CHAPTER II

The street in which Mr. Blunt lived presented itself to our eyes, narrow, silent, empty, and dark, but with enough gas-lamps in it to disclose its most striking feature: a quantity of flag-poles sticking out above many of its closed portals. It was the street of Consuls and I remarked to Mr. Blunt that coming out in the morning he could survey the flags of all nations almost—except his own. (The U. S. consulate was on the other side of the town.) He mumbled through his teeth that he took good care to keep clear of his own consulate.

"Are you afraid of the consul's dog?" I asked jocularly. The consul's dog weighed about a pound and a half and was known to the whole town as exhibited on the consular fore-arm in all places, at all hours, but mainly at the hour of the fashionable promenade on the Prado.

But I felt my jest misplaced when Mills growled low in my ear: "They are all Yankees there."

I murmured a confused "Of course."

Books are nothing. I discovered that I had never been aware before that the Civil War in America was not printed matter but a fact only about ten years old. Of course. He was a South Carolinian gentleman. I was a little ashamed of my want of tact. Meantime, looking like the conventional conception of a fashionable reveller, with his opera-hat pushed off his forehead, Captain Blunt was having some slight difficulty with his latch-key; for the house before which we had stopped was not one of those many-storied houses that made up the greater part of the street. It had only one row of windows above the ground floor. Dead walls abutting on to it indicated that it had a garden. Its dark front presented no marked architectural character, and in the flickering light of a street lamp it looked a little as though it had gone down in the world. The greater then was my surprise to enter a hall paved in black and white marble and in its dimness appearing of palatial proportions. Mr. Blunt did not turn up the small solitary gas-jet, but led the way across the black and white pavement past the end of the staircase, past a door of gleaming dark wood with a heavy bronze handle. It gave access to his rooms he said; but he took us straight on to the studio at the end of the passage.

It was rather a small place tacked on in the manner of a lean-to to the garden side of the house. A large lamp was burning brightly there. The floor was of mere flag-stones but the few rugs scattered about though extremely worn were very

costly. There was also there a beautiful sofa upholstered in pink figured silk, an enormous divan with many cushions, some splendid arm-chairs of various shapes (but all very shabby), a round table, and in the midst of these fine things a small common iron stove. Somebody must have been attending it lately, for the fire roared and the warmth of the place was very grateful after the bone-searching cold blasts of mistral outside.

Mills without a word flung himself on the divan and, propped on his arm, gazed thoughtfully at a distant corner where in the shadow of a monumental carved wardrobe an articulated dummy without head or hands but with beautifully shaped limbs composed in a shrinking attitude, seemed to be embarrassed by his stare.

As we sat enjoying the bivouac hospitality (the dish was really excellent and our host in a shabby grey jacket still looked the accomplished man-about-town) my eyes kept on straying towards that corner. Blunt noticed this and remarked that I seemed to be attracted by the Empress.

"It's disagreeable," I said. "It seems to lurk there like a shy skeleton at the feast. But why do you give the name of Empress to that dummy?"

"Because it sat for days and days in the robes of a Byzantine Empress to a painter. . . I wonder where he discovered these priceless stuffs. . . You knew him, I believe?"

Mills lowered his head slowly, then tossed down his throat some wine out of a Venetian goblet.

"This house is full of costly objects. So are all his other houses, so is his place in Paris—that mysterious Pavilion hidden away in Passy somewhere."

Mills knew the Pavilion. The wine had, I suppose, loosened his tongue. Blunt, too, lost something of his reserve. From their talk I gathered the notion of an eccentric personality, a man of great wealth, not so much solitary as difficult of access, a collector of fine things, a painter known only to very few people and not at all to the public market. But as meantime I had been emptying my Venetian goblet with a certain regularity (the amount of heat given out by that iron stove was amazing; it parched one's throat, and the straw-coloured wine didn't seem much stronger than so much pleasantly flavoured water) the voices and the impressions they conveyed acquired something fantastic to my mind. Suddenly I perceived that Mills was sitting in his shirt-sleeves. I had not noticed him taking off his coat. Blunt had unbuttoned his shabby jacket, exposing a lot of starched shirt-front with the white tie under his dark shaved chin. He had a strange air of

insolence—or so it seemed to me. I addressed him much louder than I intended really.

"Did you know that extraordinary man?"

"To know him personally one had to be either very distinguished or very lucky. Mr. Mills here . . ."

"Yes, I have been lucky," Mills struck in. "It was my cousin who was distinguished. That's how I managed to enter his house in Paris—it was called the Pavilion—twice."

"And saw Doña Rita twice, too?" asked Blunt with an indefinite smile and a marked emphasis. Mills was also emphatic in his reply but with a serious face.

"I am not an easy enthusiast where women are concerned, but she was without doubt the most admirable find of his amongst all the priceless items he had accumulated in that house—the most admirable. . . "

"Ah! But, you see, of all the objects there she was the only one that was alive," pointed out Blunt with the slightest possible flavour of sarcasm.

"Immensely so," affirmed Mills. "Not because she was restless, indeed she hardly ever moved from that couch between the windows—you know."

"No. I don't know. I've never been in there," announced Blunt with that flash of white teeth so strangely without any character of its own that it was merely disturbing.

"But she radiated life," continued Mills. "She had plenty of it, and it had a quality. My cousin and Henry Allègre had a lot to say to each other and so I was free to talk to her. At the second visit we were like old friends, which was absurd considering that all the chances were that we would never meet again in this world or in the next. I am not meddling with theology but it seems to me that in the Elysian fields she'll have her place in a very special company."

All this in a sympathetic voice and in his unmoved manner. Blunt produced another disturbing white flash and muttered:

"I should say mixed." Then louder: "As for instance . . . "

"As for instance Cleopatra," answered Mills quietly. He added after a pause: "Who was not exactly pretty."

"I should have thought rather a La Vallière," Blunt dropped with an indifference of which one did not know what to make. He may have begun to be bored with the subject. But it may have been put on, for the whole personality was not clearly definable. I, however, was not indifferent. A woman is always an interesting subject and I was thoroughly awake to that interest. Mills pondered for a while with a sort of dispassionate benevolence, at last:

"Yes, Doña Rita as far as I know her is so varied in her simplicity that even that is possible," he said. "Yes. A romantic resigned La Vallière . . . who had a big mouth."

I felt moved to make myself heard.

"Did you know La Vallière, too?" I asked impertinently.

Mills only smiled at me. "No. I am not quite so old as that," he said. "But it's not very difficult to know facts of that kind about a historical personage. There were some ribald verses made at the time, and Louis XIV was congratulated on the possession—I really don't remember how it goes—on the possession of:

". . . de ce bec amoureux Qui d'une oreille à l'autre va, Tra là là.

or something of the sort. It needn't be from ear to ear, but it's a fact that a big mouth is often a sign of a certain generosity of mind and feeling. Young man, beware of women with small mouths. Beware of the others, too, of course; but a small mouth is a fatal sign. Well, the royalist sympathizers can't charge Doña Rita with any lack of generosity from what I hear. Why should I judge her? I have known her for, say, six hours altogether. It was enough to feel the seduction of her native intelligence and of her splendid physique. And all that was brought home to me so quickly," he concluded, "because she had what some Frenchman has called the 'terrible gift of familiarity'."

Blunt had been listening moodily. He nodded assent.

"Yes!" Mills' thoughts were still dwelling in the past. "And when saying good-bye she could put in an instant an immense distance between herself and you. A slight stiffening of that perfect figure, a change of the physiognomy: it was like being dismissed by a person born in the purple. Even if she did offer you her hand—as she did to me—it was as if across a broad river. Trick of manner or a bit of truth peeping out? Perhaps she's really one of those inaccessible beings. What do you think, Blunt?"

It was a direct question which for some reason (as if my range of sensitiveness had been increased already) displeased or rather disturbed me strangely. Blunt seemed not to have heard it. But after a while he turned to me.

"That thick man," he said in a tone of perfect urbanity, "is as fine as a needle. All these statements about the seduction and then this final doubt expressed after only two visits which could not have included more than six hours altogether and this some three years ago! But it is Henry Allègre that you should ask this question, Mr. Mills."

"I haven't the secret of raising the dead," answered Mills good humouredly. "And if I had I would hesitate. It would seem such a liberty to take with a person one had known so slightly in life."

"And yet Henry Allègre is the only person to ask about her, after all this uninterrupted companionship of years, ever since he discovered her; all the time, every breathing moment of it, till, literally, his very last breath. I don't mean to say she nursed him. He had his confidential man for that. He couldn't bear women about his person. But then apparently he couldn't bear this one out of his sight. She's the only woman who ever sat to him, for he would never suffer a model inside his house. That's why the 'Girl in the Hat' and the 'Byzantine Empress' have that family air, though neither of them is really a likeness of Doña Rita. . . You know my mother?"

Mills inclined his body slightly and a fugitive smile vanished from his lips. Blunt's eyes were fastened on the very centre of his empty plate.

"Then perhaps you know my mother's artistic and literary associations," Blunt went on in a subtly changed tone. "My mother has been writing verse since she was a girl of fifteen. She's still writing verse. She's still fifteen—a spoiled girl of genius. So she requested one of her poet friends—no less than Versoy himself—to arrange for a visit to Henry Allègre's house. At first he thought he hadn't heard aright. You must know that for my mother a man that doesn't jump out of his skin for any woman's caprice is not chivalrous. But perhaps you do know? . . ."

Mills shook his head with an amused air. Blunt, who had raised his eyes from his plate to look at him, started afresh with great deliberation.

"She gives no peace to herself or her friends. My mother's exquisitely absurd. You understand that all these painters, poets, art collectors (and dealers in bric-à-brac, he interjected through his teeth) of my mother are not in my way; but Versoy lives more like a man of the world. One day I met him at the fencing school. He was furious. He asked me to tell my mother that this was the last

effort of his chivalry. The jobs she gave him to do were too difficult. But I daresay he had been pleased enough to show the influence he had in that quarter. He knew my mother would tell the world's wife all about it. He's a spiteful, gingery little wretch. The top of his head shines like a billiard ball. I believe he polishes it every morning with a cloth. Of course they didn't get further than the big drawing-room on the first floor, an enormous drawing-room with three pairs of columns in the middle. The double doors on the top of the staircase had been thrown wide open, as if for a visit from royalty. You can picture to yourself my mother, with her white hair done in some 18th century fashion and her sparkling black eyes, penetrating into those splendours attended by a sort of bald-headed, vexed squirrel—and Henry Allègre coming forward to meet them like a severe prince with the face of a tombstone Crusader, big white hands, muffled silken voice, half-shut eyes, as if looking down at them from a balcony. You remember that trick of his, Mills?"

Mills emitted an enormous cloud of smoke out of his distended cheeks.

"I daresay he was furious, too," Blunt continued dispassionately. "But he was extremely civil. He showed her all the 'treasures' in the room, ivories, enamels, miniatures, all sorts of monstrosities from Japan, from India, from Timbuctoo . . . for all I know. . . He pushed his condescension so far as to have the 'Girl in the Hat' brought down into the drawing-room—half length, unframed. They put her on a chair for my mother to look at. The 'Byzantine Empress' was already there, hung on the end wall—full length, gold frame weighing half a ton. My mother first overwhelms the 'Master' with thanks, and then absorbs herself in the adoration of the 'Girl in the Hat.' Then she sighs out: 'It should be called Diaphanéité, if there is such a word. Ah! This is the last expression of modernity!' She puts up suddenly her face-à-main and looks towards the end wall. 'And that—Byzantium itself! Who was she, this sullen and beautiful Empress?'

"'The one I had in my mind was Theodosia!' Allègre consented to answer. 'Originally a slave girl—from somewhere.'

"My mother can be marvellously indiscreet when the whim takes her. She finds nothing better to do than to ask the 'Master' why he took his inspiration for those two faces from the same model. No doubt she was proud of her discerning eye. It was really clever of her. Allègre, however, looked on it as a colossal impertinence; but he answered in his silkiest tones:

"'Perhaps it is because I saw in that woman something of the women of all time.'

"My mother might have guessed that she was on thin ice there. She is extremely

intelligent. Moreover, she ought to have known. But women can be miraculously dense sometimes. So she exclaims, 'Then she is a wonder!' And with some notion of being complimentary goes on to say that only the eyes of the discoverer of so many wonders of art could have discovered something so marvellous in life. I suppose Allègre lost his temper altogether then; or perhaps he only wanted to pay my mother out, for all these 'Masters' she had been throwing at his head for the last two hours. He insinuates with the utmost politeness:

"'As you are honouring my poor collection with a visit you may like to judge for yourself as to the inspiration of these two pictures. She is upstairs changing her dress after our morning ride. But she wouldn't be very long. She might be a little surprised at first to be called down like this, but with a few words of preparation and purely as a matter of art . . .'

"There were never two people more taken aback. Versoy himself confesses that he dropped his tall hat with a crash. I am a dutiful son, I hope, but I must say I should have liked to have seen the retreat down the great staircase. Ha! Ha! Ha!"

He laughed most undutifully and then his face twitched grimly.

"That implacable brute Allègre followed them down ceremoniously and put my mother into the fiacre at the door with the greatest deference. He didn't open his lips though, and made a great bow as the fiacre drove away. My mother didn't recover from her consternation for three days. I lunch with her almost daily and I couldn't imagine what was the matter. Then one day . . ."

He glanced round the table, jumped up and with a word of excuse left the studio by a small door in a corner. This startled me into the consciousness that I had been as if I had not existed for these two men. With his elbows propped on the table Mills had his hands in front of his face clasping the pipe from which he extracted now and then a puff of smoke, staring stolidly across the room.

I was moved to ask in a whisper:

"Do you know him well?"

"I don't know what he is driving at," he answered drily. "But as to his mother she is not as volatile as all that. I suspect it was business. It may have been a deep plot to get a picture out of Allègre for somebody. My cousin as likely as not. Or simply to discover what he had. The Blunts lost all their property and in Paris there are various ways of making a little money, without actually breaking anything. Not even the law. And Mrs. Blunt really had a position once—in the

days of the Second Empire—and so. . .”

I listened open-mouthed to these things into which my West-Indian experiences could not have given me an insight. But Mills checked himself and ended in a changed tone.

“It’s not easy to know what she would be at, either, in any given instance. For the rest, spotlessly honourable. A delightful, aristocratic old lady. Only poor.”

A bump at the door silenced him and immediately Mr. John Blunt, Captain of Cavalry in the Army of Legitimity, first-rate cook (as to one dish at least), and generous host, entered clutching the necks of four more bottles between the fingers of his hand.

“I stumbled and nearly smashed the lot,” he remarked casually. But even I, with all my innocence, never for a moment believed he had stumbled accidentally. During the uncorking and the filling up of glasses a profound silence reigned; but neither of us took it seriously—any more than his stumble.

“One day,” he went on again in that curiously flavoured voice of his, “my mother took a heroic decision and made up her mind to get up in the middle of the night. You must understand my mother’s phraseology. It meant that she would be up and dressed by nine o’clock. This time it was not Versoy that was commanded for attendance, but I. You may imagine how delighted I was. . . .”

It was very plain to me that Blunt was addressing himself exclusively to Mills: Mills the mind, even more than Mills the man. It was as if Mills represented something initiated and to be reckoned with. I, of course, could have no such pretensions. If I represented anything it was a perfect freshness of sensations and a refreshing ignorance, not so much of what life may give one (as to that I had some ideas at least) but of what it really contains. I knew very well that I was utterly insignificant in these men’s eyes. Yet my attention was not checked by that knowledge. It’s true they were talking of a woman, but I was yet at the age when this subject by itself is not of overwhelming interest. My imagination would have been more stimulated probably by the adventures and fortunes of a man. What kept my interest from flagging was Mr. Blunt himself. The play of the white gleams of his smile round the suspicion of grimness of his tone fascinated me like a moral incongruity.

So at the age when one sleeps well indeed but does feel sometimes as if the need of sleep were a mere weakness of a distant old age, I kept easily awake; and in my freshness I was kept amused by the contrast of personalities, of the disclosed facts and moral outlook with the rough initiations of my West-Indian experience.

And all these things were dominated by a feminine figure which to my imagination had only a floating outline, now invested with the grace of girlhood, now with the prestige of a woman; and indistinct in both these characters. For these two men had seen her, while to me she was only being "presented," elusively, in vanishing words, in the shifting tones of an unfamiliar voice.

She was being presented to me now in the Bois de Boulogne at the early hour of the ultra-fashionable world (so I understood), on a light bay "bit of blood" attended on the off side by that Henry Allègre mounted on a dark brown powerful weight carrier; and on the other by one of Allègre's acquaintances (the man had no real friends), distinguished frequenters of that mysterious Pavilion. And so that side of the frame in which that woman appeared to one down the perspective of the great Allée was not permanent. That morning when Mr. Blunt had to escort his mother there for the gratification of her irresistible curiosity (of which he highly disapproved) there appeared in succession, at that woman's or girl's bridle-hand, a cavalry general in red breeches, on whom she was smiling; a rising politician in a grey suit, who talked to her with great animation but left her side abruptly to join a personage in a red fez and mounted on a white horse; and then, some time afterwards, the vexed Mr. Blunt and his indiscreet mother (though I really couldn't see where the harm was) had one more chance of a good stare. The third party that time was the Royal Pretender (Allègre had been painting his portrait lately), whose hearty, sonorous laugh was heard long before the mounted trio came riding very slowly abreast of the Blunts. There was colour in the girl's face. She was not laughing. Her expression was serious and her eyes thoughtfully downcast. Blunt admitted that on that occasion the charm, brilliance, and force of her personality was adequately framed between those magnificently mounted, paladin-like attendants, one older than the other but the two composing together admirably in the different stages of their manhood. Mr. Blunt had never before seen Henry Allègre so close. Allègre was riding nearest to the path on which Blunt was dutifully giving his arm to his mother (they had got out of their fiacre) and wondering if that confounded fellow would have the impudence to take off his hat. But he did not. Perhaps he didn't notice. Allègre was not a man of wandering glances. There were silver hairs in his beard but he looked as solid as a statue. Less than three months afterwards he was gone.

"What was it?" asked Mills, who had not changed his pose for a very long time.

"Oh, an accident. But he lingered. They were on their way to Corsica. A yearly pilgrimage. Sentimental perhaps. It was to Corsica that he carried her off—I mean first of all."

There was the slightest contraction of Mr. Blunt's facial muscles. Very slight; but I, staring at the narrator after the manner of all simple souls, noticed it; the

twitch of a pain which surely must have been mental. There was also a suggestion of effort before he went on: "I suppose you know how he got hold of her?" in a tone of ease which was astonishingly ill-assumed for such a worldly, self-controlled, drawing-room person.

Mills changed his attitude to look at him fixedly for a moment. Then he leaned back in his chair and with interest—I don't mean curiosity, I mean interest: "Does anybody know besides the two parties concerned?" he asked, with something as it were renewed (or was it refreshed?) in his unmoved quietness. "I ask because one has never heard any tales. I remember one evening in a restaurant seeing a man come in with a lady—a beautiful lady—very particularly beautiful, as though she had been stolen out of Mahomet's paradise. With Doña Rita it can't be anything as definite as that. But speaking of her in the same strain, I've always felt that she looked as though Allègre had caught her in the precincts of some temple . . . in the mountains."

I was delighted. I had never heard before a woman spoken about in that way, a real live woman that is, not a woman in a book. For this was no poetry and yet it seemed to put her in the category of visions. And I would have lost myself in it if Mr. Blunt had not, most unexpectedly, addressed himself to me.

"I told you that man was as fine as a needle."

And then to Mills: "Out of a temple? We know what that means." His dark eyes flashed: "And must it be really in the mountains?" he added.

"Or in a desert," conceded Mills, "if you prefer that. There have been temples in deserts, you know."

Blunt had calmed down suddenly and assumed a nonchalant pose.

"As a matter of fact, Henry Allègre caught her very early one morning in his own old garden full of thrushes and other small birds. She was sitting on a stone, a fragment of some old balustrade, with her feet in the damp grass, and reading a tattered book of some kind. She had on a short, black, two-penny frock (une petite robe de deux sous) and there was a hole in one of her stockings. She raised her eyes and saw him looking down at her thoughtfully over that ambrosian beard of his, like Jove at a mortal. They exchanged a good long stare, for at first she was too startled to move; and then he murmured, "Restez donc." She lowered her eyes again on her book and after a while heard him walk away on the path. Her heart thumped while she listened to the little birds filling the air with their noise. She was not frightened. I am telling you this positively because she has told me the tale herself. What better authority can you have . . .?" Blunt

paused.

"That's true. She's not the sort of person to lie about her own sensations," murmured Mills above his clasped hands.

"Nothing can escape his penetration," Blunt remarked to me with that equivocal urbanity which made me always feel uncomfortable on Mills' account. "Positively nothing." He turned to Mills again. "After some minutes of immobility—she told me—she arose from her stone and walked slowly on the track of that apparition. Allègre was nowhere to be seen by that time. Under the gateway of the extremely ugly tenement house, which hides the Pavilion and the garden from the street, the wife of the porter was waiting with her arms akimbo. At once she cried out to Rita: 'You were caught by our gentleman.'

"As a matter of fact, that old woman, being a friend of Rita's aunt, allowed the girl to come into the garden whenever Allègre was away. But Allègre's goings and comings were sudden and unannounced; and that morning, Rita, crossing the narrow, thronged street, had slipped in through the gateway in ignorance of Allègre's return and unseen by the porter's wife.

"The child, she was but little more than that then, expressed her regret of having perhaps got the kind porter's wife into trouble.

"The old woman said with a peculiar smile: 'Your face is not of the sort that gets other people into trouble. My gentleman wasn't angry. He says you may come in any morning you like.'

"Rita, without saying anything to this, crossed the street back again to the warehouse full of oranges where she spent most of her waking hours. Her dreaming, empty, idle, thoughtless, unperturbed hours, she calls them. She crossed the street with a hole in her stocking. She had a hole in her stocking not because her uncle and aunt were poor (they had around them never less than eight thousand oranges, mostly in cases) but because she was then careless and untidy and totally unconscious of her personal appearance. She told me herself that she was not even conscious then of her personal existence. She was a mere adjunct in the twilight life of her aunt, a Frenchwoman, and her uncle, the orange merchant, a Basque peasant, to whom her other uncle, the great man of the family, the priest of some parish in the hills near Tolosa, had sent her up at the age of thirteen or thereabouts for safe keeping. She is of peasant stock, you know. This is the true origin of the 'Girl in the Hat' and of the 'Byzantine Empress' which excited my dear mother so much; of the mysterious girl that the privileged personalities great in art, in letters, in politics, or simply in the world, could see on the big sofa during the gatherings in Allègre's exclusive Pavilion: the

Doña Rita of their respectful addresses, manifest and mysterious, like an object of art from some unknown period; the Doña Rita of the initiated Paris. Doña Rita and nothing more—unique and indefinable." He stopped with a disagreeable smile.

"And of peasant stock?" I exclaimed in the strangely conscious silence that fell between Mills and Blunt.

"Oh! All these Basques have been ennobled by Don Sanche II," said Captain Blunt moodily. "You see coats of arms carved over the doorways of the most miserable caserios. As far as that goes she's Doña Rita right enough whatever else she is or is not in herself or in the eyes of others. In your eyes, for instance, Mills. Eh?"

For a time Mills preserved that conscious silence.

"Why think about it at all?" he murmured coldly at last. "A strange bird is hatched sometimes in a nest in an unaccountable way and then the fate of such a bird is bound to be ill-defined, uncertain, questionable. And so that is how Henry Allègre saw her first? And what happened next?"

"What happened next?" repeated Mr. Blunt, with an affected surprise in his tone. "Is it necessary to ask that question? If you had asked how the next happened. . . . But as you may imagine she hasn't told me anything about that. She didn't," he continued with polite sarcasm, "enlarge upon the facts. That confounded Allègre, with his impudent assumption of princely airs, must have (I shouldn't wonder) made the fact of his notice appear as a sort of favour dropped from Olympus. I really can't tell how the minds and the imaginations of such aunts and uncles are affected by such rare visitations. Mythology may give us a hint. There is the story of Danae, for instance."

"There is," remarked Mills calmly, "but I don't remember any aunt or uncle in that connection."

"And there are also certain stories of the discovery and acquisition of some unique objects of art. The sly approaches, the astute negotiations, the lying and the circumventing . . . for the love of beauty, you know."

With his dark face and with the perpetual smiles playing about his grimness, Mr. Blunt appeared to me positively satanic. Mills' hand was toying absently with an empty glass. Again they had forgotten my existence altogether.

"I don't know how an object of art would feel," went on Blunt, in an unexpectedly

grating voice, which, however, recovered its tone immediately. "I don't know. But I do know that Rita herself was not a Danae, never, not at any time of her life. She didn't mind the holes in her stockings. She wouldn't mind holes in her stockings now. . . That is if she manages to keep any stockings at all," he added, with a sort of suppressed fury so funnily unexpected that I would have burst into a laugh if I hadn't been lost in astonishment of the simplest kind.

"No—really!" There was a flash of interest from the quiet Mills.

"Yes, really," Blunt nodded and knitted his brows very devilishly indeed. "She may yet be left without a single pair of stockings."

"The world's a thief," declared Mills, with the utmost composure. "It wouldn't mind robbing a lonely traveller."

"He is so subtle." Blunt remembered my existence for the purpose of that remark and as usual it made me very uncomfortable. "Perfectly true. A lonely traveller. They are all in the scramble from the lowest to the highest. Heavens! What a gang! There was even an Archbishop in it."

"Vous plaisantez," said Mills, but without any marked show of incredulity.

"I joke very seldom," Blunt protested earnestly. "That's why I haven't mentioned His Majesty—whom God preserve. That would have been an exaggeration. . . However, the end is not yet. We were talking about the beginning. I have heard that some dealers in fine objects, quite mercenary people of course (my mother has an experience in that world), show sometimes an astonishing reluctance to part with some specimens, even at a good price. It must be very funny. It's just possible that the uncle and the aunt have been rolling in tears on the floor, amongst their oranges, or beating their heads against the walls from rage and despair. But I doubt it. And in any case Allègre is not the sort of person that gets into any vulgar trouble. And it's just possible that those people stood open-mouthed at all that magnificence. They weren't poor, you know; therefore it wasn't incumbent on them to be honest. They are still there in the old respectable warehouse, I understand. They have kept their position in their quartier, I believe. But they didn't keep their niece. It might have been an act of sacrifice! For I seem to remember hearing that after attending for a while some school round the corner the child had been set to keep the books of that orange business. However it might have been, the first fact in Rita's and Allègre's common history is a journey to Italy, and then to Corsica. You know Allègre had a house in Corsica somewhere. She has it now as she has everything he ever had; and that Corsican palace is the portion that will stick the longest to Doña Rita, I imagine. Who would want to buy a place like that? I suppose nobody

would take it for a gift. The fellow was having houses built all over the place. This very house where we are sitting belonged to him. Doña Rita has given it to her sister, I understand. Or at any rate the sister runs it. She is my landlady . . ."

"Her sister here!" I exclaimed. "Her sister!"

Blunt turned to me politely, but only for a long mute gaze. His eyes were in deep shadow and it struck me for the first time then that there was something fatal in that man's aspect as soon as he fell silent. I think the effect was purely physical, but in consequence whatever he said seemed inadequate and as if produced by a commonplace, if uneasy, soul.

"Doña Rita brought her down from her mountains on purpose. She is asleep somewhere in this house, in one of the vacant rooms. She lets them, you know, at extortionate prices, that is, if people will pay them, for she is easily intimidated. You see, she has never seen such an enormous town before in her life, nor yet so many strange people. She has been keeping house for the uncle-priest in some mountain gorge for years and years. It's extraordinary he should have let her go. There is something mysterious there, some reason or other. It's either theology or Family. The saintly uncle in his wild parish would know nothing of any other reasons. She wears a rosary at her waist. Directly she had seen some real money she developed a love of it. If you stay with me long enough, and I hope you will (I really can't sleep), you will see her going out to mass at half-past six; but there is nothing remarkable in her; just a peasant woman of thirty-four or so. A rustic nun. . . ."

I may as well say at once that we didn't stay as long as that. It was not that morning that I saw for the first time Therese of the whispering lips and downcast eyes slipping out to an early mass from the house of iniquity into the early winter murk of the city of perdition, in a world steeped in sin. No. It was not on that morning that I saw Doña Rita's incredible sister with her brown, dry face, her gliding motion, and her really nun-like dress, with a black handkerchief enfolding her head tightly, with the two pointed ends hanging down her back. Yes, nun-like enough. And yet not altogether. People would have turned round after her if those dartings out to the half-past six mass hadn't been the only occasion on which she ventured into the impious streets. She was frightened of the streets, but in a particular way, not as if of a danger but as if of a contamination. Yet she didn't fly back to her mountains because at bottom she had an indomitable character, a peasant tenacity of purpose, predatory instincts. . . .

No, we didn't remain long enough with Mr. Blunt to see even as much as her back glide out of the house on her prayerful errand. She was prayerful. She was

terrible. Her one-idead peasant mind was as inaccessible as a closed iron safe. She was fatal. . . It's perfectly ridiculous to confess that they all seem fatal to me now; but writing to you like this in all sincerity I don't mind appearing ridiculous. I suppose fatality must be expressed, embodied, like other forces of this earth; and if so why not in such people as well as in other more glorious or more frightful figures?

We remained, however, long enough to let Mr. Blunt's half-hidden acrimony develop itself or prey on itself in further talk about the man Allègre and the girl Rita. Mr. Blunt, still addressing Mills with that story, passed on to what he called the second act, the disclosure, with, what he called, the characteristic Allègre impudence—which surpassed the impudence of kings, millionaires, or tramps, by many degrees—the revelation of Rita's existence to the world at large. It wasn't a very large world, but then it was most choicely composed. How is one to describe it shortly? In a sentence it was the world that rides in the morning in the Bois.

In something less than a year and a half from the time he found her sitting on a broken fragment of stone work buried in the grass of his wild garden, full of thrushes, starlings, and other innocent creatures of the air, he had given her amongst other accomplishments the art of sitting admirably on a horse, and directly they returned to Paris he took her out with him for their first morning ride.

"I leave you to judge of the sensation," continued Mr. Blunt, with a faint grimace, as though the words had an acrid taste in his mouth. "And the consternation," he added venomously. "Many of those men on that great morning had some one of their womankind with them. But their hats had to go off all the same, especially the hats of the fellows who were under some sort of obligation to Allègre. You would be astonished to hear the names of people, of real personalities in the world, who, not to mince matters, owed money to Allègre. And I don't mean in the world of art only. In the first rout of the surprise some story of an adopted daughter was set abroad hastily, I believe. You know 'adopted' with a peculiar accent on the word—and it was plausible enough. I have been told that at that time she looked extremely youthful by his side, I mean extremely youthful in expression, in the eyes, in the smile. She must have been . . ."

Blunt pulled himself up short, but not so short as not to let the confused murmur of the word "adorable" reach our attentive ears.

The heavy Mills made a slight movement in his chair. The effect on me was more inward, a strange emotion which left me perfectly still; and for the moment of silence Blunt looked more fatal than ever.

"I understand it didn't last very long," he addressed us politely again. "And no wonder! The sort of talk she would have heard during that first springtime in Paris would have put an impress on a much less receptive personality; for of course Allègre didn't close his doors to his friends and this new apparition was not of the sort to make them keep away. After that first morning she always had somebody to ride at her bridle hand. Old Doyen, the sculptor, was the first to approach them. At that age a man may venture on anything. He rides a strange animal like a circus horse. Rita had spotted him out of the corner of her eye as he passed them, putting up his enormous paw in a still more enormous glove, airily, you know, like this" (Blunt waved his hand above his head), "to Allègre. He passes on. All at once he wheels his fantastic animal round and comes trotting after them. With the merest casual 'Bonjour, Allègre' he ranges close to her on the other side and addresses her, hat in hand, in that booming voice of his like a deferential roar of the sea very far away. His articulation is not good, and the first words she really made out were 'I am an old sculptor. . . Of course there is that habit. . . But I can see you through all that. . . '

He put his hat on very much on one side. 'I am a great sculptor of women,' he declared. 'I gave up my life to them, poor unfortunate creatures, the most beautiful, the wealthiest, the most loved. . . Two generations of them. . . Just look at me full in the eyes, mon enfant.'

"They stared at each other. Doña Rita confessed to me that the old fellow made her heart beat with such force that she couldn't manage to smile at him. And she saw his eyes run full of tears. He wiped them simply with the back of his hand and went on booming faintly. 'Thought so. You are enough to make one cry. I thought my artist's life was finished, and here you come along from devil knows where with this young friend of mine, who isn't a bad smearer of canvases—but it's marble and bronze that you want. . . I shall finish my artist's life with your face; but I shall want a bit of those shoulders, too. . . You hear, Allègre, I must have a bit of her shoulders, too. I can see through the cloth that they are divine. If they aren't divine I will eat my hat. Yes, I will do your head and then—nunc dimittis.'

"These were the first words with which the world greeted her, or should I say civilization did; already both her native mountains and the cavern of oranges belonged to a prehistoric age. 'Why don't you ask him to come this afternoon?' Allègre's voice suggested gently. 'He knows the way to the house.'

"The old man said with extraordinary fervour, 'Oh, yes I will,' pulled up his horse and they went on. She told me that she could feel her heart-beats for a long time. The remote power of that voice, those old eyes full of tears, that noble and ruined

face, had affected her extraordinarily she said. But perhaps what affected her was the shadow, the still living shadow of a great passion in the man's heart.

"Allègre remarked to her calmly: 'He has been a little mad all his life.'"