

## **PART ONE**

### **CHAPTER I**

Certain streets have an atmosphere of their own, a sort of universal fame and the particular affection of their citizens. One of such streets is the Cannebière, and the jest: "If Paris had a Cannebière it would be a little Marseilles" is the jocular expression of municipal pride. I, too, I have been under the spell. For me it has been a street leading into the unknown.

There was a part of it where one could see as many as five big cafés in a resplendent row. That evening I strolled into one of them. It was by no means full. It looked deserted, in fact, festal and overlighted, but cheerful. The wonderful street was distinctly cold (it was an evening of carnival), I was very idle, and I was feeling a little lonely. So I went in and sat down.

The carnival time was drawing to an end. Everybody, high and low, was anxious to have the last fling. Companies of masks with linked arms and whooping like red Indians swept the streets in crazy rushes while gusts of cold mistral swayed the gas lights as far as the eye could reach. There was a touch of bedlam in all this.

Perhaps it was that which made me feel lonely, since I was neither masked, nor disguised, nor yelling, nor in any other way in harmony with the bedlam element of life. But I was not sad. I was merely in a state of sobriety. I had just returned from my second West Indies voyage. My eyes were still full of tropical splendour, my memory of my experiences, lawful and lawless, which had their charm and their thrill; for they had startled me a little and had amused me considerably. But they had left me untouched. Indeed they were other men's adventures, not mine. Except for a little habit of responsibility which I had acquired they had not matured me. I was as young as before. Inconceivably young—still beautifully unthinking—infinately receptive.

You may believe that I was not thinking of Don Carlos and his fight for a kingdom. Why should I? You don't want to think of things which you meet every day in the newspapers and in conversation. I had paid some calls since my return and most of my acquaintance were legitimists and intensely interested in the events of the frontier of Spain, for political, religious, or romantic reasons. But I was not interested. Apparently I was not romantic enough. Or was it that I was even more romantic than all those good people? The affair seemed to me

commonplace. That man was attending to his business of a Pretender.

On the front page of the illustrated paper I saw lying on a table near me, he looked picturesque enough, seated on a boulder, a big strong man with a square-cut beard, his hands resting on the hilt of a cavalry sabre—and all around him a landscape of savage mountains. He caught my eye on that spiritedly composed woodcut. (There were no inane snapshot-reproductions in those days.) It was the obvious romance for the use of royalists but it arrested my attention.

Just then some masks from outside invaded the café, dancing hand in hand in a single file led by a burly man with a cardboard nose. He gambolled in wildly and behind him twenty others perhaps, mostly Pierrots and Pierrettes holding each other by the hand and winding in and out between the chairs and tables: eyes shining in the holes of cardboard faces, breasts panting; but all preserving a mysterious silence.

They were people of the poorer sort (white calico with red spots, costumes), but amongst them there was a girl in a black dress sewn over with gold half moons, very high in the neck and very short in the skirt. Most of the ordinary clients of the café didn't even look up from their games or papers. I, being alone and idle, stared abstractedly. The girl costumed as Night wore a small black velvet mask, what is called in French a "loup." What made her daintiness join that obviously rough lot I can't imagine. Her uncovered mouth and chin suggested refined prettiness.

They filed past my table; the Night noticed perhaps my fixed gaze and throwing her body forward out of the wriggling chain shot out at me a slender tongue like a pink dart. I was not prepared for this, not even to the extent of an appreciative "Très foli," before she wriggled and hopped away. But having been thus distinguished I could do no less than follow her with my eyes to the door where the chain of hands being broken all the masks were trying to get out at once. Two gentlemen coming in out of the street stood arrested in the crush. The Night (it must have been her idiosyncrasy) put her tongue out at them, too. The taller of the two (he was in evening clothes under a light wide-open overcoat) with great presence of mind chucked her under the chin, giving me the view at the same time of a flash of white teeth in his dark, lean face. The other man was very different; fair, with smooth, ruddy cheeks and burly shoulders. He was wearing a grey suit, obviously bought ready-made, for it seemed too tight for his powerful frame.

That man was not altogether a stranger to me. For the last week or so I had been rather on the look-out for him in all the public places where in a provincial town men may expect to meet each other. I saw him for the first time (wearing that

same grey ready-made suit) in a legitimist drawing-room where, clearly, he was an object of interest, especially to the women. I had caught his name as Monsieur Mills. The lady who had introduced me took the earliest opportunity to murmur into my ear: "A relation of Lord X." (Un proche parent de Lord X.) And then she added, casting up her eyes: "A good friend of the King." Meaning Don Carlos of course.

I looked at the proche parent; not on account of the parentage but marvelling at his air of ease in that cumbrous body and in such tight clothes, too. But presently the same lady informed me further: "He has come here amongst us un naufragé."

I became then really interested. I had never seen a shipwrecked person before. All the boyishness in me was aroused. I considered a shipwreck as an unavoidable event sooner or later in my future.

Meantime the man thus distinguished in my eyes glanced quietly about and never spoke unless addressed directly by one of the ladies present. There were more than a dozen people in that drawing-room, mostly women eating fine pastry and talking passionately. It might have been a Carlist committee meeting of a particularly fatuous character. Even my youth and inexperience were aware of that. And I was by a long way the youngest person in the room. That quiet Monsieur Mills intimidated me a little by his age (I suppose he was thirty-five), his massive tranquillity, his clear, watchful eyes. But the temptation was too great—and I addressed him impulsively on the subject of that shipwreck.

He turned his big fair face towards me with surprise in his keen glance, which (as though he had seen through me in an instant and found nothing objectionable) changed subtly into friendliness. On the matter of the shipwreck he did not say much. He only told me that it had not occurred in the Mediterranean, but on the other side of Southern France—in the Bay of Biscay. "But this is hardly the place to enter on a story of that kind," he observed, looking round at the room with a faint smile as attractive as the rest of his rustic but well-bred personality.

I expressed my regret. I should have liked to hear all about it. To this he said that it was not a secret and that perhaps next time we met. . .

"But where can we meet?" I cried. "I don't come often to this house, you know."

"Where? Why on the Cannebière to be sure. Everybody meets everybody else at least once a day on the pavement opposite the Bourse."

This was absolutely true. But though I looked for him on each succeeding day he

was nowhere to be seen at the usual times. The companions of my idle hours (and all my hours were idle just then) noticed my preoccupation and chaffed me about it in a rather obvious way. They wanted to know whether she, whom I expected to see, was dark or fair; whether that fascination which kept me on tenterhooks of expectation was one of my aristocrats or one of my marine beauties: for they knew I had a footing in both these—shall we say circles? As to themselves they were the bohemian circle, not very wide—half a dozen of us led by a sculptor whom we called Prax for short. My own nick-name was “Young Ulysses.”

I liked it.

But chaff or no chaff they would have been surprised to see me leave them for the burly and sympathetic Mills. I was ready to drop any easy company of equals to approach that interesting man with every mental deference. It was not precisely because of that shipwreck. He attracted and interested me the more because he was not to be seen. The fear that he might have departed suddenly for England—(or for Spain)—caused me a sort of ridiculous depression as though I had missed a unique opportunity. And it was a joyful reaction which emboldened me to signal to him with a raised arm across that café.

I was abashed immediately afterwards, when I saw him advance towards my table with his friend. The latter was eminently elegant. He was exactly like one of those figures one can see of a fine May evening in the neighbourhood of the Opera-house in Paris. Very Parisian indeed. And yet he struck me as not so perfectly French as he ought to have been, as if one's nationality were an accomplishment with varying degrees of excellence. As to Mills, he was perfectly insular. There could be no doubt about him. They were both smiling faintly at me. The burly Mills attended to the introduction: “Captain Blunt.”

We shook hands. The name didn't tell me much. What surprised me was that Mills should have remembered mine so well. I don't want to boast of my modesty but it seemed to me that two or three days was more than enough for a man like Mills to forget my very existence. As to the Captain, I was struck on closer view by the perfect correctness of his personality. Clothes, slight figure, clear-cut, thin, sun-tanned face, pose, all this was so good that it was saved from the danger of banality only by the mobile black eyes of a keenness that one doesn't meet every day in the south of France and still less in Italy. Another thing was that, viewed as an officer in mufti, he did not look sufficiently professional. That imperfection was interesting, too.

You may think that I am subtilizing my impressions on purpose, but you may take it from a man who has lived a rough, a very rough life, that it is the

subtleties of personalities, and contacts, and events, that count for interest and memory—and pretty well nothing else. This—you see—is the last evening of that part of my life in which I did not know that woman. These are like the last hours of a previous existence. It isn't my fault that they are associated with nothing better at the decisive moment than the banal splendours of a gilded café and the bedlamite yells of carnival in the street.

We three, however (almost complete strangers to each other), had assumed attitudes of serious amiability round our table. A waiter approached for orders and it was then, in relation to my order for coffee, that the absolutely first thing I learned of Captain Blunt was the fact that he was a sufferer from insomnia. In his immovable way Mills began charging his pipe. I felt extremely embarrassed all at once, but became positively annoyed when I saw our Prax enter the café in a sort of mediaeval costume very much like what Faust wears in the third act. I have no doubt it was meant for a purely operatic Faust. A light mantle floated from his shoulders. He strode theatrically up to our table and addressing me as “Young Ulysses” proposed I should go outside on the fields of asphalt and help him gather a few marguerites to decorate a truly infernal supper which was being organized across the road at the Maison Dorée—upstairs. With expostulatory shakes of the head and indignant glances I called his attention to the fact that I was not alone. He stepped back a pace as if astonished by the discovery, took off his plumed velvet toque with a low obeisance so that the feathers swept the floor, and swaggered off the stage with his left hand resting on the hilt of the property dagger at his belt.

Meantime the well-connected but rustic Mills had been busy lighting his briar and the distinguished Captain sat smiling to himself. I was horribly vexed and apologized for that intrusion, saying that the fellow was a future great sculptor and perfectly harmless; but he had been swallowing lots of night air which had got into his head apparently.

Mills peered at me with his friendly but awfully searching blue eyes through the cloud of smoke he had wreathed about his big head. The slim, dark Captain's smile took on an amiable expression. Might he know why I was addressed as “Young Ulysses” by my friend? and immediately he added the remark with urbane playfulness that Ulysses was an astute person. Mills did not give me time for a reply. He struck in: “That old Greek was famed as a wanderer—the first historical seaman.” He waved his pipe vaguely at me.

“Ah! Vraiment!” The polite Captain seemed incredulous and as if weary. “Are you a seaman? In what sense, pray?” We were talking French and he used the term *homme de mer*.

Again Mills interfered quietly. "In the same sense in which you are a military man." (Homme de guerre.)

It was then that I heard Captain Blunt produce one of his striking declarations. He had two of them, and this was the first.

"I live by my sword."

It was said in an extraordinary dandified manner which in conjunction with the matter made me forget my tongue in my head. I could only stare at him. He added more naturally: "2nd Reg. Castille, Cavalry." Then with marked stress in Spanish, "En las filas legitimas."

Mills was heard, unmoved, like Jove in his cloud: "He's on leave here."

"Of course I don't shout that fact on the housetops," the Captain addressed me pointedly, "any more than our friend his shipwreck adventure. We must not strain the toleration of the French authorities too much! It wouldn't be correct—and not very safe either."

I became suddenly extremely delighted with my company. A man who "lived by his sword," before my eyes, close at my elbow! So such people did exist in the world yet! I had not been born too late! And across the table with his air of watchful, unmoved benevolence, enough in itself to arouse one's interest, there was the man with the story of a shipwreck that mustn't be shouted on housetops. Why?

I understood very well why, when he told me that he had joined in the Clyde a small steamer chartered by a relative of his, "a very wealthy man," he observed (probably Lord X, I thought), to carry arms and other supplies to the Carlist army. And it was not a shipwreck in the ordinary sense. Everything went perfectly well to the last moment when suddenly the Numancia (a Republican ironclad) had appeared and chased them ashore on the French coast below Bayonne. In a few words, but with evident appreciation of the adventure, Mills described to us how he swam to the beach clad simply in a money belt and a pair of trousers. Shells were falling all round till a tiny French gunboat came out of Bayonne and shoed the Numancia away out of territorial waters.

He was very amusing and I was fascinated by the mental picture of that tranquil man rolling in the surf and emerging breathless, in the costume you know, on the fair land of France, in the character of a smuggler of war material. However, they had never arrested or expelled him, since he was there before my eyes. But how and why did he get so far from the scene of his sea adventure was an interesting

question. And I put it to him with most naïve indiscretion which did not shock him visibly. He told me that the ship being only stranded, not sunk, the contraband cargo aboard was doubtless in good condition. The French custom-house men were guarding the wreck. If their vigilance could be—h'm—removed by some means, or even merely reduced, a lot of these rifles and cartridges could be taken off quietly at night by certain Spanish fishing boats. In fact, salvaged for the Carlists, after all. He thought it could be done. . . .

I said with professional gravity that given a few perfectly quiet nights (rare on that coast) it could certainly be done.

Mr. Mills was not afraid of the elements. It was the highly inconvenient zeal of the French custom-house people that had to be dealt with in some way.

“Heavens!” I cried, astonished. “You can’t bribe the French Customs. This isn’t a South-American republic.”

“Is it a republic?” he murmured, very absorbed in smoking his wooden pipe.

“Well, isn’t it?”

He murmured again, “Oh, so little.” At this I laughed, and a faintly humorous expression passed over Mills’ face. No. Bribes were out of the question, he admitted. But there were many legitimist sympathies in Paris. A proper person could set them in motion and a mere hint from high quarters to the officials on the spot not to worry over-much about that wreck. . . .

What was most amusing was the cool, reasonable tone of this amazing project. Mr. Blunt sat by very detached, his eyes roamed here and there all over the café; and it was while looking upward at the pink foot of a fleshy and very much foreshortened goddess of some sort depicted on the ceiling in an enormous composition in the Italian style that he let fall casually the words, “She will manage it for you quite easily.”

“Every Carlist agent in Bayonne assured me of that,” said Mr. Mills. “I would have gone straight to Paris only I was told she had fled here for a rest; tired, discontented. Not a very encouraging report.”

“These flights are well known,” muttered Mr. Blunt. “You shall see her all right.”

“Yes. They told me that you . . .”

I broke in: “You mean to say that you expect a woman to arrange that sort of

thing for you?”

“A trifle, for her,” Mr. Blunt remarked indifferently. “At that sort of thing women are best. They have less scruples.”

“More audacity,” interjected Mr. Mills almost in a whisper.

Mr. Blunt kept quiet for a moment, then: “You see,” he addressed me in a most refined tone, “a mere man may suddenly find himself being kicked down the stairs.”

I don't know why I should have felt shocked by that statement. It could not be because it was untrue. The other did not give me time to offer any remark. He inquired with extreme politeness what did I know of South American republics? I confessed that I knew very little of them. Wandering about the Gulf of Mexico I had a look-in here and there; and amongst others I had a few days in Haiti which was of course unique, being a negro republic. On this Captain Blunt began to talk of negroes at large. He talked of them with knowledge, intelligence, and a sort of contemptuous affection. He generalized, he particularized about the blacks; he told anecdotes. I was interested, a little incredulous, and considerably surprised. What could this man with such a boulevardier exterior that he looked positively like, an exile in a provincial town, and with his drawing-room manner—what could he know of negroes?

Mills, sitting silent with his air of watchful intelligence, seemed to read my thoughts, waved his pipe slightly and explained: “The Captain is from South Carolina.”

“Oh,” I murmured, and then after the slightest of pauses I heard the second of Mr. J. K. Blunt's declarations.

“Yes,” he said. “Je suis Américain, catholique et gentil-homme,” in a tone contrasting so strongly with the smile, which, as it were, underlined the uttered words, that I was at a loss whether to return the smile in kind or acknowledge the words with a grave little bow. Of course I did neither and there fell on us an odd, equivocal silence. It marked our final abandonment of the French language. I was the one to speak first, proposing that my companions should sup with me, not across the way, which would be riotous with more than one “infernal” supper, but in another much more select establishment in a side street away from the Cannebière. It flattered my vanity a little to be able to say that I had a corner table always reserved in the Salon des Palmiers, otherwise Salon Blanc, where the atmosphere was legitimist and extremely decorous besides—even in Carnival time. “Nine tenths of the people there,” I said, “would be of your political



opinions, if that's an inducement. Come along. Let's be festive," I encouraged them.

I didn't feel particularly festive. What I wanted was to remain in my company and break an inexplicable feeling of constraint of which I was aware. Mills looked at me steadily with a faint, kind smile.

"No," said Blunt. "Why should we go there? They will be only turning us out in the small hours, to go home and face insomnia. Can you imagine anything more disgusting?"

He was smiling all the time, but his deep-set eyes did not lend themselves to the expression of whimsical politeness which he tried to achieve. He had another suggestion to offer. Why shouldn't we adjourn to his rooms? He had there materials for a dish of his own invention for which he was famous all along the line of the Royal Cavalry outposts, and he would cook it for us. There were also a few bottles of some white wine, quite possible, which we could drink out of Venetian cut-glass goblets. A bivouac feast, in fact. And he wouldn't turn us out in the small hours. Not he. He couldn't sleep.

Need I say I was fascinated by the idea? Well, yes. But somehow I hesitated and looked towards Mills, so much my senior. He got up without a word. This was decisive; for no obscure premonition, and of something indefinite at that, could stand against the example of his tranquil personality.