

M A N D R A G O R A

MICHAEL SAW HER only dimly through the dusty glass of the shop window, with its array of vases, ornaments, fans, figurines, snuff boxes and general bric-a-brac. She was sitting on a hard chair, her head slightly bowed, her hands folded in her lap, and there was an old-fashioned air about her, a modesty and demureness which Michael found charming. He was a shy, withdrawn person himself, and the brash young females who crossed his path nowadays scared him. But his sense of being drawn towards this young woman was overpowering.

Like a creature pulled by a magnet, he opened the door of the shop and entered. The bell gave a resounding ping, but the girl, whom he'd presumed was in charge, did not move.

A thin, white-haired man with bowed shoulders and haggard features came in from the back. 'Good morning, Sir. Can I help you?'

Still the young woman in the chair made no move.

'I'd just like to look around, if I may,' said Michael.

'Certainly, Sir. Take your time.'

Michael pretended to examine items on the shelves, thus gradually drawing closer to the young woman. He admired the smooth darkness of her upswept hair, the pallor of her delicate features, the graceful folds of her black, ankle-length dress. How lovely she was.

Now he was very close to her. His foot brushed against her skirt. 'I beg your pardon,' he said, daring to look directly into her face; and only then did he realise that she wasn't a living woman but a life-sized image.

'Good heavens,' he said, 'I thought she was real.'

The shop owner smiled. 'A lot of people think so when they first come in, and who's to say they're not right? Reality takes many different forms.'

Michael was standing as if spellbound. He whispered, 'Is she for sale?'

'I wouldn't sell her,' said the other man, 'but why do you ask?' and Michael, 'Because I want her. She's my ideal woman. Beautiful — gentle — quiet — I love her!'

'Good,' said the old man, 'then please take her. From the look of you, I am sure that you would give Mandragora a good home.'

'Mandragora?' echoed Michael, and the other, 'That is her name.'

Michael picked Mandragora up in his arms and carried her away as if she were a lovely but helpless invalid. He felt like a knight in shining armour bearing his dark lady to the security of his castle.

His castle was a rather shabby flat, but there was one good armchair, and here he placed Mandragora so that her head rested against a velvet cushion. He arranged her hands in her lap and stroked the folds of her skirt.

'Welcome home, my love,' he said.

Next day was Sunday and he stayed indoors all day, just for the pleasure of Mandragora's company. He talked to her, and she really did seem to be listening in a way that other people never listened when he talked. In the evening he played his record of Chopin Nocturnes, and he could feel her, motionless, absorbing the music. She was the perfect companion, no fidgeting, no interruptions, no sudden demand for a drink or a coffee. How different from the girls at his office whom he had entertained on rare occasions and found so restless and loud voiced that he was glad when they'd gone.

On Monday morning, before he set off to work, he said: 'Goodbye for the present, Mandragora. See you this evening,' and he kissed her cheek. It was as soft and smooth as real young flesh.

During that day, he brooded over what she was made of. Not wax, nor metal, nor plastic, nor even silk. Not any substance he could think of except — the impossible?

That evening, gentle and tremulous, he undressed her. She was naked beneath the long black dress. Her skin was perfect, except for two slight blemishes: a mole on her left shoulder, and an appendix scar.

These things told him that he had in his possession an example of the taxidermist's art, and he remembered the old man saying: 'Reality takes many different forms.'

He must find out more about her! So next day, during his lunch hour, he returned to the shop. The old man remembered him and asked eagerly, 'How is Mandragora?'

'What I want to ask,' said Michael, 'is *who* is Mandragora?'

'One of those whom the gods love' was the soft reply.

'Why did she die so young?' Michael asked.

'Pernicious anaemia. There's treatment for it nowadays, a regular injection, but in those days there was nothing. I can see that you have realised that she is not merely a doll. Come into the back room and I'll tell you her history.'

They sat down in the old man's private quarters and he said, 'She was my wife. We were both young when we married. I adored her. When she died I couldn't bear to part with her. A funeral was arranged but, at great risk, I managed to steal her body from the coffin and replace it with a dummy. Then I set to work.'

'You set to work?' queried Michael.

'I was a taxidermist by profession in those days. Many museums in this country have examples of my work, mostly animals and birds, and I did private jobs for people whose pets died, some beloved cat or dog. I know the idea of taxidermy is macabre to some people, but not to me. I used all the skill and artistry I possessed to make her image out of her own flesh. She was my masterpiece. I never did another taxidermy job after that. It would have been an anticlimax. I became a shop owner instead, and here I still am.'

He paused, then went on, 'Mandragora and I lived here together in perfect serenity, but whereas I grew old, she did not. Lately I learned that I'm a sick man. Doctors warn me that I haven't much longer.'

'I'm sorry,' Michael murmured.

'No need to be sorry now. I'm not afraid of death, but I was afraid of what might happen to Mandragora when I was no longer here to look after her. That was why I placed her in the shop. I prayed that some sensitive young man, with his life before him, would come along and offer himself as her protector; and, like a miracle, you came. I knew straight away that you would care for her as tenderly as I ever did.'

'I promise you I will,' said Michael.

'Thank you. Indeed, I feel that you may be able to give her more than I did, for you fell in love with her as she is, whereas my love was always shadowed by the memory of what she had been. Your devotion will be more wholehearted than mine.'

The bell in the shop rang. Both men rose. Michael departed and the other attended to a customer.

A few days afterwards, when Michael passed the shop, it was closed. The shopkeeper next door told him that the owner had died. So now Michael felt that Mandragora was truly his own and to her he would dedicate his life.

From then on, the madness of this dedication gripped him. Not that he realised he was mad. To themselves, the mad are normal. Madness is just as natural as sanity and the madman makes his own natural normality.

Michael thought of nothing but the beloved figure in his room. He neglected his work. He lost his job. He almost stopped eating, for Mandragora did not eat. He stayed with her for hours on end, rarely venturing into the outside air, and then only to buy flowers for her, until his savings ran out.

He poured into Mandragora all the passion of his love and devotion, a spiritual love, for he never touched her, except carefully to wash her, arrange her hair and her dress. With mounting excitement, he saw that his treatment of Mandragora was benefiting her more than the ministrations of her late husband, who had himself confessed that his love had not been wholehearted. Michael watched how her hair seemed to become glossier, her skin to lose some of its pallor, her lips to grow rosy.

In this euphoric mood, this ecstasy of self-sacrifice, he was not aware that he was destroying himself. He grew weak, but ignored the fact. He ceased going out altogether and was no longer eating anything at all. He drifted about his room, like a living ghost, talking to Mandragora, worshipping her with words, creating love poems for her alone.

One day his weakness reached a point of no return. He collapsed unconscious. When he came to for a moment, he crawled over to the figure in the chair and, for the first time, kissed her on the lips.

At that moment life drained out of him.

The room became utterly silent. Then there was the sound of quick, light breaths, growing steadier, deeper. Mandragora rose to her feet. From the pocket of her dress she drew a black lace handkerchief and placed it over the dead man's face.

Then, cheeks flushed, lips eagerly parted, she loosened her long hair so that it cascaded down her back. She made a few graceful, dancing movements, and then she went out for a walk in the sunshine.

It was good to be alive again!