before, was a passionate and pragmatic worker and he put great care in performing at high standards, in the best possible way: he did not leave anything to the chance, he always managed in order to obtain the best results from all his activities. He therefore won the first prize in the above mentioned contests many times. One year he was even proclaimed the overall winner: he ended up the very best farmer of the entire county, the top winner of all the contests organized in the region.

Obviously, to win the county overall contest, he had to be also the best dancer and as a matter of fact he danced marvellously and majestically with his own devoted partner, his passionate spouse, the lovely Catherine. They danced together not only a fabulous and enthusiastically applauded square-dance, but also a whirling and gripping fandango in which Catherine, in particular, amply showed all her grace and her meticulous care for sticking to the right steps of this difficult, but fascinating dance. After years of living together and frequently dancing tightly enlaced in one another's arms, they had become a harmonious duo who could easily give a nice show of their ability to curious and enthralled onlookers. Some naïf painters wanted to represent her in their paintings and sketched very nice portraits of her while dancing so attractively. Her lovely silhouette had therefore become a cherished symbol in the entire county and was exhibited everywhere, in private houses as well as in public exercises. For him, a foreigner, it was certainly a reason to be proud of such success.

Although, obviously, all farmers were eager to be awarded the prize and the consequent title of 'Number One of the Year' in at least one of the contests, there was no jealousy towards him by the losers, as he had gained their liking with his constant help and his wise suggestions freely given to anybody needing them. People had learnt to know and appreciate him as the 'wizard' come from afar with good ideas and rich experience. As said, he had brought with him from Spain his years-long experience in difficult operating conditions and could therefore greatly improve the performances of his new farm in the USA. He had then fully merited the attention

and the appreciation of the other farmers of the county and the prizes he won were just a due recompense for the hard work he constantly devoted to the cause of an enlightened agricultural methodology.

Although the times of the Far West had long since been forgotten, and only sporadic theft of one or two heads of cattle happened from time to time in the region by the action of some young thief or some homeless shabby robber, one year it happened that a big cattle theft was carried out in Pedro's county. It was, according to all the evidence, and counting the number of the farmers who were victims of the theft and the number of animals which disappeared, a hold-up carried out by a well organized and prominent band of outlaws. If Pedro could easily afford the loss of a couple of head, without major trouble, the loss of more than fifty animals was a real disaster for the economy of his farm.

So he had to intervene in order to find out where the bandits had found a convenient hideout for themselves and for the stolen herd. What was the worst thing in the whole affair was that the cows stolen from Pedro's corral included Belle, the winner for the previous three straight years of the County prize for the highest milk production. Pedro was very worried about her fate. The robbers were probably absolutely unaware of what an extraordinary animal it was and, if they planned to slaughter the robbed animals they might submit Belle to this awful end too. After some initial hesitation and incomprehension, a big hunt was set up among the various farmers hit by the thieves' blow.

The task however proved to be very difficult: both the herd and the men who had carried out the robbery seemed to have completely vanished, without leaving any traces of their passage anywhere. Pedro and the other men turned round and round throughout the entire county, but were totally unable to discover even the smallest sign of the presence of their cattle or of the men leading them. It turned out to be, for all those farmers as well as for the police involved in the matter, a difficult and complicated puzzle!

It was at last found out how the cattle had been taken away without leaving traces of their passage: whereas the farmers had thought that the cows had been robbed in the old fashioned way, by being led in group on foot, by some experienced cow-boys, it was

discovered that these modern thieves had made use of more advantageous and sophisticated techniques: they used big lorries to rapidly and surreptitiously transport the cattle away. Traces were found of the large tyres of at least five (maybe six) 5-axles trucks, which had been parked in the proximity of the corrals of the various farmers victims of the robbery.

The masterly coup had been carried out in the night at high speed in only a very few hours and the whole operation must have been planned and directed in great detail by some astute mastermind: the five or six lorries did not in fact travel together on the same road, since a column of trucks transporting nearly two hundred cows together might have raised suspicions, especially if by chance it bumped into some police patrol car or a road-block. Each of them headed to a different destination. So from Minnesota the alarm was launched in the neighbouring States of North and South Dakota, Iowa, Wisconsin and, later, also in Ontario, Canada. But the bandits could have enjoyed the help of a vast, well prepared network of accomplices to take care of hiding the lorries during the day: they therefore had the advantage of travelling surreptitiously only at night to cross those States.

Initially, only the local press started publishing articles about this big robbery, but after a while, when there was no evidence of where the robbers had taken the stolen cattle, even the most renowned newspapers, the so-called 'national press', such as, in particular, 'The Washington Post', 'The Herald Tribune' and 'The New York Times', threw themselves on this cunningly carried out theft and rivers of ink were poured on the matter by their 'special envoys' (though most of them wrote their hectic articles of fire without moving to the site, but remaining quietly seated in their personal comfortable armchair). None of them however was able to draw out a real scoop on the highly interesting subject, likely to provide the investigators with news and details about the performed theft.

Pedro, being in a hurry to recover his cows as soon as possible – before they could get wounded or hit by being so closely packed to one another inside the lorries – and not trusting much the work of the county police (he knew the men of the local station and had to acknowledge that they were not considered as being particularly brilliant, efficient and successful in performing their job), had to place himself half-heartedly in a detective's shoes and start his own

private investigations.

The first places he looked were the fuel filling stations installed on the roads out of the area where they resided, asking the owners and the attendants whether any lorry transporting cattle had stopped there for refuelling, but the answer was negative all over Minnesota. Evidently, the bandits had taken care to have their tanks full before the robbery took place, in order to avoid the necessity of refuelling inside the State borders with the beasts onboard. They had been keenly careful not to draw someone's attention to them.

The second research places he visited were all the pubs, taverns, inns, road services stations spread all over the State to ascertain whether foreign faces had peeped in to get food and/or drinks. But also there, there had not been any strange or unknown people stopping for eating or drinking. Not to leave any stone unturned, he finally looked also in the Lake Superior havens, Duluth and Superior, to check if by chance the stolen cattle were bound to be burgled to Canada. But here too there had not been any attempt by a lorry transporting cattle to cross the lake on a ferry.

He had diligently investigated all routes which might have been used by the fleeing robbers. Where could they have gone then? It was a real puzzle; to his great dismay (he had thought in fact that locating the hideouts of big trucks with cattle onboard would be much simpler), Pedro groped in the dark for days!

Thinking that the stolen herd might have been brought to Florida – it is difficult to say on what ground, but probably guessing that as this State was very tourist oriented, the need for fresh meat supply was quite high –, Pedro and a couple of other farmers in the same situation as he travelled to the far South of USA. They had to pass through Louisiana and had therefore a stop-over in New Orleans. This fantastic town, so full of colour, of excited people, of laughter everywhere, of loud noise and of enthralling music fascinated and intrigued them a lot. They could see very good jazz musicians perform concerts in the streets, both as soloists or as members of well organized bands. All of them performed magnificently, attracting and drawing along enthusiastic and exhilarated onlookers listening to them, nearly in trance for the pleasure aroused in them by that wonderful music.

Pedro was a lover of jazz and therefore enjoyed very much the possibility of attending spontaneous open air jam sessions carried

out by such good amateur performers. In their wandering through the old districts of the town, they even fell on a column of rhythmically marching mourners who were following a funeral: at the head of the procession there was a band of musicians who were playing the worldwide renowned tune 'Oh, when the Saints go marching in' at very high volume; in turn, the mourning people were singing the tune and dancing, whirling fast in real rapture. It could easily be considered as a carnival feasting procession, not as what ought to be the sad accompaniment to the burial of a deceased person. Everywhere else in the entire world there would be cries and tears, but there, in New Orleans, there was laughter, singing, dancing and passionate gladness! What funny customs its inhabitants had!

Apart from the pleasure of listening to exceedingly good original music, for Pedro and his mates this journey turned however to be totally vain, as they did not discover any trace of the robbed cows.

After several days of complete silence, in which the robbed farmers had already started to despair and fear that their cattle were lost forever without any indication of where they had vanished, sudden news arrived to Pedro and his mates about a lorry-driver, who had been making a stop-over while crossing the town of Las Vegas in the State of Nevada, to play at the slot-machines in the Cesar's Palace Hotel casino. Half drunk, he had revealed to some of the other customers playing at the nearby machines that he was driving a big lorry filled with a massive 'alive' load. These words, reported to Pedro's group of farmers, immediately aroused their suspicions that he could have been referring to the transport of the stolen cattle.

Pedro and two other farmers rushed to Las Vegas in search of more detailed and precise news. Once there, they found the customers who had received the lorry-driver's avowal and interviewed them, but could not learn much more than they already knew. The man in fact, apart from what had already been reported to them, had not revealed either where he came from or where he was heading to. The only further information that he had delivered to the astonished and curious listeners was that he came from a far away State and that he had been compelled to drive all the time on his long journey in very critical conditions. He had in fact had to drive his lorry only by night, surreptitiously and on secondary routes for 'fear of armed robbers' (these indeed were, with a good dose of

irony and self-mocking, the words he had used, as if he were not himself a robber, but an honest, innocent and immaculate citizen)! After these few words, also because the onlookers did not appear to be meddlers, curious to know his adventures or personal affairs and therefore had not pushed him to tell them more about his travel, that man had disappeared. Unfortunately, they did not know anything of his whereabouts.

Pedro and his mates were very annoyed and disappointed by the poverty of the news they could gather, since it gave them no way to discover the destination of the robbed cattle. They were however absolutely convinced now that the lorry-driver met by the Cesar's Palace Hotel casino's customers was involved in the transportation of the cattle stolen from them. His avowal about the transportation of a 'live' load was self speaking!

Then a man was found dead in the streets of Chinatown, the district of San Francisco mainly inhabited by Chinese people. He was a man of evident Asian origin and had certainly been murdered, since his throat had been cut with a very sharp knife or a well edged sword. Investigations carried out by the police of the big Pacific Ocean coast-town brought to light that the name of the murdered man was William Li-Pen Cheng and that he was a lorry-driver by profession. The evidence was that he had been the victim of a showdown, but for the rest the police groped in the dark and the mystery of the reason of this death remained very thick and insoluble. When they read this news in the paper and especially after the discovery that that man was a lorry-driver, Pedro's group of farmers straightened their antennas and pricked up their ears immediately, suspecting – though vaguely and without any specific ground – that the murder could, in one way or another, be connected with the robbery of their cattle.

Pedro was asked by his mates to carry out a personal investigation in order to detect whether there could exist a connection between the two facts. He therefore travelled to San Francisco where he was able to find Mr. Cheng's family's address. It was not in San Francisco, but in another town of California, San Diego. He travelled to San Diego, where he had initially some difficulty in locating the house where Mr. Cheng's family lived. He did however find it (it was in fact on the outskirts of the town) and succeeded in talking to Mr. Cheng's wife. Although she was in strict mourning

(the funerals of her husband had just taken place), she consented to talk to him, especially after he showed her some money he was prepared to give her in exchange for the information he wanted from her.

She did not know much about her husband's activity, but she told Pedro that he had revealed to her that he had been enrolled for the performance of 'a very big coup' to be carried out in a distant State: it involved the driving of a big lorry for several days, travelling mostly at night. Though still cryptic, this was anyhow the revelation that the hit farmers hoped to obtain; it gave them the confirmation that their suspicion was correct: for them, in fact, the murdered man was certainly involved in the robbery that they had suffered! Now, the only further information they had in their hands was that probably the robbed cattle had been brought to San Francisco. But where? San Francisco is such a huge town that, although the cattle herd was conspicuous, it could have been hidden anywhere, so numerous were the available hideouts, especially for a well organized gang as the robbers seemed to have set up.

Some days later a big tussle burst out in the streets of Chinatown, involving around 20 men of both Asian and American origin. It is however difficult to say on which side those struggling men were and for whom or what they fought, since it was absolutely impossible to distinguish whether it was a fight of Americans against Asians or among different parties, mingling up together the followers of the two (or more?) of them. The scuffle lasted for a long time and was very ferocious: after the men had at length come to heavy blows, the sharp knives in many hands became much more dangerous. The police were immediately called by some onlookers, but before they could intervene, several men were wounded.

Although a couple of them were in a very severe condition, thank God apparently there were no casualties. When the policemen arrived on the spot, all the men who were not wounded took flight, running away as fast as possible to hide themselves in some shelters to avoid capture. But the more seriously wounded ones remained on the ground and were arrested by the police and taken to the district jail. Two of them however, both white Americans, by the names, respectively, of Robert (Bob) McDermott and Timothy Hutchison, who were in very pitiful conditions had to be taken, though under strict surveillance, to the hospital.

Since their mates (or adversaries?) locked themselves in a strict silence, a sort of dumbness, the police waited patiently some days until these two men, who seemed to be the most malleable ones, could recover enough to allow the investigators to interrogate them.

Under the interrogation, they revealed that the scuffle had been caused by Bob McDermott's request to their boss for a higher salary to compensate him for the fatigue encountered in driving a heavy lorry through a lot of States avoiding all possible contact with the police. Their boss had reacted very badly to his request, saying that they had received already a very high remuneration amply repaying them for the entire travel they had made, as well as for the relevant difficulties encountered and slapped violently (he had indeed a reputation to be a very harsh and violent man) McDermott on his face. The latter did not accept being treated in that malevolent way and returned a punch to the boss who, in turn, ordered his cutthroats to throw him and his companions out in the street. Hence the scuffle, which obviously involved also other men who had immediately come to help them against the boss's thugs, thus turning it into a real gigantic street battle.

The police of course wanted to know their boss's name, but they were only able to report his first name, Hakim, since they did not know his surname. Obviously, it came out also that the load they had transported in the lorries were the cattle stolen in Minnesota, but they were totally unaware of the place they had to be delivered and of who received the cargo. They simply had the task of parking the lorries in care of some warehouse on San Francisco dockyards and this was all they had duly done. Hearing the name of Hakim, which sounded middle-eastern, the police initially feared that an Islamic terrorist outrage could be brought against the USA and prepared itself to face it, warning also the population of the entire USA about the incoming danger. They understood later on however that this fact was a simple matter of a big robbery and had nothing to see with a terrorist outrage.

Still the question existed: where had all the cattle been brought to? Where had they been unloaded? Where were they now hidden? Hakim must have been the masterly organizer of the coup, but he certainly worked out this robbery under the specific request of somebody else, he could not act on his own, for his own personal benefit (apart from being munificently paid, thus receiving a

conspicuous amount of money for the brilliant performance of the gigantic robbery). Who then gave the order? Who had entrusted him the impervious but at the same time easy task to carry out the big theft? All these questions still remained unanswered. Conjectures obviously were made in abundance, but no clear explanation of what had happened in reality was formulated. The mystery reigned sovereign. The curiosity and frantic expectations of Pedro and the other farmers' were still to be appeased.

After some time had elapsed, suddenly one day a police patrol, which had received the task of patrolling the dockyards, noticed a horrible stink coming out of one of the innumerable enormous warehouses. It was well locked not only with the bolt attached to the shutter, but also with a double pair of very robust padlocks. The two policemen succeeded in forcing their way through the locking systems and entered into the warehouse. An incredible scene presented itself to their astounded and incredulous eyes: everywhere there was the full evidence that a massive slaughter of cows had taken place therein. There were in fact, scattered more or less everywhere, partly ordered and sorted, partly in great disorder, heaps of cows' legs, bowels, horns, and also some full heads and groups of piled skins.

The police organized an ambush. They locked the warehouse again putting everything in order as it was before their entry. Then they kept the warehouse under strict surveillance and waited patiently. A couple of days later, a man came in the heart of the night, opened the warehouse in a regular manner – with appropriate keys – and entered into it. It was visibly a man of eastern origin: very probably Chinese. The policemen who lay in wait prepared themselves to arrest him, but unfortunately one of them stumbled on an empty can thrown on the tarred esplanade surrounding the warehouse, thus making a loud noise that reverberated heavily among the warehouses and also inside them. Hearing the sudden unsuspected noise in the deep silence of the night, the man who had entered inside the incriminated warehouse was put on the alert and managed to vanish in the dark through a secondary exit before the arrival of the police to arrest him.

Once penetrated into the warehouse, the policemen felt finished since the warehouse was evidently empty and nobody was there. The suspected man had slipped through their fingers. It was therefore

absolutely necessary to organize new ambushes around the incriminated warehouse, surrounding it completely with a conspicuous number of expert policemen. Not knowing in fact who the organizers of the theft were, the police had no other weapon in its hands, but to wait until some of the rascals themselves fell in their net. They had however to wait for days and nobody seemed to be anxious to penetrate into that warehouse. There was absolutely no movement about it. Disappointing silence and motionlessness reigned sovereign.

After one week, the policemen got tired of spending nights and days patiently waiting for the appearance of somebody attempting to enter into the warehouse (although now it was necessary to wear a mask, because of the fetid miasmas emanating from the cows carcasses piled inside it) and were therefore about to take the decision to remove the ambush. At last, something happened: three men came, removed the padlocks and entered into the warehouse. The policemen promptly jumped out of their hideouts and swooped upon them before they could draw out their guns, arresting them. They were all Chinese or of Chinese origin.

Immediately submitted to stringent interrogatory, they remained however in very tight silence, as if they were all dumb. Hearing that the arrested men were Chinese, one of the farmers of Minnesota, Jack Miller, who had been robbed of his cows and was able to speak Chinese because his mother originated from that country, asked permission from Pedro's group to go to San Francisco and make investigations in the Chinese milieu, in order to find out whether it was still possible to recover, at least in part, the robbed cows. After some days however Mr. Miller was found dead in a street of Chinatown, with his throat ripped open. All the evidence pointed to the work of the Chinese mafia bound to the restaurants network.

At the announcement of the recovery of his farmer-mate's corpse, Pedro became frightened that something like that might also happen to him, should he continue chasing the robbers, and decided that it was too dangerous to carry on searching for the robbers of his cattle: it was certainly better and preferable to give up the hope of being able to rescue Belle and the other cows and live quietly and joyously with his family, in the much more precious love of Catherine and of his children. Pedro therefore let the whole sad affair drop and returned to the intensive care of his farm.

The affection he had felt for the farm and the agricultural work, as well as for the rearing of animals, especially milk-cows (where his best thoughts were always for Belle, his preferred one) was however toughly affected after the theft he had undergone. He became sad, always discontented, disaffected in respect of farm work and started hating the USA and the kind of hard life one had to carry on there. The enthusiasm that had pushed him to leave Spain and settle down in the USA had been strongly affected.

Out of the blue Ricardo received a phone call from Mrs. Funke Akinyemi, a 48 year-old Yoruba lady living in Nigeria. She was a friend of the Kanu family who had given her Ricardo's telephone number. As a matter of fact, she wanted Ricardo to help her in getting a visa from the Spanish Consulate in Lagos in order to be enabled to travel to Spain. Although she was the widow of a Nigerian man from whom she had also gotten children, she had had in the past a Spanish lover as well, from whom she had got a daughter, who was now 12 years old and lived in Spain in the care of the Caritas organization. As several years had elapsed since she had last seen her daughter, she was now very eager to make a trip to Spain in order to pay her a visit and stay a little with her. As she was a close acquaintance of his so good friends, the Kanus, Ricardo could not deny her his help: he therefore promised her he would do his best to convince the Consulate to deliver her the longed for visa.

His intervention with the Spanish visa officer (whom he had known when he lived as a permanent resident in Nigeria) was however rather frustrating for him, since it did not produce the immediate positive reaction he hoped to get, but only an almost vague promise to take Mrs. Akinyemi's request into consideration. The process of delivering her a visa was in reality long and drawn out (probably because the delivery of visas at the Consulate had become a matter subject to bribery and consistent amounts were regularly scrounged from travellers wishing to get it) and took more than one year of continuous strenuous requests on both Mrs. Akinyemi's and Ricardo's sides. Funke and Ricardo were therefore in rather close contact for quite a long time, either by telephone or by e-mails and SMS. Little by little they developed a tight friendship which suddenly transformed itself into a sincere affection and eventually sexual desire for each other arose when Ricardo one day

said to her that he had started liking her (she had sent to him a roll-film full of photographs of her from which he could see that she was a still youthful and attractive woman).

She was indeed very flattered when he said that he felt great attraction toward her because of her delightful aspect and adamant beauty. Their phone conversations therefore became more and more hot, being sentimental- and sexual-oriented, touching intimate erotic subjects until they frantically and totally openly avowed the mutual desire of having between them a serious nice romance together with a complete sexual relationship.

When at last, after an exceedingly long and frustrating wait, the so much desired visa was granted to her, she could start the preparation of her travel to Spain. Both Funke herself and Ricardo were very excited that their happy meeting was approaching and were totally bursting with joy. But their joy got even enhanced and magnified and really burst powerfully out when they, after short time, could at last really meet. Ricardo, waking up much earlier than usual, drove to Madrid airport to fetch her: he was a bit late because of the heavy traffic met on the connecting road between Valladolid and Madrid and her aeroplane had already landed when, after parking the car in the ad-hoc spaces, he was able to get to the airport arrival zone. But she did not mind that much about waiting for him to arrive; she detected him immediately among the incoming crowd and flung herself towards him. On his side, he was able to discern that the black lady coming towards him was the woman he had come to pick up and embraced her gently putting his lips on her gleaming fleshy lips (which he found warm and very agreeable to kiss), while hugging her tightly to himself. They looked at one another intensely smiling as enraptured without being able to divert their eyes from each other's face. They looked like mesmerized people. When at last they were able to move and go to the car, as soon as they were seated therein, Ricardo asked her gently:

“Funke, darling, let me kiss you more adequately: I want to fully taste the fragrance of your lips; may I then kiss you?”

She, experiencing great emotion, was practically unable to speak, but she nodded a silent yes. He took her face delicately in his hands and kissed her with consummate skill, firstly just skimming her lips and squeezing them gently with his own, then pressing her lips delicately with his desirous semi-open mouth and lastly kissing her

voraciously introducing his tongue as deeply as possible into her mouth. She liked his way of kissing very much and was delighted at receiving such intense manifestation of desire and hunger for her. She felt she utterly desired to have him inside herself. She then exclaimed ecstatically:

“Darling, by kissing me like that, you make me nearly come and desire to make love to you at once! I feel I want you deeply inside myself, Ricardo, my dear!”

Ricardo smiled sweetly at her and said:

“OK, let’s first go to the hotel I have booked for you; it would not be suitable or correct to make love here in the very middle of the car park. Somebody might see us and inform the police who could prosecute us for obscenity in public lieu.” then added eagerly and hopefully: “But do you really feel you want to make love to me?”

Her reply came forward immediately, without reticence or embarrassment:

“Of course I do. With all my heart, darling, I want to feel as soon as I can the pleasure of having you inside me!” then, after a short pause, she added eagerly: “I *need* to have you in me!”

Ricardo drove back as fast as possible, traffic permitting, to the Valladolid hotel in the vicinity of the railway station where he had booked a room for her. When they arrived there he asked the receptionist whether the booked room was ready and accessible and at her positive answer, having got the relevant key, accompanied Funke to the assigned room. As soon as they were inside it, Ricardo hugged her in his arms saying:

“Darling Funke, what I feel is that I need to kiss you again and again: frankly speaking, I love your enchanting lips so much that I would never stop kissing you!”

She was all in a flutter; she therefore replied promptly:

“Ricardo, your kisses are so delightful that I would never want you to stop either!”

After kissing her ravenously, he whispered with half-cut breath, but rather temerarily as though they had known one another since at least some years instead of being an acquaintance truly made – despite their extremely frequent hectic and ‘hot’ telephonic conversations – hardly one hour earlier, when they had met for the very first time:

“Undress, lovely you, please, undress; I have been wanting for a

very long time to see you and hold you *totally naked* in my arms!”

She started taking off her long Nigerian attire, then stopped and asked him eagerly:

“Do you really want me to undress completely?”

His reply was very firm but pronounced under his breath for the emotion pervading him:

“Yes, please. Do it as I asked you and ... quickly, please. I long to caress and kiss ... and ... lick your naked body!”

At this point, she undressed completely, without further request or hesitation, taking off her bra and panties and remaining totally naked under his astonished and admiring gaze. He watched her in full adoration for her beautiful features. What a magnificent highly seductive nude was in front of him! A really splendid unsuspected vision for his mesmerized eyes!

Of course, she was no longer a young girl, and had no more the slim body of a 20 or 30 year-old woman, but she still maintained a sufficiently slender figure and a nice shape that made her body yet exceedingly attractive and very desirable. Although, as obvious, no more so hard as in youth, she still had magnificent plump breasts which were generously offered to his caresses and kisses producing great temptation and libido. Ricardo was extremely excited: he utterly liked her and felt an enormous attraction toward such mature woman who was now taken into his most tender and suave hug, openly and gracefully offering herself to his love action. A real precious gift for him! Ricardo deemed she was superb and very lovable and felt the pressing desire to possess her rising overbearingly and imperiously in him. He couldn't wait any longer, it urged him madly, he had to have her immediately.

He locked the door, then made her stretch on the bed and he too undressed quickly; then he hugged her again gently caressing all her body. He kissed her at length on her face lingering on her eyes, her nose, her lips, then he started licking her voraciously, suavely stroking his tongue on her neck, her shoulders, her breasts (while sucking and biting gently her gushing, prominent nipples), her belly, her thighs, her desirable and desirous vulva, then also her back and her buttocks; he then licked and sucked at length her clitoris and this sent her into ecstasy: she could no more resist and she came with a short but piercing cry, attaining a wonderful, fully ravishing orgasm. Enraptured, she exclaimed as inebriated:

“Darling, in all my life I never enjoyed an orgasm as enchanting as the one you let me have right now! No man ever – neither my husband, nor my Spanish ex-lover or the few other African men I had had in the far past – was able to let me feel the intense pleasure that you, on the contrary, just now so easily raised in me. It was fantastic and you are really wonderful, the very best lover existing on earth! A real *maestro* in the art of lovemaking! Or did you by chance learn some *juju rituals* or other secret formulas for making a woman so delighted and fully satisfied? I am really happy I had the immense luck of meeting you!”

It was absolutely true; as a matter of fact, although a long time had elapsed since she had had the last occasion to make love to a man and she might therefore have forgotten the details of the interludes she had enjoyed in the past, of one thing she was pretty sure: were it due to all the promises of love he had made her by telephone and to her consequent tender expectation for a sweet intimacy with him, but for certain she had never felt such delightful sensations as the ones she was now experiencing thanks to Ricardo’s tender attention for her.

In spite of her former firm assumption that lovemaking was no longer a matter for her in consideration of her advanced age, she realized now that she utterly liked to have a physical love relationship and deemed that making love to a man was really the most wonderful, gorgeous and satisfying thing a woman could do. Especially in respect of such a wonderful ‘oyinbo’ endowed with highly praiseworthy qualities, such as an unselfish kindness and an exclusive sweet tenderness, now so openly and fully dedicated to her.

Ricardo then asked her:

“Funke, my darling, do you prefer ‘oyinbos’ to African men and how do you like them?”

She replied solidly:

“No, Ricardo, I must say that I have no specific preference for ‘oyinbos’ in general, although you know well that we Nigerian women get easily crazy for white men and although, after Luisito Ortega, the father of my daughter Naomi (the one I am here to pay a visit to), you are only the second white man I have made love to. Believe me, however, dear you, the only ‘oyinbo’ I really like or, better, I now love with all my heart and all my senses is you, indeed!

If there really existed other white men like you, then I would like all these fabulous and fascinating, sensual ‘oyinbos’ unconditionally and indiscriminately!”

She then eagerly took his penis with both her hands. After drawing her mouth near to it in order to tenderly and lovingly kiss and lick its gleaming cyclamen-pink glans (superbly emerged fully swollen and erect from the foreskin that she cared to squeeze joyously backwards along the stem), she finally introduced it straight into her desirous mouth and started sucking it with great gusto and delightful passion. Ricardo requested her to bite it and she did it with enhanced intensity and enormous pleasure for both of them until he could no more stand such lovely action.

Fearing that he was about to ejaculate, he asked her to be allowed to enter her immediately. Since she had already attained the apex of excitement thanks to the lovely preambles Ricardo had amply lavished on her and her intimate parts were therefore well lubricated with her internal hormonal fluids, she assented; then she stretched better on the bed and parted her legs compass-like to receive him between her lovely-shaped fleshy thighs, thus fully offering her open, now eagerly expecting vulva to his penetration. While he was in her, pushing forward to reach the bottom of her vagina in search of pleasure and, as a consequence, attain prompt ejaculation, she mumbled and moaned happily aloud. Most of the words she uttered were absolutely unintelligible. The sole comprehensible phrases that she emitted and went on repeating again and again, as in a trance, though yet interjected with loud acute shrills of pleasure and strange low groans and guttural sounds, equally dictated by the intense pleasure she was proving, were:

“How lovely! ... How *lovely!* ...ahaaaaah ... Oh, that’s really sweet! ... I love it! ... grhummm ... *I love to have you in me!* ... grhummahaaaaah ... This gives me not only great pleasure and bliss, but also a true unequalled wonderful happiness!”

Ricardo pushed his penis into the very depth of her body and, no more able to refrain from coming, ejaculated powerfully in the very bottom of her vagina. Filled by uncontrollable happiness and pushed by unspeakable pleasure, she came again as well, potently and happily enjoying this new orgasm mixed together with his own.

The bliss and the pleasure he found inside her were at such a high level that he felt as if he did not exist any more, but was molten with

her in a sort of golden melting pot: he did not want to come out from her ever again. The delightful sensations of pleasure Ricardo felt were such that he would have liked to spend all the rest of his life inside her. He told her the nature of his feelings and thoughts and she replied she felt the same sentiments about him. For her, he could therefore remain inside her as long as he wanted, there was no problem at all in this respect: on the contrary, she enjoyed his permanence in her body very much.

He felt an immense happiness pervading him: this lady was really majestic and almost magic in making love and revealed herself as very skilled in giving a man pleasure as well as being a real sumptuous lover. Moreover, she was certainly very fond of him: this was absolutely great! Then his capability of seducing lovely African women was not simply limited to that specific field, i.e. making ravages among young or even very young and inexperienced black beauties, but was likely to open a breach also in more mature and experienced women's hearts! He felt exceedingly happy for this unsuspected revelation.

Feeling deeply in her heart that she would have at the utmost liked to get from Heaven the so cherished marvellous grace of getting married with him, Funke said to Ricardo, hugging him tight to herself and crossing her feet upon his back:

“Darling, you are the most delightful and seductive man I ever had the chance to have in my life! I love you so much and will always love you until I die! I am yours, totally, only yours, forever! Please, Ricardo, my great and unique love, marry me: I crave to be officially and formally your woman here in Spain, as well as in Nigeria and in the entire world for the rest of my life! Moreover, by getting married, we can continue to make such extraordinary enchanting love to each other in order to give us reciprocally maximum pleasure all along our life and nobody, not even the Church, can blame or reprimand us!”

Profoundly touched and struck by emotion, he replied convulsively:

“Funke, my dear precious Honey, my Sweetie, I feel really honoured and proud that you, such an admirable and lovely lady, want me to become your husband. I would certainly be at the utmost pleased to have you as my own spouse! Unfortunately for this nice and sweet design, however, I already have a wife, as you

know, and for Spanish law I may not marry a second time. It is not like in Africa, in particular in Nigeria, where polygamous marriages are contemplated and permitted by the law of the Federal Republic: here, I would be considered a bigamist and be automatically prosecuted and condemned to be jailed as such by the country's Courts authorities. But, believe me, I'm terribly sorry not to be in a position likely to comply with your dear desire that, to my eyes, should fully deserve to be implemented!"

"It is a pity, darling, that you cannot or don't want to marry me, for – I am absolutely sure of what I say – no other woman in the world, not even your wife, can love you as much as I love you! My love for you is really immense: you are a fantastic idol for me, *I adore you!*"

However their love, great and intense as it was, could unfortunately have only a very short life: she was meant to remain in Spain only eight days (and, obviously, she wanted to spend three or four of those days with her daughter in Toledo, where she lived, as she had planned to do since her departure from Nigeria). They spent together the entire remaining four days, making passionate love all the time. The sex intercourse they had was exceedingly intense and gratifying. They practically remained all the time inside the hotel room tightly hugged tenderly in one another's embrace and most rewarding love, getting out of it only for a short sightseeing of the town, still unknown to her, and for eating meals.

When, after few days of intense love and unspeakable happiness, the time arrived for her to leave, Ricardo took her to the airport; she wept disconsolately all along the stretch of road from Valladolid to Madrid. They bade farewell to each other with great sadness, knowing very well that that could be the very last occasion they had had to meet and stay together.

They remained however in tight telephone contact practically all along their life, always expressing to one another tender words of deep and sincere affection. Funke was anyhow convinced – and so she remained for ever – that she had missed something very important and determinant in her life, especially by not having gotten married to him.

After some peaceful years, during which labour in the fields was full of satisfaction for Pedro, with majestic harvests and consequent

earning of substantial amounts of money and also Catherine's work at home and in the vegetable garden was fruitful and satisfactory, one damned day a terrible tragedy happened: Pedro died, victim of a horrible and tragic accident.

It had happened that his maize harvesting truck suddenly got struck and did not intend to go on working. Pedro, who was driving it, got down from the driver's seat in the air-conditioned cabin and went under the harvesting tool to check the reason for its sudden stop. At the moment he was under the machine, for some inexplicable reason – he maybe had forgotten to carefully thoroughly pull the hand-brake – the truck moved forward a bit running him over.

Nobody was around at that very moment to stop the truck. Pedro, for his own luck in those tragic circumstances, died practically instantly. When one of his workers, seeing that the truck was immobilised in the middle of a half-harvested field, went to it to ascertain what had happened to stop the work like that, he discovered poor Pedro already dead under the harvesting machine.

The terrible news of Pedro's death spread out immediately with a great impact on everybody – all the people living in the whole of Minnesota had in fact learnt to like and even love him for his gentleness and participation to everybody's troubles and difficulties, as well as his readiness to give a hand wherever and whenever necessary. Catherine was literally petrified and wept bitterly. She had little by little become accustomed to his rather silent presence near her, his substantial help, his wise advice.

Though in the very background of her heart Ricardo had always remained her real hero, it can be said that, without any doubt, she loved Pedro very much and appreciated him immensely. His loss now, in his prime, was a terrible shock and a very painful blow for her, as well as for their children. One could often catch her weeping in some secluded corner of the house or even while doing her daily work.

Pedro was buried in a small graveyard expressly created under an immense lonely oak tree which rose on the hilltop in the vicinity of the house, which, for the thick richness of its foliage, was Pedro's favourite tree in all the property. He used in fact to rest under it often, in the cool protection offered by its leafage against the stifling heat of summer afternoons. Now he was alas bound to rest there

forever. It was a very gloomy and sad ceremony with the intervention of an enormous exceedingly moved crowd. It seemed that even Heaven was mourning Pedro's death as it rained heavily all along the ceremony. The reverend parish priest gave a speech in which he illustrated how good-hearted Pedro was and how all of them would now miss him. Also some of the County authorities wanted to commemorate this genuine man, as well as colleague farmers with nice and passionate words of circumstance.

For a while Catherine kept the bridles of the enterprise in her hands, but she had neither a sound experience in the field, nor was she agriculture-oriented minded and she therefore had to rely on an agent for the main agricultural business. Very soon however this man proved to be untrustworthy: he spoiled the farm with unwise manoeuvres and operations and, furthermore, he stealthily stole Catherine's money.

Catherine therefore, also under the suggestion and the pressure of Miguel and María Ana who pushed her to go back to their property in Spain, decided to sell the whole property in Minnesota and fly back to Spain. As she was used to do every ten days or fortnight, since their settling in the USA, as she considered him her personal counsellor on whose cherished advices she could fully rely, she called Ricardo in order to have his own advice about her decision; he had always given her precious and wise suggestions and she had never had to complain about what he had suggested her to do: she therefore had full faith in his wisdom:

“Ricardo, Miguel and María Ana want me to leave the USA and come back to Spain and settle definitively there. They say that there was a purpose in living here when Pedro was alive and kept care of the running of the property, but now that he is no more with us, it is not wise that I remain here alone, keeping on my shoulders the difficult burden of the enterprise. They know in fact that I have no real experience, though I learnt something through Pedro's patient teaching, to run such a big farm.” then, after a short pause, she added: “What do you suggest that I do? In your opinion, is it a right thing that I leave the USA and come back to Europe?”

“Cathy, my Sylph (if I may still call you that), I think that if Miguel and María Ana want you to stay with them again, this is certainly a good and wise suggestion. Obviously, if you come back, I personally will be very happy because in this way I shall have the pleasure of

seeing you and frequenting you again! Yes Cathy, sell everything and come back!” then he went on, taking into account the economical aspect of the whole transaction: “Be however careful in selling your property: don’t show an exaggerated haste to sell, otherwise buyers will probably behave like hungry vultures and greedily offer you an amount of money below the real value of the whole property, I mean residence, farm, fields and annexes. You are not in stringent necessity to get whatever you can get from its sale: so do everything with relative calm and in the due time and try to sell it at a reasonable price, which can give you the maximum benefit. You must earn from its sale at least its true value!”

Then Catherine asked Ricardo his advice about how she had to behave with her children, especially in respect of Isabel’s studies:

“Isabel is about to be 16 now and will terminate school this year. She is therefore about to go to college. What do you think is the best for her: to remain in the USA and go to college here or come back to Europe with us, she too, and try to find a proper institute for her there? Bear in mind, moreover, that she is also a little champion in athletics and we have to take care of these particular features and enable her to develop her characteristics and possibilities. She is fond of athletics and wants to practice it at high levels.”

After having thought a bit about the various issues, Ricardo answered her:

“Since she has had American instruction, for me the best for her is that she go to college in the USA, Cathy. In this way she will be allowed to practice athletics at high standards and also because afterwards, if I’m not wrong, she wants to continue her studies at the MIT, the renowned Massachusetts Institute of Technology.”

“I think that this is the right and most wise behaviour to keep in her respect. I agree with you, Ricardo, and I’m going to look for the most convenient college for her here in the USA. Thank you for your precious advice. As usual, you were very positive and useful, my dear Ricardo!”

Catherine followed judiciously Ricardo’s suggestion for both the sale of the property in Minnesota and the search for a good college for Isabel. She took her time to sell the property, analysing carefully the various proposals and offers received by potential buyers: she eventually sold it to a young Irish couple – who, by the way, reminded her of Pedro and herself when they had arrived and settled

down in the USA – at a very remunerative price. In respect of the selection of a college for Isabel, many were short-listed, but her eventual choice fell at last on Wellesley College, located in Wellesley, Massachusetts, thanks to its nice location (not far from the MIT), lovely environment and full range of facilities. It was a renowned, totally feminine college, among the very first ones of the whole country in that category. This choice was later on approved also by Ricardo, who, being her natural father, had – also in Catherine’s opinion and especially now, after the unfortunate loss of Pedro – to express his own advice on such a delicate topic as Isabel’s education.

She then packed up all her belongings and flew back to Europe with the other three children and Pedro’s corpse (not knowing if the new proprietor would respect the small burial place under the lonely oak tree, she preferred to dig up Pedro’s coffin and take it to Spain to bury it in the family tomb).

At her arrival at Madrid airport she was welcomed by Miguel, Jennifer and María Ana, as well as by Ricardo and some other very affectionate friends as a queen coming back to her country after a long exile. They were all so happy that they behaved like mad people when she came out of the baggage reclaiming hall. Her son and the two younger daughters had preceded her out and were already in the arms of their uncle and aunts who held them tight, kissed them ravenously and stroked them with infinite tenderness. But the roaring howl that welcomed her when she appeared at the threshold of the arrivals hall was like a potent thunder that made all the other travellers turn their heads round and look at them astounded. It was a real triumph decreed to her by all her closest relatives and friends!

Ricardo and Catherine met very frequently after her return to Pedro’s ancestral mansion in the country village nearby Burgos: they often even used to spend the night either in Ricardo’s or in Catherine’s house when it had become too late, after all the chats they exchanged, to go back home. She was always exceedingly happy when he remained in her house to spend there the night, because she felt fully protected by his presence and knew perfectly well that no evil of any sort could happen to her while he was near her: on those occasions, she was not annoyed at all to be compelled to prepare the bed for him in the guests-room; on the contrary, she always did that happily, singing old traditional songs of her own

country. After Pedro's death, she had in fact become fearful and apprehensive. In spite of the never extinguished flame that burnt in their heart for one another, they always behaved in the most correct and irreproachable way, as good friends; they didn't even manifest to each other the great affection they sincerely mutually felt, so that neither of them knew whether the other one still harboured sentiments of love inside him or her.

They enjoyed each other's company so much however: as soon as possible they were together chattering and laughing aloud so thoughtlessly, remembering old episodes of their former life as a couple in love, when she was still a delightful young girl full of hopes and dreams and he, as a middle-aged gentleman, an object of desire for beautiful young African ladies. The intimate and conspiratorial mood they emanated around them was so evident and palpable that everybody looking at them when they talked to one another in that cheerful way would think that they were two people totally lost in dreams and fond of each other. But, consciously at least, they were not in love and only a very sincere and affectionate, intimate friendship existed between them. More than one and a half years thus elapsed.

Suddenly, one day, Soledad, Ricardo's wife, got sick: all her body was painful and she had persistent high fever that even antibiotics were unable to smash down, whilst no medicaments were able to sedate her awful pain. She was transferred to the hospital where very accurate medical examinations were carried out and the diagnosis was alas terrible: she had contracted the so-called modern incurable disease, cancer of the pancreas.

They immediately put in place all the cures and submitted her to all possible healing systems and gave her all sorts of medicaments, but everything was useless: in spite of all efforts produced by the experienced medical team, she died six months later.

Ricardo and also Catherine – despite the little hidden jealousy that Soledad felt and sometime slightly manifested, though gently as it was in her character, in her respect for being such a close friend to Ricardo and the real and unique recipient of his confidences – whenever she was free from her household engagements, assisted her lovingly up to the last moments. She had been a very good wife for Ricardo and a marvellous mother for their three sons. Both the

father and the children were therefore racked by sorrow. Their pain was really immense. Now that she was no more with them, they felt that an enormous hole had been created in their lives. They utterly missed her sweet and helpful presence among them.

An impressive crowd of mourning friends attended her funeral: they all knew her mild temper, the sweetness of her character, the promptness in helping those who needed an external intervention for solving troubles and problems, as well as her gentle, silent pardon vis-à-vis Ricardo's infidelities and too often treacherous behaviour; everybody loved her.

Catherine, who had already passed through analogous circumstances having lost her husband some time before, took the care of consoling Ricardo. She too had loved Soledad, despite the jealousy demonstrated towards her, and could easily understand how important she had been for him (in spite of their sound love, when they were fond of one another, Ricardo in fact had never manifested the slightest intention of divorcing Soledad in order to be enabled to marry her). She therefore spent most of her time with him and they had unconsciously started, little by little, to behave as a man and a woman in love. Evidently, the old flame burning in their hearts for one another had not cooled down at all with the time elapsed and the togetherness they were now living on the contrary more and more nourished it.

One year later, Ricardo understood that he could no longer live without Catherine, that she was really everything for him, as well as that life had got a valid reason to be lived and had returned to being happy and joyful again just for the presence of such a delightful woman near him. Gathering all his courage, since he sincerely feared she did not wish to tie her life to such an old man as he now had become (he was nearly 80), then, trembling for the anxiety, very shyly and nearly ashamed to dare putting forward such an audacious proposition, asked her under his breath lest she should give him a firm negative answer (which would represent a real catastrophe for him and the final collapse of his world):

"Catherine, my lovely Sweet Sylph, will you agree to marry me?"

She had on the contrary long hoped that he would put forward a question like this. In turn, however, she feared in the very bottom of her heart that he no longer desired her and had, for this reason, carefully avoided broaching that topic in their so amiable and

friendly conversations in order not to be disappointed by a negative reaction from him.

She felt therefore galvanised with happiness and replied at once with maximum excitement, delight and enthusiasm, putting him immediately out of his embarrassment:

“Yes, Ricardo, darling, for sure I *want* to become *your wife*! I always dreamt of being *your* wife! I therefore accept your proposition with maximum joy! You can’t really imagine how happy your request is making me! To be officially *yours* is indeed the most cherished desire that I nurtured in my heart since the very beginning of our romance, since I got acquainted with you.” then she added, with a particular light of sincere profound love kindling in her beautiful eyes: “Ricardo, my beloved Ricardo, I have always been fond of you, since the very first day we met. Even when I was Pedro’s wife – and, as you well know, I honestly was sincerely bound and devoted to him – in the very bottom of my heart I felt and sincerely realized that actually if I had to belong to a man, this man could only be you. You and *you alone* are the true man of my life! I adore you and will love you *forever!*”

Her words were exceedingly sincere and full of true love and he felt perfectly the power of the passion harboured in her heart for him; yet he was incredulous that such great happiness was really destined to him; moreover, he wanted to ascertain how profound and unselfish was her love and – why not? – challenge her a bit, also for joke, with provocative thoughts:

“Are you sure, my love, that you want me in spite of my very advanced age? Look at how white my hair is nowadays. I am very old now, you know, I am eighty! So, do you really want *me* or are you simply seeking for any man, feeling lonely and eager to have a male presence beside you?”

But Catherine was too concerned about the possibility of realizing at last her long cherished dream and too dramatically determined to save her desire to be intimately bound to that man through a regular sacred marriage, as well as to defend her consequential happiness against all external impediments - also against his own illogical and unreasonable fear not to be fit for her. This was totally unacceptable for her. They had lived for years as lovers in the past, happily loving each other very intensely, as crazy people; moreover, in her eyes, he was the best man existing on earth: why then should he not be the

right man for her? No, it was not possible to assume this: *he* was absolutely *the right husband* for her! Also at his age. ‘What did his age matter in a love deal? As a matter of fact, how could it interfere with her happiness? How and for which reason could it hinder her from attaining her most cherished target?’ She therefore did not fall into his trap and did not catch up his challenge; on the contrary, she protested vehemently:

“Ricardo, my love, I am perfectly sure: I absolutely want you and you alone!” then, with a rapid lovely blink in her beautiful eyes to melt at once the heart of any man as fond of her as Ricardo was, she added softly: “I am perfectly aware of your age, my beloved Ricardo! But what can age count? Age, your age in particular, is totally insignificant for me and I disdainfully reject this too simple pretext; I loved you immediately when I met you and at that time I was just a bit more than an adolescent, only 21 years old – do you remember? –, whilst you were already a mature man: what makes you think that the difference in our respective ages can count for me, especially nowadays that I also attained maturity? And mind that I owe you my current womanhood: you, only you (not even Pedro, my late husband), made of me the woman I now am. I intimately love you, I’m crazy about you, I utterly want and desire you and this is what really matters for me! Believe me, Ricardo, there is on earth no happier woman than me for having been requested to become your wife. I surely want you and *you alone* as my husband with all my heart, all my mind and all my strength! You are in fact the only man who can make me happy!”

Her old dream had eventually come true: she would soon marry the man she had loved with all her heart, with all her soul, with all her senses all along her life, since she was a young girl of only 21. The only and real man in her life. A man on whom she had easily relied entirely in the past and on whose constant help and assistance she knew she could count for her whole life, certainly as long as he would be alive. The only man that in making love to her had given her a pleasure that in all her life she had never felt from any other man!

Life had been generous with her, she acknowledged it willingly: though after another marriage, after a lot of vicissitudes and also adverse fate, she could at last proudly bear his own surname – Mrs. Catherine de Cortes y Montero, how delightful and enchanting! –

and crown the dream she had always cherished deeply in her heart and longed for its realisation since she had met him: to have eventually Ricardo as her husband! Now, at last, he would be hers. Her man, with no doubt, how wonderful! He wanted to belong to her, this was sure and ascertained: he himself had asked her to marry him! And, in turn, she wanted with all heart and mind to belong to him. Only to him.

Their marriage was celebrated in Madrid's Cathedral with a simple but very moving ceremony: both the bridegroom and the bride were visibly moved and excited and though it was for both the second time they performed this special sacred act, they got clumsy and hesitant and faltered several times because of their excitement; they failed to pronounce correctly the formula of the traditional sacred oath: they stuttered and were unable to let the relevant words flow out fluently and coherently.

Their voices in fact were fading and cut out by strong emotion, which brought tears up into their throats, nearly choking them.

At hearing them so moved, all the attendees (not many, actually, only their close relatives and the most intimate friends, such as Miguel, Jennifer, María Ana, Sisi – who in the meantime had separated from her husband, Helenio Suarez, also because of a treacherous adulterous relationship maintained by him with another woman, which had resulted in the birth of twins –, were present; obviously, Ricardo's brothers, sister and sons had travelled from Jeres de la Frontera to know his new *black* bride who they found 'superlative and majestic' and Catherine's relatives, her aunt and three cousins, in their most sumptuous African attires, had specially travelled from Nigeria) were warmed towards them and took a liking to them.

How wonderful was it to be together again, to be formally united, to form a couple again, as in the old times, when their lovely romance was splendidly flourishing, up to her engagement with Pedro, and this time definitively, with a sacred bond, forever! How marvellous and delightful was their love tie, which, by virtue of this marriage, had at last attained its righteous crowning achievement! Ricardo was so happy to have eventually succeeded in making her his wife that he felt as he was living in a dream.

He was on cloud nine and said to her, enchanted, broken-voiced from the strongly assailing emotion:

“Catherine, marvellous Sylph, my sweetheart, my beloved and unique Woman, you are undoubtedly the nicest thing that ever happened to enter into my life and I utterly rejoice to have you now – such adorable lovely woman! – with me, for me, for the rest of my life to share it with. I had to wait so long to have you formally and sacredly for myself, but this magic moment at last came: I thought my life was behind my shoulders since I’m no longer a young man, but you rejuvenated me bringing a new life for me and now what I can see in front of me is a totally different splendid future! I love you so intensely and am so excited that I could burn myself to death igniting and inflaming spontaneously instantaneously!”

She was exceedingly moved and replied, tenderly clinging to him:

“Darling, I am so happy that you are mine, at last! And, believe me, I feel in my heart, as well as in my flesh, up into the inner part of my bones that I am totally and only yours.”

In the night – though they had spent in the past innumerable nights together, this was the very first night they were spending non-sinfully, but in the most honest and clean form, formally and officially as husband and wife – they made love very passionately, as though the sixteen years elapsed in the meantime had not existed and their love was as fresh and genuine as when they had first met and loved each other. She then let him approach and hug him with her gleaming eyes full of evident love fixed on him, totally mesmerized.

She was indeed all in a flutter: in all her life, no man had ever exerted on her such magnetic power of seduction capable of exciting her up to that incredible, fantastic level as only her beloved Ricardo was able to do. The sensations she felt with him were really unequalled. She felt she needed to have him inside herself. Her whole body was in fact quivering and throbbing voluptuously in expectation of his penetration inside her eager vagina. Ravenously, she therefore said to him, looking tenderly straight into his eyes:

“Ricardo, please, tell me that you want to take me, that you wish to be inside me, that you are longing to possess me, that you utterly desire me, only me! I absolutely frankly need to hear you saying these delightful and enthusing words of unbridled love and real passion!”

Obviously, Ricardo retorted willingly:

“Yes, my lovely Sweet Sylph, that is undoubtedly unquestionable: I

want to enter you, only you, because I love you above everything with all my heart, my soul, my strength!”

When Ricardo got her splendid body (she had only put a bit more flesh on her hips, which had now become more round and plump) naked in his arms again after so long a time, he seemed to be hypnotized himself and nearly swooned for the mental – more than for the physical – pleasure and the intense delight that this simple fact provoked in him. The same phenomenon happened to her when he kissed and licked fervently her body and, in particular, her face, her mouth and her eyes in such a charming way as in the old times, making her get an orgasm the intensity of which she had not attained (and had totally forgotten) since she had stopped making love to him.

An incredible languorous warmth spread delicately from her head to fill up all the farthest and smallest cells of her body. Under the sweet, tender and wise touch of the fingertips of his hands pressing her flesh as if it were the substantial part of a musical instrument, her body was transformed now into a harmonious harp, then into a romantic piano through which he played a celestial powerful medley of inaudible sentimental and romantic musical tunes. He liked the plump firmness of her body. Its softness. He loved her body. Ricardo avidly licked off her the dewdrops of her sweat that had started to bead her delightful body. He felt inebriated by the light scent of that body. Ricardo utterly liked the sweet nearly imperceptible fragrance emanating from it. His most unbridled fantasy was incapable to describe all his happiness for having her for himself!

In his eyes, she was really magnificent, the most beautiful and luxurious creature existing among all the wonders of creation. All the nice memories and the lovely thoughts harboured in his heart up to that moment for those extraordinarily delightful young women, Edima, Vivian, Aysha and Nadine, as well as for more mature ones, such as Sisi and, in particular, Funke he had formerly loved with all his heart faded out and were now overwhelmed by Catherine’s formal entrance into his life. No, no other women would exist in his heart from now on: his heart now belonged totally and uniquely to her! No room was left for others, however attractive they might be! Not only his heart, but also his brain were now completely devoted to her. He himself with all his being belonged totally to her. For

certain, he would be faithful to her forever.

Catherine was the only living being deserving his love that he had already entirely dedicated to unconditionally! The other women – though loved as they had been! –, even Edima Essien, the most beloved among them, existed only in the backstage of his mind and had no more a precise meaning and importance or a scope in his life, as well as an impact on his behaviour. He now was but Catherine's paladin! He felt that very intimately in himself.

He then rested the open palm of his hand on Catherine's belly and let her whole body quiver with the desire for him that little by little took a strong hold of her. Blood flushed more rapidly in all her veins, furiously pumped through them by a maddened heart. Opening her legs in a compass-like manner and tightening them delightfully around his own body, she offered him the wonderful warmth of her lovely, well-shaped even thighs. He kissed and licked them passionately. Getting wet, she felt fully supplied with the vital lymph oozing out of her intimate parts. She owned up that she now needed to be entered by his virile member.

A real apotheosis was therefore attained when they combined together their respective bodies: at feeling him inside herself, she remembered suddenly all the sweet moments she had lived in that far past with him and how marvellous and enthralling it was making love to him. They felt that they were now united in a single body and a single spirit, that they did not exist any more as two separate individual entities, but they had merged into one another, thus forming – as under the effect of a magic spell (had Africa's spirituality and superstition, as well as its fascinating, mysterious mood won over Ricardo's pragmatism and, in so doing, conquered and bewitched him?) – a single flesh.

Whenever he was in her, he let her feel as if, with him, she had received in her also his full own life and she highly rejoiced for this precious gift he was giving her. How delightful it was indeed to be the master of his life in such a marvellous and exceedingly exciting way!

For certain, even now in his advanced age he had not forgotten how to act in order to give a woman pleasure and he was still able to perform accordingly. What a magnificent lover he was for Catherine! For her, there was on earth no better man than Ricardo: Ricardo and only Ricardo was the man who had completely conquered her

heart and there could not be any man apart from him likely to give her, with his highly desired precious love, real, sincere and profound happiness and joy together with physical bliss and explosive pleasure.

“Oh, Ricardo, my Ricardo!” she yelled out aloud, convulsing languidly “Oh, how I love it when you enter me and push your penis so deep inside me!”

He replied in an absolute ecstasy:

“My lovely and unique Sweet Sylph, Cathy dear, believe me, when I am in you I am in the most delightful and unequalled Paradise on earth! Nowhere else could I find so much pleasure and so great a happiness! For certain, you are the very best among all the creatures existing on this planet and, generally speaking, in the whole universe.”

Enchanted and delighted by Ricardo’s lovely words that had raised in her a countless, unrepeatable sensation of well-being and of intimate peace, she knew perfectly well that such great pleasure could come to her only from him; she therefore said to him feverishly:

“You see, darling, my unique great love and now, at last, my marvellous husband, that you were *not unfit* for me (I presume you remember the discussion we had on this topic when you came for a short mission to Nigeria many, many years ago)? Ricardo, my sole adored hero, you are absolutely *the right man* for me, the only real *man of my life!* I love you so much and will always love you, being totally dedicated to you, believe me!”

He would have liked to be in a position to give her the most spectacular gifts: he would have liked to be able to catch a rainbow to make it a gift to her to be used as a multicoloured carpet to walk on barefoot or to cut off a piece of sky full of stars of the firmament from its immanent place in the infinite celestial vault of heaven to give it to her together with the entire earth.

He therefore asked her enthusiastically:

“Darling what would you like me to give you as a present to remind you of me forever?”

She did not hesitate even for a second before replying suavely:

“Just these moments of indisputable happiness and immense joy!”

“Just that? Are you sure that is all you want from me? Don’t you want anything else?”

“No, darling, this will be more than enough to content me totally, I assure you! I don’t need anything else.”

Emphatically, he said to her:

“Catherine, my most precious treasure, you are a really fabulous woman! A true dream! I would like to do with you something I never did with any other woman! ... Yes, but what can this be? ... There is nothing new under the sun in making love to a woman, if one wants to stick to what is licit and acceptable! ... OK, I found it: I will do my best to love you more intensely than I have ever done in the past with any other woman! I will eternally adore you and, be sure of it, my love for you will never fade! My heart is only yours forever!”

It was indeed a gallant assertion which met entirely her appreciation. She fully understood that he had said that only to demonstrate to her that he felt so bound to her that no limit could exist to his love for her, as well as how deep his adoration was for her and her body. As a consequence, she felt even more romantically bound to him.

They lived six years together, tenderly and voluptuously loving each other all the time. In spite of his advanced age, Catherine was in fact able to bring him up with her mouth and Ricardo showed joyfully to her every day and, especially every night all his love and his desire for her by penetrating her again and again, thus giving her indescribable pleasure. He was a strong and healthy man and, despite his age, was never sick, apart from the customary colds that he easily got regularly every year because – he used to say – of his long, big nose by no means protected, but instead defencelessly exposed ‘to all blowing winds’. She, on the contrary, had from time to time recurrent attacks of malaria fevers that she had contracted in her childhood, being endemic for Africans.

On these occasions she sought his help in healing her, while lying in bed under a heap of blankets to keep her very warm and taking appropriate anti-malaria medicines, such as Lariam or Fancidar.

Nearly every day, if the weather was fine and they were both in good health, they used to go cycling along a path round a nearby lake. When they reached a particularly thick and intricate tuft of wood, they left their bicycles leaning hidden against a tree trunk, penetrated into it and there, in a secluded glade, hidden from

everybody's sight, they usually undressed completely and indulged in hugging tightly, naked as worms, in each other's arms, as well as kissing and licking one another's body tenderly and voluptuously. Ricardo laid his pullover on the grass and Catherine stretched upon it.

He could only contemplate her silently, as mesmerized: oh, what a marvellous vision she was for his delighted eyes!

No other sight could compete with such a celestial, gorgeous vision: it would certainly lose the comparison! Catherine, for him, was too beautiful and fascinating, a real triumphant queen in her spectacular, majestic prettiness, an enchanting goddess of womanliness that the entire Olympus as well as the whole humanity could only strongly envy and adore.

Though he should have become used to her charms after such a long time passed enjoying her graces, he couldn't refrain from thinking: 'How wonderfully beautiful and seducing is a *naked black woman!* Certainly, in a nude contest, no white woman's body can compete with that of a black counterpart! Ah, how attractive, adamant and fascinating is that magnificent chocolate-like brown – or charcoal black – colour of its soft velvet-thick skin! Black women's skin colour is indeed solar, luminous and brilliant like sunshine, a real spreader of joy and happiness everywhere, whilst that of us, white people, is lunar, pale and discoloured like moonshine, capable only of bringing mournfulness and discontentment (otherwise, why should we be so eager to get tanned, exposing our skin for hours to the blazing rays of a stifling sun, even risking burns, especially in summertime? There are, among us, people who in this way get even darker than the light chocolate-like brown Africans). Theirs is therefore really an admirable first-prize-worth item: a true wonder of nature; it is indeed so full and rich of strange mystery and magic! And, undoubtedly, of unbelievable voluptuousness.

The way African women offer their body to their male partner in lovemaking is in fact really special, unique and delightful: what an incredible and enormous amount of bliss and pleasure, together with exciting and sensationally arousing emotions, right besides real deep affection and devotion, as well as true happiness and joy, they can lavish on the man they love! Frankly speaking, they seem not to pertain to earth, but to be fabulously fine and utterly fascinating

extraterrestrial beings or fantastic though delightful characters of an amazing fairy-tale! I must sincerely own up that I absolutely adore black women: they are all so majestic and exceptionally charming and I am simply fond of the marvellous dark colour of their glowing skin! I must love and praise them with all my heart, my mind, my soul and my senses.

And, beyond all that, what a precious treasure is Catherine! In front of such a superb beauty and of this marvellous gift I undeservedly received from life, I am totally breathless and don't dare say a word or even touch her splendid body! I unfortunately have the obsessing impression that by stroking it I would risk spoiling and making it dirty. How come that this charming chocolate-like colour of her body has the power of bewitching me completely and leaving me motionless, without strength, without words, like a weak and dumb puppet?

Ricardo did not usually like slogans used by fanatical supporters of political parties or of the most diversified fundamentalists' ideologies; he therefore could not approve those black political activists who went around polemically shouting aloud against the predominant and alas often vexing white community: 'Black is beautiful! ... Black is beautiful!'

But, for certain, at least as far as women were concerned, he agreed totally with this concept and was absolutely convinced of the rightness of this principle: 'Yes, *black is effectively very beautiful!* In any case, if not all black people, at least *Catherine*, this delightful and absolutely unique *black* woman (same, for the truth, as his other very close and beloved friends, Edima, Vivian, Nadine, Sisi, Funke and, obviously, also Meme), is tremendously captivating. Adored marvellous African women, never be vexed or ashamed for the colour of your skin: that splendid velvety skin you have been so graciously endowed with by the Almighty God or by nature is so indisputably adamant and sublimely fascinating, so soft and seducing to touch and caress that only a very farsighted and quite benign creator could conceive such great beauty for coating and, as a consequence, adorning a human being with!

Furthermore, that magnificent chocolate- or charcoal-like skin colour – whether mat or brilliantly glowing and glossy – is for certain the most glamorous one, the very best one which could be chosen by this highly clever creator to make human races diversified!

Personally, I must frankly confess that I easily and simply become totally mesmerized, maddened and spellbound at contemplating the fabulous, impressive and seductive beauty emanating from your sumptuous and majestic bodies: their magic sinuosity and their ardent willingness to concede themselves to pleasure in lovemaking are really unique. Believe me, adorable you, lovely African women, fascinating *black* women, in my opinion, you certainly are among the most precious wonders of the planet. Be therefore absolutely proud of your skin, don't ever even think of changing it! I willingly own up that I thank God continuously for having created you!

Ricardo admired Catherine in silent contemplation of her nude body which still appeared for him as the most extraordinary natural show he had ever seen.

She was like a magnificent goddess in the ancient mythologies: a real nymph-queen of the woods to whom all the other nymphs had to render a due homage! Her chocolate-like coloured body, highly sketched against the sky or against the green colour of grass, glimmered in the penumbra of the surrounding forest, enhancing her precious beauty.

They very much liked to stay naked like that in the open nature of that hidden corner of the wood: he, the assaulting wild (but, in Ricardo's case, certainly gentle) faun and she, the triumphant splendid nymph conceding to him her most precious graces!

When he kissed her, slowly opening her mouth with his own and when he could taste the sweetness of her lips, searching more deeply for her tongue, everything around them faded out.

Nothing else existed, but their two bodies enlaced in a tight tender embrace showing entirely the strength of their frantic love. Catherine knew in fact perfectly well that outside of his love for her and her desire for him there was only a cold darkness and a dreadful gloomy night threatening their life.

She therefore gave herself up to the lovely sensations that only Ricardo had ever been able to arouse in her and let them pervade – like a sweet hot tide – throughout her trembling body. It seemed to flow down from her lips - which his own, glued to them, delightfully caressed and kept gently in their hold - through her breasts that his cupped hand was tenderly holding in its hollow and down across her belly, until her hips and her shapely thighs began to melt beneath her and she felt herself totally dissolved into him just as does,

bubbling, a tablet of fizzy aspirin or any other soluble gas-containing substance in a glass of water. They loved each other in a feasting fury: they rolled and rolled again on one another even outside the limited boundaries of Ricardo's pullover, on the grass – which seemed happy to receive in its soft embrace these two enlaced overheated bodies –, and murmured to one another passionate words of love.

He used to say to her:

“Cathy, my beloved Little You, I live only because you are alive, because you exist! I can't stop praising and thanking the Lord for having created you and given you to me: you are the most marvellous creature in the entire humanity and I'm proud and happy that you – at last! – became my wife! I really can't stop deeply loving and adoring you!”

In return, she said with glowing eyes, stretching her arms around him and hugging him tightly to her magnificent body:

“Ricardo, darling, you are the dream of my life come true: as I told you already, I always dreamt of being your wife and this is a marvellous gift that I at last got from Heaven and a wonderful reality now! I am *yours*, totally and only *yours*; I have belonged to you *since ever*, my beloved Ricardo, since the beginning of our acquaintance that very day I came with you to Antonio's farewell party in Lagos or even before really becoming acquainted with you; I can tranquilly say in all faith: since the day of my birth. Yes, darling, ever since my birth I was already yours, I was fully destined to you. Only to you! This is what I'm absolutely convinced of. Even when I was still Pedro's wife, for whom, note it well, I felt a very great affection and deep sincere devotion, I knew in the depth of my heart that the truth was that I belonged only to you. I will belong to you *up to the end of my life!*”

It was a unique, dazzling rejoicing! In their carefree frenzy and hearty passion for one another, they behaved, despite their now mature age, like youngsters in love. Their making love in the small forest in full and open nudity looked as a real hymn to the enchanting beauty and the luxuriant vitality of the surrounding nature. That secluded little forest glade had become their usual open-air alcove, but every time they made love there, it was as if Ricardo saw Catherine for the very first time, so great was his pleasure at watching (and admiring) her completely nude and at

making love to her in that enchanting and spellbound place.

He gazed at her with gleaming, adoring eyes, like mesmerized. All the other beautiful Nigerian women (such as Edima, first of all, plus Vivian, Sisi, Funke, but also Bunmi, Beatrice and Janet^(*)), as well as the Niger Republic's Targuia Aysha and the Gabonese Nadine he had crazily and happily loved in the past – and for whom he maintained in the most profound recess of his heart a sound, very deep affection, but nothing more than that – faded out and vanished from his mind and from his heart and left there just a vague insignificant trace as a simple memory, a ghostly vestige of their passage in his life. In spite in fact of the dazzling love he had then felt for them, unfortunately for those beauties they could no longer find a significant place there, since there was no room for them, now the place was totally occupied by the loveliest of them all, his beloved Catherine.

Alas for them and for their lovely remembrance! Both his heart and his mind were now totally and unequivocally dedicated and devoted to Catherine, his beloved sweetheart, the woman he adored, whom he considered as the quintessence and the most spectacular specimen of the delightful womanhood having had its origin in the fabulous Africa, this great and unequalled continent. And more specifically in Nigeria, the true Land of love.

Luckily, the path around the lake was only frequented by hurried cyclists and runners; otherwise some passers-by might become curious at hearing their groans of love and discover, surely with high scandal, this tightly enlaced naked couple. And though Catherine in her glamorous 44 year-old nudeness could still attract the desire of men, he, as an old man of more than 80, with his relaxed pectoral and abdominal muscles, his wrinkly skin, his slightly swollen stomach and belly, could in no way be a nice and sexy vision for any voyeur wishing to stealthily watch a man and a woman making love.

When they made love, he possessed her ravenously: how enthralling and exhilarating it was for him to get inside her! Every time he was in her, inside her delightful body, it was anyhow for both the explosion of new astonishingly pleasant sensations.

Catherine also took fervent care to relieve him from the painful condition created by his powerful nocturnal erections. On those occasions, in fact, if she realised the state which he was in, becoming suddenly awake, she firmly grasped with both hands his exceedingly

swollen and hardened penis and drew it to her mouth in order to tenderly suck and bite it before inserting it into her vagina, so eager to receive it inside itself. This act was extremely pleasant and exalting for both: for him because such unconscious abnormal erections were absolutely very painful and he then really needed a relief likely to reduce his tension and pain; for her, as well, because she enjoyed very much to introduce in her mouth and then in her body this beloved piece of his body in this monstrous condition, since on those occasions his penis became so awfully big as never happened in that unbelievable way in normal erection situations when they made love totally consciously.

She was more and more convinced that her encounter with Ricardo had been a real blessing that Heaven had reserved for her, since no other man in her whole life had been able to give her such wonderful sensations of pleasure and so much happiness and joy. It was really the enchanting triumph, a true full jubilation of senses.

They lived their sexuality intensely, passionately and happily. This indeed was due to the fact that he attained the most fulfilling happiness only *inside her* and she could feel so exceedingly happy only by having *him* inside herself. How magnificent was their love: they were able to give each other a real profusion of unequalled pleasure and incommensurable happiness! They were reciprocally grateful to one another for this splendid gift they feverishly exchanged toward each other.

She had in fact been a devoted and faithful spouse for Pedro, but only with Ricardo, since ever, could she feel totally accomplished as a woman and get such wonderful, fulfilling and exceedingly pleasant physical and spiritual satisfactions.

Needless to say, although sex doubtlessly played a primary role in their lives and somehow dictated their behaviour vis-à-vis each other, being a strong and potent component in their relationship – since he constantly desired to possess her and she always wanted him inside herself –, it was not actually a determinant factor at all, not essential for them. Sex was the pure and simplest consequence of their mutual liking of their bodies – a real great passion harboured in their hearts and minds, especially in Ricardo's: undoubtedly, for him, her body was the most attractive and seductive woman's body existing in the world! – that powerfully pushed them into one another's arms.

Catherine indeed, in spite of her advancing age, still had a lovable and desirable slender silhouette and was still a superb woman who made him crave for her (as said before, only her hips had put on some weight and her belly had become slightly more convex) and Ricardo, though with relaxed muscles and slightly inflated stomach and belly, had still a vigorous aspect.

Physical lovemaking therefore was only an external manifestation, the most apparent evidence of the incredible, indissoluble bond – a bond even stronger than that of the matrimony, which had at last tied them to one another and so sanctified their union forever – that had united their souls and their spirits since their very first encounter many, many years ago.

A love bond of that strength could not be seen anywhere: no other man and woman in love on earth could be said to be as united as they were to each other. The joys and pleasure of sex, though agreeable and highly desirable, were indeed ephemeral, transitory and perishable, whilst their love was immanent, long lasting and resistant against all hurdles and difficulties inherent to life itself.

This was mainly due to the fact that he had her at the foremost top of all his thoughts and she had him above everything in hers. It was indeed a magnificent reciprocal and absolutely shared feeling: he was crazily fond of her, he loved her more than his own life and thought that he could no longer live without her and she literally adored him and deeply felt in her heart that he was the only true man in her life! Together, obviously, they formed a splendid and unique unity! Therefore, although their bodies matched so perfectly to one another that their relationship could, at a first superficial look, seem to be totally based on physical pleasure, their love bond and, consequently, their romance was on the contrary full of sincere sentiment and tender romanticism: if they had to stay a couple of hours apart from each other, they were immediately prey to a nostalgic desire for the partner, which urged them to run toward him or her as soon as possible and cling tightly to one another, seeking for each other's embrace and passionate kisses.

The engine which therefore moved their actions and threw each of them in the arms of the other was not hunger for sex, but a reciprocal enrapturing true love and sincere affection, the profound esteem and great respect that they harboured in their heart for one another, the tender consensus and habitual constant agreement on

everything, the day-by-day wish to comply with the other's desires and to make him or her happy and satisfied, the frantic search for togetherness and the gratitude for this unique gift offered to them by life. Since they were both fervent practising Catholics, they constantly praised and thanked God for this immense delightful gift of being now united forever.

Their story was a unique, splendid romance! How delightful, agreeable and fully worthy to be lived was life in those splendid circumstances! They would have sung its praises together, in a lovely, harmonious duet; their love was in fact a solid reality in the precariousness of human life: it was really steady, sincere and immense and had a long story behind it, it came from the night of times and they yet crazily loved one another! Their relationship indeed did not go on by virtue of a lazy and indolent inertia, but they were able to renovate their love bond everyday, to maintain it as fresh and genuine as if it were the very first day they had met. After such a long time since then and all the vicissitudes experienced, as well as the long separation suffered, they had at last crowned their long cherished dream and were now husband and wife, united for life; they could not spoil this unbelievable gift, they had to keep it as their most precious treasure! Furthermore, they knew very well that because of Ricardo's advanced age, it was not given to them to live a long time together; they therefore had to profit from every single instant they had at their disposal to manifest to each other all the strength of their love.

Although Ricardo was already above 80, Catherine was still young enough to bear a child in her womb; the great and tender love which tied them so tightly to one another, although having already produced a fruit in the past, with Isabel's birth, could not remain fruitless in the present lucky circumstances of being at last a married couple.

As a matter of fact, she became pregnant and gave birth to another child – *her* and *his* child, the second *product of their immense love!* –, a boy this time, who was given the name Julio Alejandro.

Even though Ricardo, laughing amused, asserted that he could be his own son's grandfather or even great-grandfather, they both welcomed the arrival of this child, who furthermore demonstrated the much cemented strength of their union, with great cheers and joy. Moreover, as the last child that Catherine had had the chance to

get – her very cadet! –, they loved it incommensurably. Catherine's desire to have many progeny had therefore been totally satisfied.

They also travelled a lot, all through Europe which Ricardo cheerfully showed her:

Germany, with the solid and fascinating Berlin and the treasure-rich Potsdam, as well as the splendid Munich, the enchanting small medieval towns of the 'Romantische Strasse (the romantic road)' and the imposing Rhine River with its towns and castles, as well as the powerful falls at Schaffausen in Switzerland.

Scandinavia, with the cheerful capital of Denmark, Copenhagen (where they visited the nice royal castle at Amalienborg, the lovely Mermaid statuette, the fabulous Tivoli park, reign of amusement, as well as of eating and, specially, of drinking, the Town Hall and the lively, picturesque Nyhavn, full of nice, smoky pubs and characteristic small restaurants), and the serious and rather austere but nevertheless still attractive capitals of Norway, Sweden and Finland.

There was Oslo (where they could see the impressive ultra-modern Town Hall, the ancient Akershus fortress, the royal palace, the fantastic museums of the Viking ships, of the Kon-Tiki raft and that of Amundsen's polar ship Fram, as well as the intriguing Vigeland's sculptures in Frogner park). Then Stockholm (where they could visit the museum dedicated to the XVIIth century Vasa man of war [battle ship], recovered from the sea and duly restored, besides the royal palace, the Town Hall, the cavaliers' palaces and the Opera House, with the beautiful elongated feminine statues in front of it). Finally Helsinki, a delicate and nearly evanescent town, (visiting, besides it, the powerful King Olaf's Olavinlinna castle at Savonlinna and the nearby pyrite mine of Outokumpu, the industrial towns of Tampere, Lahti and Turku, the romantic – though alas full of mosquitoes! – region of lakes).

The other attractive European countries through which Ricardo cheerfully guided Catherine in order to show her this so diversified continent and in this way allow her to become a fully integrated European lady were in particular:

The Czech Republic (where they visited, besides the lovely city of Prague with its many splendidly attractive treasures, also the impressive Karlštejn castle), Poland (they visited here the beautiful

towns of Warsaw, minutely restored from the ruins suffered in World War II, and of Krakow, with its charming and very attractive Rynek Główny, i.e. the large market square – on which stands the big XVIth century Town Hall tower, the fine Renaissance building in its middle originally designated for the market of fabrics and tissues and many other buildings of historical interest –, the famous ancient Jagielloński University – where the world famous Polish astronomer Copernicus studied in XVth century –, the powerful Wawel castle and cathedral, as well as the sanctuary of the so-called ‘black’ Holy Virgin of Częstochowa at Jasna Góra and the Auschwitz prison camp, to pay a homage to the numberless people who had been killed there by Nazis and Russia (where they saw the many fantastic treasures of Moscow and of Saint Petersburg), all of which were captivating targets of their travels through Europe that left with them dreamy memories and beautiful souvenirs.

They travelled to Africa as well, to the fabulous Egypt with its majestic memories of the time of pharaohs, to the fascinating Kenya with its striking vast landscapes, its parks full of wildlife, the beautiful, fierce and independent Maasai, Samburu and Turkana people and its marvellous sunsets full of glamour and mystery, and to the poor, but yet attractive Somalia (where Mogadiscio, though spoiled and ravaged by war and indigenous struggles, still preserved and showed typical Italian style and characteristics in both the town planning scheme and the architecture of many major buildings).

As obvious, a very special place in their travels to Africa was reserved to Nigeria. Catherine in fact, although she had now been living abroad for more than sixteen years, felt exceedingly bound to her country that she rightly loved much. She therefore wanted to travel quite often to her cherished homeland and each time wanted Ricardo to accompany her.

Ricardo, for the truth, did that not only with great pleasure, but also with the highest enthusiasm because he too loved Nigeria very much, as it was the country where he had happily lived for many years in the not far past.

He would meet there not only Catherine’s relatives, her aunt and her cousins who he had already made the acquaintance of at the time of his long living in Nigeria and renewed it on the occasion of his marriage with Catherine, but also all her wider family. Ricardo was requested to pay to Catherine’s kin one million Naira (about

5,400 Pounds) as dowry for having married her. It seemed to be a very high bride price by Nigerian standards, but as she had become an experienced housewife, moreover graduated, and was presently carrying out honourably and commendably the raising of her children, as well as her housekeeping tasks in Europe, it was normal that they attached a great value to her.

Taking however into account all her high qualities – and, for him, especially her beauty, an important natural gift that was however not taken into great account by her Nigerian kin. Beauty, in Nigeria, is in fact not considered an important woman's characteristic worthy of being duly honoured and praised by people in the same way as obedience, submission and dedication to house duties, as well as fertility. In Ricardo's eyes therefore it was even a too low price for such an enchanting lady that he was very happy to pay for being officially authorized, also in Nigeria, to consider her as his own wife in all respects. He was received and welcomed by everybody with great honour and high signs of homage openly manifesting their joy and their pleasure together with their approval for his being Catherine's husband.

Sisi's father was very proud that his daughter had become such a close friend of a Spanish 'hidalgo', a real European knight and a member of the old European aristocracy, and decided to 'push' the local Oba (King) to grant Ricardo the Nigerian dignity with the traditional title of Chief. Ricardo felt exceedingly touched by the concession of such honour, which clearly indicated the high consideration in which he was kept in that friendly and courteous community.

Ricardo obviously used his travels to Nigeria with Catherine to meet again his old good friends, the Kanu family. Though with a slight hint of jealousy by Dakky (who in the meantime had secretly fallen fond of him and had therefore hoped that he could take *her* as his wife, also in spite of the three nice children she had got by that awful Bulgarian man she had been in unfortunate love with), they all were very happy to be enabled to manifest to him their great affection and consequently to embrace him once more. Apart therefore from Dakky for obvious reasons, they were also happy to renew the acquaintance of Catherine, his new lovely Nigerian bride that they had known as his girlfriend when he had suddenly paid them a visit with her on the occasion of his short mission to Nigeria

many years ago.

On some of these travels to Nigeria, he would also pay short occasional visits to Funke who, although now aged and sick, was always exceedingly happy to receive and welcome him in her own home. When she met Catherine, who had gone and visited her together with him, Funke had to admit that she was an adamant very beautiful woman and heartily praised Ricardo for his splendid decision in choosing to marry such a magnificent and sublime bride. In the secret of her heart, however, she felt a very powerful and exclusive jealousy towards Catherine and still strongly and sorrowfully regretted that Ricardo – this handsome man she had craved for and so intensely loved, several years before – had married *that* black woman instead of *herself*. Ego-centric as she was (thus however behaving not dissimilarly from any other woman in love, endowed with a strong personality), Funke deemed in fact herself more worthy than anybody else to get such privileged, highly praised and cherished honour.

Besides making these engaging long-distance leisure travels, Ricardo and Catherine also participated in some field-trips in Spain organised by the Association of veterans of his old company, Santa Fe, which enlisted as members ex-employees in retirement such as he himself. Such trips were aimed at visiting and getting acquainted with the hectic activity performed on oil and gas fields (including off-shore platforms for research and/or production), mining enterprises – i.e. mines and relevant ore-treatment plants – and chemical factories. In all these places, they found skilled and highly experienced geologists, mining and mechanical engineers, as well as adroit and smart technicians who clearly explained to them, with great ability and attention-attracting knowledge, the operations which were carried out there.

Ricardo eventually died at the age of 86: all the men in his family, his father, his grandfather and his great-grandfather had died at that age. He died quietly and surely happily one day, early in the morning, as though falling asleep, in the presence of Catherine and of the two children he had got from her, his beloved Isabel and Julio Alejandro.

It was really a joy for Ricardo to have both the adored children he had got from Catherine around him in these last moments of his life, before passing over (Isabel, who had finally been told by Catherine

herself that he was her real natural father – and she had highly rejoiced, saying: “Even though I have to bear another man’s surname, I am so happy that Ric is not simply my so-said ‘uncle’, as your best friend, but *my own real father!* Now I understand why I loved him so much and felt such a particular great attraction for him: it was the *voice of blood* which urged me into his arms! Although Pedro always treated me with paternal affection and tenderness, as if I were his genuine daughter, since this is what he believed, I am really very happy that actually I am Ric’s daughter: I love him immensely!” –, had come home from USA to look after Ricardo in his last days).

After having fondled Julio Alejandro’s head, who was kneeling on the bed beside him, while Catherine and Isabel sat on chairs beside his bed, he was holding tightly with maximum tenderness in his hands Catherine’s and Isabel’s hands.

Before dying, gathering together his residual fading strengths, he addressed Isabel, who had in the meantime become a magnificent and exceedingly fascinating young woman, saying emphatically:

“Isabel, my lovely little Earthquake (do you remember this jolly nickname we gave you when you were a motion-full and restless turbulent child?) or Little Nymph (as I called you later on because of your extraordinary beauty), you are my beloved baby: I always loved and, of course, still love you very much!”

But Ricardo’s very last words, especially full of tenderness and sweet nostalgia, as well as of regret for being on the point of prematurely leaving her alone, had been for his adored Catherine:

“Cathy, my immense and unique, sole Love, my wonderful Sweet Sylph, you undoubtedly filled my life with immortal joy and unequalled happiness: certainly, on the entire planet, there hasn’t ever been a more romantic love than our own! I lived in your love and for your love, but I have become old, even too old. Now I am going to leave you, my delightful and marvellous Angel, my beloved *black* Angel, but never forget that I always loved you and I still love you with all my heart, even now that I’m about to die! And, you are perfectly aware of, I adored with all my heart, my brain, my soul the magnificent and absolutely fascinating and seductive chocolate-like colour of your splendid skin: for nothing in the world would I ever desired to change it! ... Nor to change you, of course! ... My life with you has been like a wonderful fairytale, but the truth is that it

was an unbelievably fabulous reality. You have in fact been a wonderful bright sun given to me by a so gratifying and favourable destiny to light up my life and so long as you love me you will always be my marvellous fantastic sunshine. Also after my death!”

Catherine’s only answer was to press Ricardo’s beloved head to her small but to his eyes exceedingly praiseworthy and exquisite bosom. With his face tenderly squeezed between his black Angel’s soft, lovable breasts (which he did not miss the opportunity to sweetly kiss, though through the fabric of her nightgown, for the very last time), he felt himself to be – thus anticipating, even if just for a very short moment, the right time for that target – already in Paradise.

He died peacefully right after that.

For certain, by the ends of their lives, his predecessors had not experienced physical love any more. They considered themselves too old for this certainly enthralling but, at the same time, absolutely weakening practice. Contrary to that concept, in the last period of Ricardo’s own life there had been years of intense, physically gratifying, sincere and profound love. This was certainly due to the fact that he spent it with the delightful and splendid Catherine, a black woman originated from the magnificent gifts dispenser Nigeria, the so-called ‘Giant of Africa’, who had faithfully and loyally totally devoted her heart, as well as her entire being to him!

Catherine had thus lost her husband and to her great sorrow was therefore left alone for the second time in her life with an enormous nostalgia for him. This time, however, in spite of her relatively still young age – she had now just turned 50 year old – she decided not to marry any more, nor to get in love with another man. She lived the rest of her life up to the age of 89 as a lovely widow in the cherished memory of her two husbands, especially in that of Ricardo who had been her never forgotten, great, sincere love, the man capable of raising in her the most delicate sentiments and the most romantic thoughts.

Up to the end of her life, she maintained a very lively spirit and the marvellous temper that had made Ricardo get crazy for her. She spent it as a fully integrated black skinned European, having over time acquired and made her own, though superposed onto African

fresh genuineness and naïve mood, those somehow strange European habits, manners and ways, so typical of 'oyinbos' and usually unfamiliar to black people.

At any step of her ageing life, she certainly was delightful company for everybody. For this reason, Catherine, even in her most advanced age, was very much sought after by her children and grandchildren, as well as by her Spanish and Nigerian friends. They all loved her very intensely and constantly managed to stay around her, worrying about letting her live alone with her immense sorrow for the loss of a so much loved man and the sweet remembrances of him.

In spite of her inconsolable pain for this loss, she was however happy because she knew that she had been particularly blessed by Heaven: similarly to Jennifer's and Sissy's, her old dream had come true! As a matter of fact, she had been very lucky; unlike many other young African women whose open or more or less carefully concealed dream for one reason or another – unfortunately for them – remains unaccomplished (thus condemning them to a life as 'singles' or to an undesired marriage with an African man), she could crown her most cherished desire: to get married to a white man!

She had in fact managed to marry not just one, the most desired man she ever met in her life, but even two lovely 'oyinbos' who had fully honoured her and loved her with all their hearts. Furthermore, the second of them was the man who had engendered in her this strong passion for a white man, the man she deemed as the best one in the entire world and to whom she had therefore happily and without anxiety dedicated the most significant part of her life. When she eventually died, she was full of happiness, because she would in this way finally join Ricardo and be forever united with him again. She had therefore a very short agony and said to the already mourning onlookers:

"Don't weep, all you, dearest kin and good old friends: I am happy indeed because I am going to a place where I'll be reunited at last with my beloved Ricardo for eternity and nothing can separate us any more!" then, after a pause to take a bit of breath, she added with ever fading voice until it became as thin as a whisper: "The marvellous and harmonious romance I lived with him was a luminous and sweet example of true, profound and everlasting *love* between two persons, a *black* African woman and a *white* European

man, originally belonging to two diverse and differing worlds, but capable of integrating themselves perfectly into one another. We loved each other immensely, we were literally mad for one another: he craved for me and I loved him more than my own life! To be *Ricardo's woman*, i.e. to become *his* wife and live with him, near him, for him had always been my most cherished *dream* since the very first time we met and I am grateful to life for being very generous with me and enabling me to crown this dream and let it become *true*. Our extraordinarily happy union was certainly protected and blessed by the Almighty God, because we were both made by Him and God loves all His creatures, whatever might be the colour of their skin: black, white, red or yellow. Amen.”

Her very last words were just a nearly unintelligible murmur:

“Look therefore forward, all you, my beloved, and help to attain this important and highly desirable target: it is possible to realize racial integration peacefully, without struggles and predominance of one party on the counterpart, but with full dedication to one another – whites on one side and blacks or reds or yellows on the other – , tolerance and love, a great, unselfish, but generous and sincere love, as was our own, no matter what the initial differences are in races, traditions, education, beliefs, opinions, social class levels!”

Isabel, Ricardo's and Catherine's daughter – conceived before Catherine's engagement and born before her subsequent marriage to Pedro Gutierrez –, graduated at the MIT, as she wanted, in astrophysics and, besides being an exceedingly glamorous and fascinating woman, became a worthy and renowned scientist. After a short, but very passionate romance, a happy engagement resulted with a successful mining engineer coming from one of the best and oldest families in Spain; she had a fabulous wedding and got three splendid children, two boys and one girl who were the right crowning of her successful marriage.

Catherine's other four children too, Vicente, Guendolyn and Concepción, whom she had had from Pedro, as well as Julio Alejandro, her other child from Ricardo, born after their eventual happy wedding, grew up very well and enjoyed successful careers, happy marriages and easy, very pleasant lives.

THE END

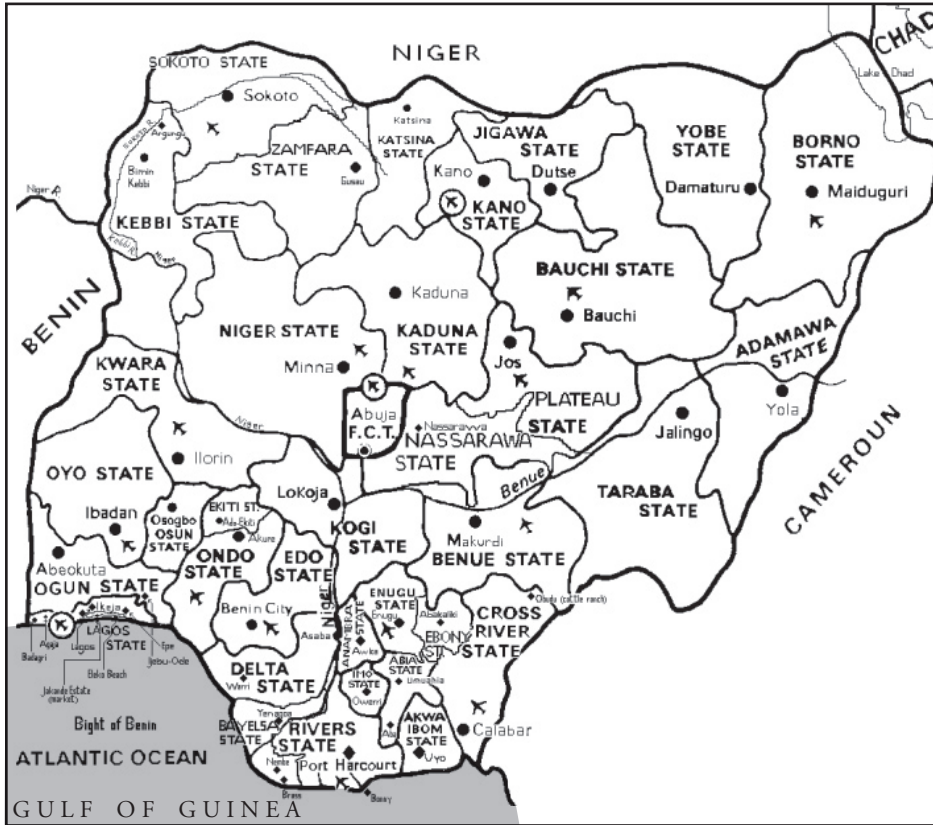
*APPENDIX: THE AFRICAN CONTINENT
or where the action takes place*

Nigeria and the other African countries mentioned in the tale



APPENDIX: THE LAND OF NIGERIA

The Federal Republic of Nigeria



N.B.: All the Nigerian locations mentioned in the text are shown on this map. Tarkwa Bay, Bar Beach and Alpha Beach, which are the three sole not indicated sites, are located as follows: the first two, respectively, just at the entrance, on the western side, and on Victoria Island's oceanfront on the eastern side of the channel leading to the port of Lagos and the third on Lekki Peninsula, at short distance eastwards of Jakande Estate.

About the Author

Umberto Cordero di Montezemolo, an Italian citizen, was born in Florence (Central Italy) on 4.2.1936, of an old aristocratic family in Piedmont (North-Western Italy), bearing the title of marquis (of Montezemolo, a fiefdom on the boundary between Piedmont and Liguria).

After having served several years in the Italian Air Force, where he attained the rank of Major, he graduated in Mining Engineering at the University “La Sapienza” and S. Pietro in Vincoli’s Engineering School of Rome in February 1971. In July 1971, he joined the ENI Group (Italian National Hydrocarbons and Energy Agency), specifically in the Somiren S.p.A., a Company dealing with the research and production of radioactive ores. After working for some months in the pre-alpine Novazza (Bergamo) prospective mine, he spent almost two years in Arlit (Republic of Niger), in the middle of the Sahara desert, working at both the uranium mine and the ore treatment plant as seconded development manager to the Somair Company which had the task of exploiting the local ore deposit. Being transferred, on his return to Italy, to Agip Mineraria, he became the expert in uranium ore treatment (and, in general, in hydrometallurgy) for this Company and headed the relevant section. He was member of various international boards dealing with uranium ore treatment. In total, he spent 11 years in the uranium field.

In 1981, he was sent to Nigeria as ENI Group Representative for his first term in this Country up to May 1985. When he came back to Italy, he joined the Development Division of Agip, where he managed the Europe and Americas Unit, but he dealt also with Africa for his knowledge of this continent. In this capacity, he installed in the Congo, near Brazzaville, under the enthusiastic sponsorship of the then Minister for Energy, Mr. R. Adada, and

achieving immediate great success, a centre for the practical use of solar energy in small appliances (such as TV, radio, telephone, drilling machine, small compressors and other electrical functioning tools, road and house lighting, fountain water-jet activation, etc.), fully and uniquely equipped with solar Silicon panels and appropriate rechargeable NiCd batteries.

In October 1993, he started his second term in Nigeria, being seconded as Corporate Planning Manager to Nigeria LNG Limited, the Company set up as a joint-venture among the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation – NNPC, Shell, Elf and Agip with the aim of constructing a plant for the liquefaction of natural gas and then shipping it to Europe. This was, by the way, a very successful project. He lived in Nigeria for almost 5 years, remaining in this position until 31st August, 1998.

After coming back he retired in December, 1998. It is then that he conceived the idea of writing his first novel «*Living in the Land of Love*», meant as a thankful hymn to the high praises of his cherished Nigeria. This present novel, written more recently as a continuation of the tale expounded in the first, is also meant to be an unconditional and passionate homage to the unrivalled value and the indisputable attractiveness of the women of Nigeria.

Nowadays, Mr. Montezemolo works with the Italy – Kazakhstan Association, whose main target is the improvement of the industrial, commercial and cultural relationship between those two countries, and also plays an active part in the Italy – Nigeria Chamber of Commerce. He now lives in San Donato Milanese (MI), Italy. He is married and has two children, a son and a daughter. His daughter has given him two lovely little granddaughters of 5 and 3 in the last few years and just recently a grandson.

