

# Maata

## CHAPTER I

The sound of rain woke Rhoda Bendall. It fell, quick and sharp, through the open window on to the polished floor. 'Dear me', she thought, 'it's raining', and she lay still, mild and sleepy, listening to the quick patter. Every morning the effort to get up seemed greater and more dreadful. She dropped asleep like a tired beast dropping into a dark, soft pit and her heart turned faint before the struggle to raise up this long heavy body once again. 'I must wake up. I must. It's raining. The curtains will be quite wet, and so will the floor.' She opened her eyes and stared into the dusky room. Her clothes lay in the middle of the floor, fan-shaped, white and grey. 'They are like the plumage of some great bird,' she thought, staring at the untidy bundle. 'I am going to get up now and shut the window.' But she did not move. Nothing helped her. There was no sound from the house. Her room, at the very top and overlooking garden strips and the backs of other houses, was remote as an empty nest in a bare tree. 'I wonder what the time is. I ought to have a clock in this room: that would be a great help. It's dark but I'm sure it's late.' A little puff of damp air blew in with the rain, making her shiver. She turned, sighed and sat up, shaking back [the loose mane of fair hair.] At the moment of raising herself Rhoda Bendall remembered. She flung out of bed, her eyes dilated, her nostrils quivered. Stretching out her arms, smiling in ecstasy, she staggered forward. 'Maata, my beloved, Maata, my adored one. It is your day—today we meet again.' She leaned out of the window, feeling the rain whip up her sleepy blood. [Clumsily she pulled at the buttons of her night gown and bared her dead white throat and breast.] 'A-ah,' she breathed, in a surge of ecstasy. 'I am baptized. I am baptized into a new day.' Down in the garden the ivy wall gleamed like bronze; some birds fluffed their feathers in the broken fountain bowl. She could see each shining spear of grass. She saw herself walking down there in her white gown, with flowing hair—a saint in a holy picture of a garden, glorying and triumphant. 'Maata! Maata! Can you hear me? My treasure, my beloved one—the day is beautiful with you. Your breath is in this [sweet] wind and the same rain falls on us both. *On us both*. Oh God, bring her quickly. Bring her quickly, God. Yes; I think you must,' crooned Rhoda Bendall, walking up and down. 'For she is of you. She is your spirit, your essence. She is God in woman.' In rapture she stopped before the mirror and stared into it, dreamily smiling. 'I wish you could see me now, Maata