

Bright Snowflakes

BY PROSPER BURANELLI

ON the stage the soprano raised her head and opened wide her mouth. A shrill note rose and trembled falsely.

In the orchestra pit Ghingoni twisted his gray, wrinkled cheeks in a grimace of pain as he slid the bow across the A string of his viola.

"She sings like a fiddle strung with rusty wires." He muttered curses in the ugly dialect of Genoa.

The first oboe in front of him turned his brown, massive face.

"It looks like a bad Christmas for you, Ghingoni." The jibe came in growling irony.

Another strident treble note from the stage, another groan from Ghingoni's bosom. During the next act that faltering voice would sing his newly composed song, "Oh Bright, Wintry Snowflakes of Yuletide."

"It will make the fiasco of a Hymn to the Sun in a college of bats." The viola player raised his big head with a blasphemous laugh. "*Addio*, expectations! *Addio*, hope!"

Ghingoni was a good musician, everybody said that; but he had never had a chance to conduct, and his compositions heretofore had pleased not even himself. He had written correctly enough but without originality. Always he had recognized his tunes as existing somewhere in Schumann or Bellini. But nobody would have played his music, anyway. Then to the Calabria Royal Italian Grand Opera Company had come the diva, Lulu Williamson—billed Lola.

This majestic woman was a soprano of wealth; she had made an intelligent marriage. She put money into the company and became its principal colo-

ratura. Heavy, very tall, and as imperturbable as music by Handel, she paraded and laughed and was revered by all. Ghingoni said to her,

"Signora, I will write a song for you."

"That will be sweet." Her smile was of regal patronage.

The months turned cold, and Christmas approached. Lulu Williamson was a soprano of sentiment. She would show the company a real Christmas. She, herself, would trim the Christmas tree. Ghingoni said to her,

"Signora, I will write a Christmas song for you."

"That will be really too sweet." She uttered little, gurgling cries. She, herself, had written some verses about Christmas:

". . . Oh, bright, wintry snowflakes of Yuletide

Are falling this holiest day;
and so on and on," she chattered blithely. He could use her poem for his song, and she would sing it on Christmas.

Ghingoni ascended into an agony of composition, blackening many pages with notes, filling hours with improvisations on his viola. A single thought stood in his head, with the clear dominance of a drum stroke in an orchestral fortissimo. He must achieve originality, the purest invention. One night, as he lay awaiting sleep, he mused over the happy times of his youth, of devil's play during the Genoese carnival, of drinking bouts in the country while merry girls trod the grapes with crimsoned feet, of roystering voyages on salt ships in the Tyrrhenian Sea. It came—a tune—like the music out of lingering memories. Sweating and chanting, Ghingoni arose and spread notes on staff lines.

It was a swaying, mooning melody in beats of three, with strange, tormenting rhythms and phrases of honey. For three weeks the inflamed musician labored, fashioning a subtle *andante grazioso*, embellishing his tune with harmonic and symphonic device, stating it now in simple, swinging beauty and then in fugitive snatches, amid laces of polyphony and strange chords.

He played the piece for his comrades, who had heard all the symphonies and operas, and who, if they remembered any other melody like his, would chant that other melody in huge mockery. But Ghingoni had fashioned a tune that seemed original, vastly unlike any other thing they had ever put ear to, and they were mystified.

"He is a good musician," the fat oboe player bellowed. "He has heard more music than we have."

Ghingoni exulted.

Originality! That is the great benediction. It is to music what money is to life, as rare as a cymbal crash in a mass by Palestrina, as enchanting as tobacco and three cordials after dinner. Originality! It might sweeten a book with five hundred pages, or a love affair with a scornful girl.

"In music there is a god," he spoke, full of tremendous philosophy, "and the god's name is originality."

Lulu Williamson listened to the song with a smile of stately enthusiasm.

"Isn't it splendid how well my verses go to music," she laughed in a measured cadence, and, while leaning over Ghingoni's shoulder and scrutinizing the page, began in that halting, half-voice manner of a singer learning a new piece:

"Oh, bright, wintry snowflakes of Yuletide

Are falling this holiest day."

"But Signora," Ghingoni raised one hand before him, "for a song, like a singer, it is necessary to have a good debut." He had a plan.

They could give "The Barber of Seville" on Christmas afternoon, and for the show piece of the singing-lesson scene

the Signora could use Ghingoni's composition. He, deserting the orchestra for an act, could play the accompaniment on a piano behind the scenes.

"Splendid," she exclaimed with her dignified laughter. "I will raise them out of their chairs."

"And as for me . . ." Ghingoni mused.

Her success with his song would get him a rise in salary, and the company needed a librarian to take care of the orchestra parts—the post would be his, too, with its dignities and extra money.

The magnificent Christmas had come. The Signora was in calamitous voice. She would bring ruin on Ghingoni's song.

"It is a trick for three devils to play on an ape," he mourned, as he moved his bow back and forth through monotonous notes of accompaniment.

Out of the troubled depths of his fantasy rose a tone, a single tone. It was a D flat, a high D flat. It was the high D flat that would come at the end of his song. It was a good note, an effective note, but, with the false, cracking intonation of that ludicrous voice, it would wring hisses from the lungs of a man as deaf as an oyster and as patient as God.

"May the devil fry my nose like a sausage!" A violent oath from the sufferer made a dozen orchestra players turn their heads and laugh.

When the act was done Ghingoni hastened out of the pit.

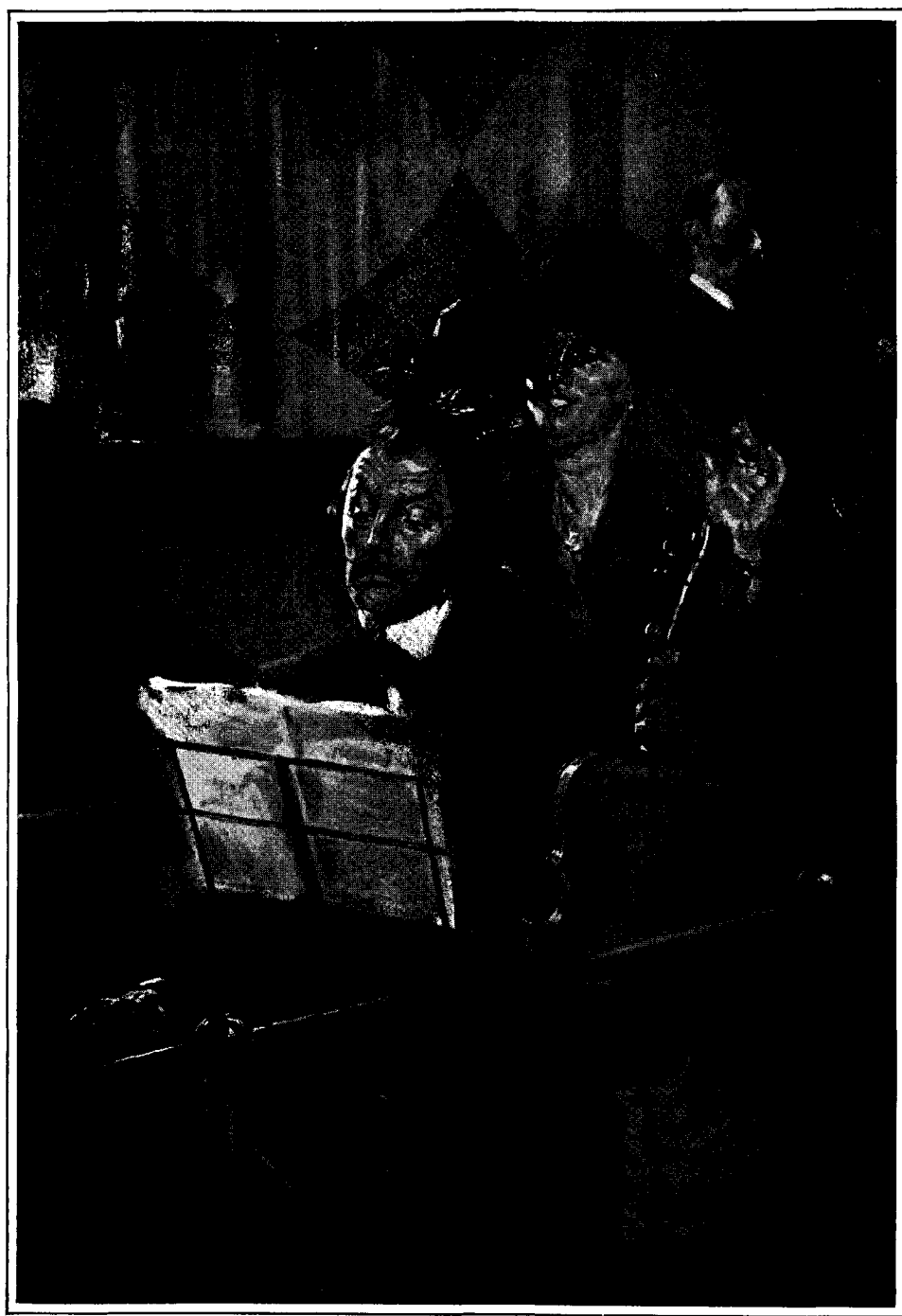
"Tell her," the first oboe shouted ribaldries after him, "that you want another soprano to sing your canzonetta.

Lulu Williamson was on her way to her dressing room when Ghingoni encountered her. There had been few bows to the scanty applause, and an expression of dejection lay in the round face, with its straight features and gaudy make-up.

"Eh, Signora," the old fellow made a courtly bow, "maybe it's better to change the D flat and have an F."

"A high F?" She was astonished.

"No, a low F."



Drawn by T. K. Hanna

“ISN'T IT SPLENDID HOW WELL MY VERSES GO TO MUSIC?”

She gave him a disdainful stare of her little gray eyes.

"What makes you think I can't sing the D flat?" Her voice was tranquil and cold.

"No, no! The F is for a better effect."

"I guess we'll have the song as written." She turned with a scornful flourish.

Ghingoni gazed balefully at the wide, lace-covered back that moved away from him.

"It is like throwing water on the corpse of a man who has drowned," he cursed. The last tassel was sewn onto the cap of doom that hung over his ears.

Lulu Williamson went to her dressing room, where a large Christmas tree stood, laden with decorations and packages. She adjusted a bauble here, an electric light globe there, deliberate in an angry calm. A baritone and a mezzo soprano passed, and stopped, but went quickly on. The genius of failure was astir.

Ghingoni leaned against a piece of scenery, and pulled ferociously at his long, straight mustaches.

"There is no way . . ." he muttered, trying to think of an escape from the embrace of disaster.

"But if I made a speech . . ." A quick whim caught Ghingoni and made a wide crescent of his mouth. He thought of the audience.

The Calabria Royal Italian Grand Opera Company had opened that holiday matinée in a rude mining city of Montana, but the crowd which had pushed its way into the theater was of swarthy, gesticulating people, Italians, who chattered in the uncouth dialect of some remote part. Ghingoni had recognized them. They were Sards, a colony from the ancient mines of their island laboring at the fresh, raw ore of this new country.

He had passed a year of his adolescence in Sardinia, where his father had taken him with a cargo of cheeses, and he recalled great pictures of goatherds' festivals beside mountain lakes and of tavern fights with knives and chairs.

"I was as happy then as a stomach full of wine." He lost the sorrow of the hour in those clear, pretty months of early memory.

"If I made a speech in dialect they would burst the theater with applause." Ghingoni was homesick for Sardinia, and it brightened his spirit.

The queenly modulations of the Signora's voice drew him back to reality.

"Say, Ghingoni, are you all set?"

She was garbed in a yellow dress of brocade, with wide, girlish skirts, ready to go on the stage. Ghingoni's song came ten minutes after the rise of the curtain.

Wrinkles of worry lay on her round, low forehead.

"We must bring out that melody as much as we can." Her tone maintained a bouncing cheerfulness. "That's what will get them."

"Without doubt. . . ." Ghingoni muttered ironically.

In the orchestra a chord banged, and mirthful ripples ran on the violins. The Signora hurried away. Ghingoni went to the piano in the wings, and sat waiting.

"Without doubt . . . I cannot make a speech, but I have hands." He mused cryptically.

Bring out that melody? He would, for he was a good pianist. It would dance in the high octaves like moonstruck satyrs, would croon in the notes around middle C, would chant an elegy in the bass, until every ear was tormented by its beauty.

The curtain rose, and the buffoonery of the opera went chattering and stamping.

"It may still be possible to pull the devil's tail," Ghingoni murmured subtly. His head drooped over the keyboard, and five extended fingers moved nervously down his cheek, while he lost himself in an act of hope.

On the stage, playing the saucy girl, the Signora sent her great body skipping and shaking through the merry antics of the comedy. She stepped to right and

left, with a swaying of shoulders and hips, made dance movements and kicks, wagged her head and threw kisses.

"What does she do that for?" Her peculiar style of acting always distracted Ghingoni.

Lulu Williamson had passed several years of her youth in a burlesque shop. Big Venus had been her name in art, and no flaunting stepper had exceeded her in the bounding grace and flaunting dash of a guileless æsthetic. She retained sly memories of these faded glories, and brought into the staid enchantments of opera a swagger and flirtation out of those days opposite the red-whiskered Irish comedian.

"Her brains are out of tune and have a few broken strings," Ghingoni meditated.

A soprano note shrilled, and went flat. He made a rueful face.

"It is enough to ruin a trumpet concerto by the Archangel Gabriel," he said.

His back quickly straightened. He groomed his mustaches. A majestic frown came upon his brow, and his mouth twisted with arrogance. On this evil day the one blessing lay in the music he had composed.

From the stage the Signora looked disapprovingly at the thin, rigid figure before the piano. She skipped across to the side of the stage near him.

"Ready there, Ghingoni," she called sharply. The song was half a minute away.

Ghingoni adjusted himself on his chair, and rested his hands silently on the keys.

Now in his imagination he heard the sound of applause, a great clapping of hands and shouts of bravo—for his song—his badly sung composition—his beautiful tune.

"My melody will make them forget the high D flat," he cried to himself, drunk with enthusiasm.

The orchestra was silent. From the audience came the vague noises of thousands of little, expectant movements. The Signora stood in the middle of the stage. She nodded to Ghingoni. A

chord of the eleventh in A flat major, and a sweet, bell-like phrase moved above lingering chords.

The song began with thirty-two bars of introduction for the piano, in which Ghingoni's tune was announced with rustic simplicity. Into each curve of flowing tone the ardent fellow breathed the graces of his heart, the languors of his love. For he had turned lovesick, had fallen into infatuate passion. He was enamored of his entrancing tune, of the melody that was so exquisitely his own. His fingers spun the dancing cadences through mazes of beauty. At the fourth bar, he leaned to one side, and stole a glance at the audience.

"But what?" he stopped breathing. "Is there a Satan in my brain?"

He had caught a shadowy glimpse of faces, ugly faces, grotesque faces, faces warped with a strange expression, eyes stretched, jaws hanging, lips twitching in ridiculous curves of ecstasy. Half a dozen handclaps sounded and impatient hisses for silence. On the stage the Signora studied the dim audience with an astonished gaze. As she waited she swung her shoulders in sympathy with the people's fervent response to the music.

"It is a delusion," Ghingoni whispered.

Chord upon chord, he led his beloved tune through progressions of dreamy charm, while his own elation went climbing. Who else could have created such a melody? At the twenty-eighth bar, as the music whirled to a climax, there were more handclaps and excited shouts of bravo.

"The bass tuba may whistle like a bird," he laughed, "but there will be no fiasco." He led the music to a pianissimo for the entrance of the voice.

Lulu Williamson took a jumping step sidewise, and waved her right hand in a sprightly gesture.

"Oh, bright, wintry snowflakes . . ." she sang in a reedy voice.

The song now went into a period of fantasy, with the melody flashing brokenly or weaving intricate counterpoints,

while the voice-part chanted over peppery dissonances. The Signora sang badly, but the audience remained undiminished in their curious enchantment.

"It is the success of a horse visiting the kingdom of gadflies." Ghingoni raised his head with the laughter of a giant who has overturned the mountain. After these middle complexities the song would close with a rousing restatement of that irresistible melody. "It will make them jump like grasshoppers," he exulted.

That tune—it was he, his own soul, the transformation into sound of the spirit that had been born in him, and it was the magical revelation of the creativeness that was his. With this his brain labored in an act of fantasy. Ghingoni saw moving before him pale, familiar figures, Rossini, with his bent shoulders and satyr's mouth, Mendelssohn, in faultless dress, and the other masters, vague and distant in their greatness. They, too, had invented original melodies.

The triumphant melody rose in octaves on the piano, with the voice shaking and straining. In the audience, enraptured heads wagged to the rhythm and fervent hands beat the time. A mood of fiery passion filled the theater.

"Ah-ah-ah!" He was one of them. He was one of the great. Fantasies of madness clutched Ghingoni's brain. His eyes glared with a wild boldness. He was the foremost melodist of his day, the most original.

"In music there is a god," in a delirium of triumph he repeated his philosophy, "and the god's name is originality." He dreamed of glories as a composer.

But, *santa madonna!* what was that?

A tenor voice sounded in the audience. It rose eager and throaty, singing the melody along with the soprano. A baritone joined loudly, and a dozen more voices, a score. A great chorus caught the measures of Ghingoni's tune, swelling the chant with the abandon of a hot enthusiasm.

But what words were those?

The audience sang, in harsh gutturals of dialect, an archaic ballad:

"In summer the wine is reddest;

In summer are sweetest the girls."

Those verses—his tune—his most original melody! Like the death thrust of a knife there came to Ghingoni a fair, disastrous memory.

In Sardinia he had loved a red-mouthed girl, with cheeks as pale as the moon in a mist and eyes of somber gray. One night of the Spring Festival he had wooed her, and she had laughed at him and sung,

"In summer the wine is reddest;

In summer are sweetest the girls;"

and all the other revelers had joined in the haunting tune. It was the favorite song of the Sards, which their fathers had caroled since the dim years. He had heard it a hundred times in his stay on the island long ago, and now it had come, unrecognized, out of the black abyss of memory, to gull him, and cheat him, and set him on a cloud for a ghastly fall.

Stricken, in a stupor of calamitous understanding, Ghingoni moved his fingers mechanically over the keyboard, while the lusty chorus in the theater grew louder and more ardent.

Lulu Williamson was not only singing—she was also dancing. Her great body waved across the stage, head tossing, hips swinging, legs flying, skirt soaring, arms undulating to the beat of the music. An audience singing along with her, and she had returned to her days of burlesque when the summons of "all join in the chorus" had been the cry of triumphant art. She was Big Venus again, and making a hit in the old, uproarious way. Higher and higher she bounded, wilder and wilder she pranced, a bacchante aroused, a nymph aflame.

"Oh, bright, wintry snowflakes of Yuletide!" She kicked her way across the stage.

"In summer the wine is reddest!" the audience roared in ecstasies of dialect.

When, in her tours of the stage, the



Drawn by T. K. Hanna

"THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO CAN LAUGH BETTER THAN THEY PLAY THE OBOE"

Signora passed near Ghingoni, she saluted him with breathless cries,

"It's a riot, *maestro*, it's a riot."

The *maestro* was lost in the processes of his own soul.

On the high D flat of the last cadence the Signora's voice screeched and broke, but nobody heard in the *fortissimo* that swelled from a hundred throats.

The applause broke out in a bewildering din. Ghingoni stirred, groaning loudly. The irony was too great for mortal flesh to bear.

"Come on, *maestro*!" The signora called him to make a bow with her. "Oh, *maestro*, don't be so modest!" Her splendid weight sent him stumbling onto the stage.

He looked with stupid eyes into the cheering depths of the auditorium, and inarticulate noises came from his throat when the Signora kissed him with a great display. He tried to run away, but she held him while the shouting and handclapping grew wilder.

"It has been," a hoarse voice at the back of the theater screamed above the tumult, "it has been in honor of our country."

An hour later the company crowded into the Signora's dressing room, where the Christmas tree flamed with lights.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Lulu Williamson, still in costume, stood in stately pose, "this has been, indeed, a Merry Christmas for us. But let us see something of the lion of the day—the *maestro*." Her fat, bare arm waved grandly at Ghingoni, who stood weak and aching in a corner. "It has been to him," she continued, "more than to me that this remarkable success has been due." She paused with a smile of generous acknowledgment, while several women pushed the mournful Ghingoni forward.

"My dear *maestro*, I congratulate you!" She saluted him with a loud kiss. "And I want to make a small gift in acknowledgment of your magnificent success. You will find it among the other presents on the Christmas tree."

Ghingoni regarded her with a smile of misery. His wits were still weak from the blow that had fallen upon him.

"Oh, so bashful, *maestro*," the Signora giggled in her high, bubbling accents. "You are really quite overcome by your glory. How that song went across! Here, I will pick out your present for you." She moved to the Christmas tree, and took a small envelope that hung from a branch. She gave it to Ghingoni, who fumbled it with shaking fingers.

"You read it to him, Florence," she addressed a contralto. "The *maestro* is really bewildered by the success his song made." The girl took the envelope, extracted a note, and read:

"Dear *Maestro*: You know that Androcchio is leaving us next week. I think we ought to have you conduct the orchestra. Will you accept the post? Merry Christmas, and congratulations for your great success. Lola Williamson."

Ghingoni seized the note, and scanned it intently. A score of singers pressed to congratulate him. Lulu Williamson sat down at her dressing table, and rubbed her cheeks vigorously with cold cream.

"Ha! ha! ha!" The sound of laughter came from a corner. There stood a group of orchestra players.

"Ha! ha! ha!" The roaring bass of the first oboe dominated the mocking chorus. The fat fellow was mingling laughter with sardonic mentions of originality. Grotesquely he imitated the harsh dialect of the enraptured audience.

A sharp pain racked Ghingoni. He looked up from the Signora's missive, raising his head slowly.

"There are people," he spoke with loud deliberation, "who can laugh better than they play the oboe."

The sound of laughter was stilled. The oboe player straightened his face. It was the voice of an orchestra conductor.

Ghingoni twisted his mustaches into shape, and, with shrugs of careless fellowship, responded to the congratulations of the singers.

Some Kings, a Khedive, and a Few Sultans

BY E. ALEXANDER POWELL

OF all the Oriental monarchs, Buddhist, Moslem, and pagan, whose acquaintance I have made during nearly a quarter of a century spent as a professional onlooker—they include four kings, seven sultans, a shah, a khedive, and numerous emirs, sheiks, and rajahs—I am inclined to think, as I review the curious list, that the most interesting of the lot, certainly the most picturesque, was King Kwaka Dua III of Ashanti. Though, at the time I met him, he no longer occupied the Golden Stool, the symbol of sovereignty in Ashanti, but pined in exile, a negro Napoleon, on an obscure island in the Indian Ocean, he none the less appealed to my imagination, for he was the last of the great “fetish” kings of Black Man’s Africa, notorious for his cruelties and his superstitions even among the cruel and superstition-steeped savages of the terrible West Coast.

The Africa of the late eighties and early nineties held no darker spot than the West-Coast kingdom of Ashanti, which, because of the wholesale atrocities committed by its rulers in the name of fetishism, might appropriately have been called the Dark and Bloody Land. These horrors reached their apogee shortly after Prince Prempeh succeeded to the Golden Stool in 1888 as King Kwaka Dua III. Sunk in superstition, the willing tool of his painted priests and befeathered witch-doctors, Prempeh, as he was commonly known, proceeded to turn his kingdom into a shambles. It is said that the human sacrifices during the eight years of his reign ran into the tens of thousands, for the king and his chiefs were imbued with the belief that the rank of their deceased relatives in the

future world would be determined by the number of attendants sent to join them. In the outskirts of Coomassie, Prempeh’s jungle capital, stood the “crucifixion grove,” to whose giant trees the victims were nailed to die in lingering agony, while the walls of the royal palace were built of the skulls of those thus sacrificed to appease his unclean gods.

The king was also required by custom to maintain the “fetish” number of wives, three thousand three hundred and thirty-three, though many of these were employed about the royal residence in menial capacities.

During the closing years of the nineteenth century conditions in Ashanti became so intolerable, the fetish houses and crucifixion groves literally so stank to heaven, that the British Government was compelled to intervene, and, upon the king’s refusal to accept a British protectorate, an expeditionary force was sent against him. Coomassie was occupied in January, 1896, the fetish buildings at Bantama were burned, and Kwaka Dua was dethroned, being transported, together with a few of his favorite wives and his leading chieftains, to the Seychelles, a group of islands lying some six hundred miles to the northeast of Madagascar, in the Indian Ocean.

Now ever since the days of my boyhood, when I reveled in the adventures of Stanley and Du Chaillu, I had nursed a secret longing to meet a real African king. So, when the captain of the little cargo boat on which I was loitering up and down the Indian Ocean remarked at breakfast one morning that he had decided to put into Mahé, the principal island of the Seychelles group, to take on a cargo of copra, and suggested that