CHAPTER III

Mills lowered the hands holding the extinct and even cold pipe before his big face.

"H'm, shoot an arrow into that old man's heart like this? But was there anything done?"

"A terra-cotta bust, I believe. Good? I don't know. I rather think it's in this house. A lot of things have been sent down from Paris here, when she gave up the Pavilion. When she goes up now she stays in hotels, you know. I imagine it is locked up in one of these things," went on Blunt, pointing towards the end of the studio where amongst the monumental presses of dark oak lurked the shy dummy which had worn the stiff robes of the Byzantine Empress and the amazing hat of the "Girl," rakishly. I wondered whether that dummy had travelled from Paris, too, and whether with or without its head. Perhaps that head had been left behind, having rolled into a corner of some empty room in the dismantled Pavilion. I represented it to myself very lonely, without features, like a turnip, with a mere peg sticking out where the neck should have been. And Mr. Blunt was talking on.

"There are treasures behind these locked doors, brocades, old jewels, unframed pictures, bronzes, chinoiseries, Japoneries."

He growled as much as a man of his accomplished manner and voice could growl. "I don't suppose she gave away all that to her sister, but I shouldn't be surprised if that timid rustic didn't lay a claim to the lot for the love of God and the good of the Church. . .

"And held on with her teeth, too," he added graphically.

Mills' face remained grave. Very grave. I was amused at those little venomous outbreaks of the fatal Mr. Blunt. Again I knew myself utterly forgotten. But I didn't feel dull and I didn't even feel sleepy. That last strikes me as strange at this distance of time, in regard of my tender years and of the depressing hour which precedes the dawn. We had been drinking that straw-coloured wine, too, I won't say like water (nobody would have drunk water like that) but, well . . . and the haze of tobacco smoke was like the blue mist of great distances seen in dreams.

Yes, that old sculptor was the first who joined them in the sight of all Paris. It

was that old glory that opened the series of companions of those morning rides; a series which extended through three successive Parisian spring-times and comprised a famous physiologist, a fellow who seemed to hint that mankind could be made immortal or at least everlastingly old; a fashionable philosopher and psychologist who used to lecture to enormous audiences of women with his tongue in his cheek (but never permitted himself anything of the kind when talking to Rita); that surly dandy Cabanel (but he only once, from mere vanity), and everybody else at all distinguished including also a celebrated person who turned out later to be a swindler. But he was really a genius. . . All this according to Mr. Blunt, who gave us all those details with a sort of languid zest covering a secret irritation.

"Apart from that, you know," went on Mr. Blunt, "all she knew of the world of men and women (I mean till Allègre's death) was what she had seen of it from the saddle two hours every morning during four months of the year or so. Absolutely all, with Allègre self-denyingly on her right hand, with that impenetrable air of guardianship. Don't touch! He didn't like his treasures to be touched unless he actually put some unique object into your hands with a sort of triumphant murmur, 'Look close at that.' Of course I only have heard all this. I am much too small a person, you understand, to even . . ."

He flashed his white teeth at us most agreeably, but the upper part of his face, the shadowed setting of his eyes, and the slight drawing in of his eyebrows gave a fatal suggestion. I thought suddenly of the definition he applied to himself: "Américain, catholique et gentil-homme" completed by that startling "I live by my sword" uttered in a light drawing-room tone tinged by a flavour of mockery lighter even than air.

He insisted to us that the first and only time he had seen Allègre a little close was that morning in the Bois with his mother. His Majesty (whom God preserve), then not even an active Pretender, flanked the girl, still a girl, on the other side, the usual companion for a month past or so. Allègre had suddenly taken it into his head to paint his portrait. A sort of intimacy had sprung up. Mrs. Blunt's remark was that of the two striking horsemen Allègre looked the more kingly.

"The son of a confounded millionaire soap-boiler," commented Mr. Blunt through his clenched teeth. "A man absolutely without parentage. Without a single relation in the world. Just a freak."

"That explains why he could leave all his fortune to her," said Mills.

"The will, I believe," said Mr. Blunt moodily, "was written on a half sheet of paper, with his device of an Assyrian bull at the head. What the devil did he mean by it?

Anyway it was the last time that she surveyed the world of men and women from the saddle. Less than three months later. . .”

“Allègre died and. . . ” murmured Mills in an interested manner.

“And she had to dismount,” broke in Mr. Blunt grimly. “Dismount right into the middle of it. Down to the very ground, you understand. I suppose you can guess what that would mean. She didn’t know what to do with herself. She had never been on the ground. She . . . ”

“Aha!” said Mills.

“Even eh! eh! if you like,” retorted Mr. Blunt, in an unrefined tone, that made me open my eyes, which were well opened before, still wider.

He turned to me with that horrible trick of his of commenting upon Mills as though that quiet man whom I admired, whom I trusted, and for whom I had already something resembling affection had been as much of a dummy as that other one lurking in the shadows, pitiful and headless in its attitude of alarmed chastity.

“Nothing escapes his penetration. He can perceive a haystack at an enormous distance when he is interested.”

I thought this was going rather too far, even to the borders of vulgarity; but Mills remained untroubled and only reached for his tobacco pouch.

“But that’s nothing to my mother’s interest. She can never see a haystack, therefore she is always so surprised and excited. Of course Doña Rita was not a woman about whom the newspapers insert little paragraphs. But Allègre was the sort of man. A lot came out in print about him and a lot was talked in the world about her; and at once my dear mother perceived a haystack and naturally became unreasonably absorbed in it. I thought her interest would wear out. But it didn’t. She had received a shock and had received an impression by means of that girl. My mother has never been treated with impertinence before, and the aesthetic impression must have been of extraordinary strength. I must suppose that it amounted to a sort of moral revolution, I can’t account for her proceedings in any other way. When Rita turned up in Paris a year and a half after Allègre’s death some shabby journalist (smart creature) hit upon the notion of alluding to her as the heiress of Mr. Allègre. ‘The heiress of Mr. Allègre has taken up her residence again amongst the treasures of art in that Pavilion so well known to the élite of the artistic, scientific, and political world, not to speak of the members of aristocratic and even royal families. . . ’ You know the sort of thing. It appeared

first in the Figaro, I believe. And then at the end a little phrase: 'She is alone.' She was in a fair way of becoming a celebrity of a sort. Daily little allusions and that sort of thing. Heaven only knows who stopped it. There was a rush of 'old friends' into that garden, enough to scare all the little birds away. I suppose one or several of them, having influence with the press, did it. But the gossip didn't stop, and the name stuck, too, since it conveyed a very certain and very significant sort of fact, and of course the Venetian episode was talked about in the houses frequented by my mother. It was talked about from a royalist point of view with a kind of respect. It was even said that the inspiration and the resolution of the war going on now over the Pyrenees had come out from that head. . . Some of them talked as if she were the guardian angel of Legitimacy. You know what royalist gush is like."

Mr. Blunt's face expressed sarcastic disgust. Mills moved his head the least little bit. Apparently he knew.

"Well, speaking with all possible respect, it seems to have affected my mother's brain. I was already with the royal army and of course there could be no question of regular postal communications with France. My mother hears or overhears somewhere that the heiress of Mr. Allègre is contemplating a secret journey. All the noble Salons were full of chatter about that secret naturally. So she sits down and pens an autograph: 'Madame, Informed that you are proceeding to the place on which the hopes of all the right thinking people are fixed, I trust to your womanly sympathy with a mother's anxious feelings, etc., etc.,' and ending with a request to take messages to me and bring news of me. . . The coolness of my mother!"

Most unexpectedly Mills was heard murmuring a question which seemed to me very odd.

"I wonder how your mother addressed that note?"

A moment of silence ensued.

"Hardly in the newspaper style, I should think," retorted Mr. Blunt, with one of his grins that made me doubt the stability of his feelings and the consistency of his outlook in regard to his whole tale. "My mother's maid took it in a fiacre very late one evening to the Pavilion and brought an answer scrawled on a scrap of paper: 'Write your messages at once' and signed with a big capital R. So my mother sat down again to her charming writing desk and the maid made another journey in a fiacre just before midnight; and ten days later or so I got a letter thrust into my hand at the avanzadas just as I was about to start on a night patrol, together with a note asking me to call on the writer so that she might allay

my mother's anxieties by telling her how I looked.

"It was signed R only, but I guessed at once and nearly fell off my horse with surprise."

"You mean to say that Doña Rita was actually at the Royal Headquarters lately?" exclaimed Mills, with evident surprise. "Why, we—everybody—thought that all this affair was over and done with."

"Absolutely. Nothing in the world could be more done with than that episode. Of course the rooms in the hotel at Tolosa were retained for her by an order from Royal Headquarters. Two garret-rooms, the place was so full of all sorts of court people; but I can assure you that for the three days she was there she never put her head outside the door. General Mongroviejo called on her officially from the King. A general, not anybody of the household, you see. That's a distinct shade of the present relation. He stayed just five minutes. Some personage from the Foreign department at Headquarters was closeted for about a couple of hours. That was of course business. Then two officers from the staff came together with some explanations or instructions to her. Then Baron H., a fellow with a pretty wife, who had made so many sacrifices for the cause, raised a great to-do about seeing her and she consented to receive him for a moment. They say he was very much frightened by her arrival, but after the interview went away all smiles. Who else? Yes, the Archbishop came. Half an hour. This is more than is necessary to give a blessing, and I can't conceive what else he had to give her. But I am sure he got something out of her. Two peasants from the upper valley were sent for by military authorities and she saw them, too. That friar who hangs about the court has been in and out several times. Well, and lastly, I myself. I got leave from the outposts. That was the first time I talked to her. I would have gone that evening back to the regiment, but the friar met me in the corridor and informed me that I would be ordered to escort that most loyal and noble lady back to the French frontier as a personal mission of the highest honour. I was inclined to laugh at him. He himself is a cheery and jovial person and he laughed with me quite readily—but I got the order before dark all right. It was rather a job, as the Alphonsists were attacking the right flank of our whole front and there was some considerable disorder there. I mounted her on a mule and her maid on another. We spent one night in a ruined old tower occupied by some of our infantry and got away at daybreak under the Alphonsist shells. The maid nearly died of fright and one of the troopers with us was wounded. To smuggle her back across the frontier was another job but it wasn't my job. It wouldn't have done for her to appear in sight of French frontier posts in the company of Carlist uniforms. She seems to have a fearless streak in her nature. At one time as we were climbing a slope absolutely exposed to artillery fire I asked her on purpose, being provoked by the way she looked about at the scenery, 'A little emotion, eh?' And she

answered me in a low voice: 'Oh, yes! I am moved. I used to run about these hills when I was little.' And note, just then the trooper close behind us had been wounded by a shell fragment. He was swearing awfully and fighting with his horse. The shells were falling around us about two to the minute.

"Luckily the Alphonsist shells are not much better than our own. But women are funny. I was afraid the maid would jump down and clear out amongst the rocks, in which case we should have had to dismount and catch her. But she didn't do that; she sat perfectly still on her mule and shrieked. Just simply shrieked. Ultimately we came to a curiously shaped rock at the end of a short wooded valley. It was very still there and the sunshine was brilliant. I said to Doña Rita: 'We will have to part in a few minutes. I understand that my mission ends at this rock.' And she said: 'I know this rock well. This is my country.'

"Then she thanked me for bringing her there and presently three peasants appeared, waiting for us, two youths and one shaven old man, with a thin nose like a sword blade and perfectly round eyes, a character well known to the whole Carlist army. The two youths stopped under the trees at a distance, but the old fellow came quite close up and gazed at her, screwing up his eyes as if looking at the sun. Then he raised his arm very slowly and took his red boina off his bald head. I watched her smiling at him all the time. I daresay she knew him as well as she knew the old rock. Very old rock. The rock of ages—and the aged man—landmarks of her youth. Then the mules started walking smartly forward, with the three peasants striding alongside of them, and vanished between the trees. These fellows were most likely sent out by her uncle the Cura.

"It was a peaceful scene, the morning light, the bit of open country framed in steep stony slopes, a high peak or two in the distance, the thin smoke of some invisible caserios, rising straight up here and there. Far away behind us the guns had ceased and the echoes in the gorges had died out. I never knew what peace meant before. . .

"Nor since," muttered Mr. Blunt after a pause and then went on. "The little stone church of her uncle, the holy man of the family, might have been round the corner of the next spur of the nearest hill. I dismounted to bandage the shoulder of my trooper. It was only a nasty long scratch. While I was busy about it a bell began to ring in the distance. The sound fell deliciously on the ear, clear like the morning light. But it stopped all at once. You know how a distant bell stops suddenly. I never knew before what stillness meant. While I was wondering at it the fellow holding our horses was moved to uplift his voice. He was a Spaniard, not a Basque, and he trolled out in Castilian that song you know,

"'Oh bells of my native village, I am going away . . . good-bye!'

He had a good voice. When the last note had floated away I remounted, but there was a charm in the spot, something particular and individual because while we were looking at it before turning our horses' heads away the singer said: 'I wonder what is the name of this place,' and the other man remarked: 'Why, there is no village here,' and the first one insisted: 'No, I mean this spot, this very place.' The wounded trooper decided that it had no name probably. But he was wrong. It had a name. The hill, or the rock, or the wood, or the whole had a name. I heard of it by chance later. It was—Lastaola."

A cloud of tobacco smoke from Mills' pipe drove between my head and the head of Mr. Blunt, who, strange to say, yawned slightly. It seemed to me an obvious affectation on the part of that man of perfect manners, and, moreover, suffering from distressing insomnia.

"This is how we first met and how we first parted," he said in a weary, indifferent tone. "It's quite possible that she did see her uncle on the way. It's perhaps on this occasion that she got her sister to come out of the wilderness. I have no doubt she had a pass from the French Government giving her the completest freedom of action. She must have got it in Paris before leaving."

Mr. Blunt broke out into worldly, slightly cynical smiles.

"She can get anything she likes in Paris. She could get a whole army over the frontier if she liked. She could get herself admitted into the Foreign Office at one o'clock in the morning if it so pleased her. Doors fly open before the heiress of Mr. Allègre. She has inherited the old friends, the old connections . . . Of course, if she were a toothless old woman . . . But, you see, she isn't. The ushers in all the ministries bow down to the ground therefore, and voices from the innermost sanctums take on an eager tone when they say, 'Faites entrer.' My mother knows something about it. She has followed her career with the greatest attention. And Rita herself is not even surprised. She accomplishes most extraordinary things, as naturally as buying a pair of gloves. People in the shops are very polite and people in the world are like people in the shops. What did she know of the world? She had seen it only from the saddle. Oh, she will get your cargo released for you all right. How will she do it? . . Well, when it's done—you follow me, Mills?—when it's done she will hardly know herself."

"It's hardly possible that she shouldn't be aware," Mills pronounced calmly.

"No, she isn't an idiot," admitted Mr. Blunt, in the same matter-of-fact voice. "But she confessed to myself only the other day that she suffered from a sense of unreality. I told her that at any rate she had her own feelings surely. And she

said to me: Yes, there was one of them at least about which she had no doubt; and you will never guess what it was. Don't try. I happen to know, because we are pretty good friends."

At that moment we all changed our attitude slightly. Mills' staring eyes moved for a glance towards Blunt, I, who was occupying the divan, raised myself on the cushions a little and Mr. Blunt, with half a turn, put his elbow on the table.

"I asked her what it was. I don't see," went on Mr. Blunt, with a perfectly horrible gentleness, "why I should have shown particular consideration to the heiress of Mr. Allègre. I don't mean to that particular mood of hers. It was the mood of weariness. And so she told me. It's fear. I will say it once again: Fear. . . ."

He added after a pause, "There can be not the slightest doubt of her courage. But she distinctly uttered the word fear."

There was under the table the noise of Mills stretching his legs.

"A person of imagination," he began, "a young, virgin intelligence, steeped for nearly five years in the talk of Allègre's studio, where every hard truth had been cracked and every belief had been worried into shreds. They were like a lot of intellectual dogs, you know . . ."

"Yes, yes, of course," Blunt interrupted hastily, "the intellectual personality altogether adrift, a soul without a home . . . but I, who am neither very fine nor very deep, I am convinced that the fear is material."

"Because she confessed to it being that?" insinuated Mills.

"No, because she didn't," contradicted Blunt, with an angry frown and in an extremely suave voice. "In fact, she bit her tongue. And considering what good friends we are (under fire together and all that) I conclude that there is nothing there to boast of. Neither is my friendship, as a matter of fact."

Mills' face was the very perfection of indifference. But I who was looking at him, in my innocence, to discover what it all might mean, I had a notion that it was perhaps a shade too perfect.

"My leave is a farce," Captain Blunt burst out, with a most unexpected exasperation. "As an officer of Don Carlos, I have no more standing than a bandit. I ought to have been interned in those filthy old barracks in Avignon a long time ago. . . Why am I not? Because Doña Rita exists and for no other reason on earth. Of course it's known that I am about. She has only to whisper

over the wires to the Minister of the Interior, 'Put that bird in a cage for me,' and the thing would be done without any more formalities than that. . . Sad world this," he commented in a changed tone. "Nowadays a gentleman who lives by his sword is exposed to that sort of thing."

It was then for the first time I heard Mr. Mills laugh. It was a deep, pleasant, kindly note, not very loud and altogether free from that quality of derision that spoils so many laughs and gives away the secret hardness of hearts. But neither was it a very joyous laugh.

"But the truth of the matter is that I am 'en mission,'" continued Captain Blunt. "I have been instructed to settle some things, to set other things going, and, by my instructions, Doña Rita is to be the intermediary for all those objects. And why? Because every bald head in this Republican Government gets pink at the top whenever her dress rustles outside the door. They bow with immense deference when the door opens, but the bow conceals a smirk because of those Venetian days. That confounded Versoy shoved his nose into that business; he says accidentally. He saw them together on the Lido and (those writing fellows are horrible) he wrote what he calls a vignette (I suppose accidentally, too) under that very title. There was in it a Prince and a lady and a big dog. He described how the Prince on landing from the gondola emptied his purse into the hands of a picturesque old beggar, while the lady, a little way off, stood gazing back at Venice with the dog romantically stretched at her feet. One of Versoy's beautiful prose vignettes in a great daily that has a literary column. But some other papers that didn't care a cent for literature rehashed the mere fact. And that's the sort of fact that impresses your political man, especially if the lady is, well, such as she is . . ."

He paused. His dark eyes flashed fatally, away from us, in the direction of the shy dummy; and then he went on with cultivated cynicism.

"So she rushes down here. Overdone, weary, rest for her nerves. Nonsense. I assure you she has no more nerves than I have."

I don't know how he meant it, but at that moment, slim and elegant, he seemed a mere bundle of nerves himself, with the flitting expressions on his thin, well-bred face, with the restlessness of his meagre brown hands amongst the objects on the table. With some pipe ash amongst a little spilt wine his forefinger traced a capital R. Then he looked into an empty glass profoundly. I have a notion that I sat there staring and listening like a yokel at a play. Mills' pipe was lying quite a foot away in front of him, empty, cold. Perhaps he had no more tobacco. Mr. Blunt assumed his dandified air—nervously.

"Of course her movements are commented on in the most exclusive drawing-rooms and also in other places, also exclusive, but where the gossip takes on another tone. There they are probably saying that she has got a 'coup de coeur' for some one. Whereas I think she is utterly incapable of that sort of thing. That Venetian affair, the beginning of it and the end of it, was nothing but a coup de tête, and all those activities in which I am involved, as you see (by order of Headquarters, ha, ha, ha!), are nothing but that, all this connection, all this intimacy into which I have dropped . . . Not to speak of my mother, who is delightful, but as irresponsible as one of those crazy princesses that shock their Royal families. . . "

He seemed to bite his tongue and I observed that Mills' eyes seemed to have grown wider than I had ever seen them before. In that tranquil face it was a great play of feature. "An intimacy," began Mr. Blunt, with an extremely refined grimness of tone, "an intimacy with the heiress of Mr. Allègre on the part of . . . on my part, well, it isn't exactly . . . it's open . . . well, I leave it to you, what does it look like?"

"Is there anybody looking on?" Mills let fall, gently, through his kindly lips.

"Not actually, perhaps, at this moment. But I don't need to tell a man of the world, like you, that such things cannot remain unseen. And that they are, well, compromising, because of the mere fact of the fortune."

Mills got on his feet, looked for his jacket and after getting into it made himself heard while he looked for his hat.

"Whereas the woman herself is, so to speak, priceless."

Mr. Blunt muttered the word "Obviously."

By then we were all on our feet. The iron stove glowed no longer and the lamp, surrounded by empty bottles and empty glasses, had grown dimmer.

I know that I had a great shiver on getting away from the cushions of the divan.

"We will meet again in a few hours," said Mr. Blunt.

"Don't forget to come," he said, addressing me. "Oh, yes, do. Have no scruples. I am authorized to make invitations."

He must have noticed my shyness, my surprise, my embarrassment. And indeed I didn't know what to say.

"I assure you there isn't anything incorrect in your coming," he insisted, with the greatest civility. "You will be introduced by two good friends, Mills and myself. Surely you are not afraid of a very charming woman. . . ."

I was not afraid, but my head swam a little and I only looked at him mutely.

"Lunch precisely at midday. Mills will bring you along. I am sorry you two are going. I shall throw myself on the bed for an hour or two, but I am sure I won't sleep."

He accompanied us along the passage into the black-and-white hall, where the low gas flame glimmered forlornly. When he opened the front door the cold blast of the mistral rushing down the street of the Consuls made me shiver to the very marrow of my bones.

Mills and I exchanged but a few words as we walked down towards the centre of the town. In the chill tempestuous dawn he strolled along musingly, disregarding the discomfort of the cold, the depressing influence of the hour, the desolation of the empty streets in which the dry dust rose in whirls in front of us, behind us, flew upon us from the side streets. The masks had gone home and our footsteps echoed on the flagstones with unequal sound as of men without purpose, without hope.

"I suppose you will come," said Mills suddenly.

"I really don't know," I said.

"Don't you? Well, remember I am not trying to persuade you; but I am staying at the Hôtel de Louvre and I shall leave there at a quarter to twelve for that lunch. At a quarter to twelve, not a minute later. I suppose you can sleep?"

I laughed.

"Charming age, yours," said Mills, as we came out on the quays. Already dim figures of the workers moved in the biting dawn and the masted forms of ships were coming out dimly, as far as the eye could reach down the old harbour.

"Well," Mills began again, "you may oversleep yourself."

This suggestion was made in a cheerful tone, just as we shook hands at the lower end of the Cannebière. He looked very burly as he walked away from me. I went on towards my lodgings. My head was very full of confused images, but I was

really too tired to think.