

### CHAPTER III

Mills got up and approached the figure at the window. To my extreme surprise, Mr. Blunt, after a moment of obviously painful hesitation, hastened out after the man with the white hair.

In consequence of these movements I was left to myself and I began to be uncomfortably conscious of it when Doña Rita, near the window, addressed me in a raised voice.

“We have no confidences to exchange, Mr. Mills and I.”

I took this for an encouragement to join them. They were both looking at me. Doña Rita added, “Mr. Mills and I are friends from old times, you know.”

Bathed in the softened reflection of the sunshine, which did not fall directly into the room, standing very straight with her arms down, before Mills, and with a faint smile directed to me, she looked extremely young, and yet mature. There was even, for a moment, a slight dimple in her cheek.

“How old, I wonder?” I said, with an answering smile.

“Oh, for ages, for ages,” she exclaimed hastily, frowning a little, then she went on addressing herself to Mills, apparently in continuation of what she was saying before.

. . . “This man’s is an extreme case, and yet perhaps it isn’t the worst. But that’s the sort of thing. I have no account to render to anybody, but I don’t want to be dragged along all the gutters where that man picks up his living.”

She had thrown her head back a little but there was no scorn, no angry flash under the dark-lashed eyelids. The words did not ring. I was struck for the first time by the even, mysterious quality of her voice.

“Will you let me suggest,” said Mills, with a grave, kindly face, “that being what you are, you have nothing to fear?”

“And perhaps nothing to lose,” she went on without bitterness. “No. It isn’t fear. It’s a sort of dread. You must remember that no nun could have had a more protected life. Henry Allègre had his greatness. When he faced the world he also masked it. He was big enough for that. He

filled the whole field of vision for me.”

“You found that enough?” asked Mills.

“Why ask now?” she remonstrated. “The truth—the truth is that I never asked myself. Enough or not there was no room for anything else. He was the shadow and the light and the form and the voice. He would have it so. The morning he died they came to call me at four o’clock. I ran into his room bare-footed. He recognized me and whispered, ‘You are flawless.’ I was very frightened. He seemed to think, and then said very plainly, ‘Such is my character. I am like that.’ These were the last words he spoke. I hardly noticed them then. I was thinking that he was lying in a very uncomfortable position and I asked him if I should lift him up a little higher on the pillows. You know I am very strong. I could have done it. I had done it before. He raised his hand off the blanket just enough to make a sign that he didn’t want to be touched. It was the last gesture he made. I hung over him and then—and then I nearly ran out of the house just as I was, in my night-gown. I think if I had been dressed I would have run out of the garden, into the street—run away altogether. I had never seen death. I may say I had never heard of it. I wanted to run from it.”

She paused for a long, quiet breath. The harmonized sweetness and daring of her face was made pathetic by her downcast eyes.

“Fuir la mort,” she repeated, meditatively, in her mysterious voice.

Mills’ big head had a little movement, nothing more. Her glance glided for a moment towards me like a friendly recognition of my right to be there, before she began again.

“My life might have been described as looking at mankind from a fourth-floor window for years. When the end came it was like falling out of a balcony into the street. It was as sudden as that. Once I remember somebody was telling us in the Pavilion a tale about a girl who jumped down from a fourth-floor window. . . . For love, I believe,” she interjected very quickly, “and came to no harm. Her guardian angel must have slipped his wings under her just in time. He must have. But as to me, all I know is that I didn’t break anything—not even my heart. Don’t be shocked, Mr. Mills. It’s very likely that you don’t understand.”

“Very likely,” Mills assented, unmoved. “But don’t be too sure of that.”

“Henry Allègre had the highest opinion of your intelligence,” she said unexpectedly and with evident seriousness. “But all this is only to tell you that

when he was gone I found myself down there unhurt, but dazed, bewildered, not sufficiently stunned. It so happened that that creature was somewhere in the neighbourhood. How he found out. . . But it's his business to find out things. And he knows, too, how to worm his way in anywhere. Indeed, in the first days he was useful and somehow he made it look as if Heaven itself had sent him. In my distress I thought I could never sufficiently repay. . . Well, I have been paying ever since."

"What do you mean?" asked Mills softly. "In hard cash?"

"Oh, it's really so little," she said. "I told you it wasn't the worst case. I stayed on in that house from which I nearly ran away in my nightgown. I stayed on because I didn't know what to do next. He vanished as he had come on the track of something else, I suppose. You know he really has got to get his living some way or other. But don't think I was deserted. On the contrary. People were coming and going, all sorts of people that Henry Allègre used to know—or had refused to know. I had a sensation of plotting and intriguing around me, all the time. I was feeling morally bruised, sore all over, when, one day, Don Rafael de Villarel sent in his card. A grandee. I didn't know him, but, as you are aware, there was hardly a personality of mark or position that hasn't been talked about in the Pavilion before me. Of him I had only heard that he was a very austere and pious person, always at Mass, and that sort of thing. I saw a frail little man with a long, yellow face and sunken fanatical eyes, an Inquisitor, an unfrocked monk. One missed a rosary from his thin fingers. He gazed at me terribly and I couldn't imagine what he might want. I waited for him to pull out a crucifix and sentence me to the stake there and then. But no; he dropped his eyes and in a cold, righteous sort of voice informed me that he had called on behalf of the prince—he called him His Majesty. I was amazed by the change. I wondered now why he didn't slip his hands into the sleeves of his coat, you know, as begging Friars do when they come for a subscription. He explained that the Prince asked for permission to call and offer me his condolences in person. We had seen a lot of him our last two months in Paris that year. Henry Allègre had taken a fancy to paint his portrait. He used to ride with us nearly every morning. Almost without thinking I said I should be pleased. Don Rafael was shocked at my want of formality, but bowed to me in silence, very much as a monk bows, from the waist. If he had only crossed his hands flat on his chest it would have been perfect. Then, I don't know why, something moved me to make him a deep curtsy as he backed out of the room, leaving me suddenly impressed, not only with him but with myself too. I had my door closed to everybody else that afternoon and the Prince came with a very proper sorrowful face, but five minutes after he got into the room he was laughing as usual, made the whole little house ring with it. You know his big, irresistible laugh. . . ."

“No,” said Mills, a little abruptly, “I have never seen him.”

“No,” she said, surprised, “and yet you . . . ”

“I understand,” interrupted Mills. “All this is purely accidental. You must know that I am a solitary man of books but with a secret taste for adventure which somehow came out; surprising even me.”

She listened with that enigmatic, still, under the eyelids glance, and a friendly turn of the head.

“I know you for a frank and loyal gentleman. . . Adventure—and books? Ah, the books! Haven’t I turned stacks of them over! Haven’t I? . . . ”

“Yes,” murmured Mills. “That’s what one does.”

She put out her hand and laid it lightly on Mills’ sleeve.

“Listen, I don’t need to justify myself, but if I had known a single woman in the world, if I had only had the opportunity to observe a single one of them, I would have been perhaps on my guard. But you know I hadn’t. The only woman I had anything to do with was myself, and they say that one can’t know oneself. It never entered my head to be on my guard against his warmth and his terrible obviousness. You and he were the only two, infinitely different, people, who didn’t approach me as if I had been a precious object in a collection, an ivory carving or a piece of Chinese porcelain. That’s why I have kept you in my memory so well. Oh! you were not obvious! As to him—I soon learned to regret I was not some object, some beautiful, carved object of bone or bronze; a rare piece of porcelain, *pâte dure*, not *pâte tendre*. A pretty specimen.”

“Rare, yes. Even unique,” said Mills, looking at her steadily with a smile. “But don’t try to depreciate yourself. You were never pretty. You are not pretty. You are worse.”

Her narrow eyes had a mischievous gleam. “Do you find such sayings in your books?” she asked.

“As a matter of fact I have,” said Mills, with a little laugh, “found this one in a book. It was a woman who said that of herself. A woman far from common, who died some few years ago. She was an actress. A great artist.”

“A great! . . . Lucky person! She had that refuge, that garment, while I stand here with nothing to protect me from evil fame; a naked temperament for any wind to

blow upon. Yes, greatness in art is a protection. I wonder if there would have been anything in me if I had tried? But Henry Allègre would never let me try. He told me that whatever I could achieve would never be good enough for what I was. The perfection of flattery! Was it that he thought I had not talent of any sort? It's possible. He would know. I've had the idea since that he was jealous. He wasn't jealous of mankind any more than he was afraid of thieves for his collection; but he may have been jealous of what he could see in me, of some passion that could be aroused. But if so he never repented. I shall never forget his last words. He saw me standing beside his bed, defenceless, symbolic and forlorn, and all he found to say was, "Well, I am like that."

I forgot myself in watching her. I had never seen anybody speak with less play of facial muscles. In the fullness of its life her face preserved a sort of immobility. The words seemed to form themselves, fiery or pathetic, in the air, outside her lips. Their design was hardly disturbed; a design of sweetness, gravity, and force as if born from the inspiration of some artist; for I had never seen anything to come up to it in nature before or since.

All this was part of the enchantment she cast over me; and I seemed to notice that Mills had the aspect of a man under a spell. If he too was a captive then I had no reason to feel ashamed of my surrender.

"And you know," she began again abruptly, "that I have been accustomed to all the forms of respect."

"That's true," murmured Mills, as if involuntarily.

"Well, yes," she reaffirmed. "My instinct may have told me that my only protection was obscurity, but I didn't know how and where to find it. Oh, yes, I had that instinct . . . But there were other instincts and . . . How am I to tell you? I didn't know how to be on guard against myself, either. Not a soul to speak to, or to get a warning from. Some woman soul that would have known, in which perhaps I could have seen my own reflection. I assure you the only woman that ever addressed me directly, and that was in writing, was . . ."

She glanced aside, saw Mr. Blunt returning from the hall and added rapidly in a lowered voice,

"His mother."

The bright, mechanical smile of Mr. Blunt gleamed at us right down the room, but he didn't, as it were, follow it in his body. He swerved to the nearest of the two big fireplaces and finding some cigarettes on the mantelpiece remained

leaning on his elbow in the warmth of the bright wood fire. I noticed then a bit of mute play. The heiress of Henry Allègre, who could secure neither obscurity nor any other alleviation to that invidious position, looked as if she would speak to Blunt from a distance; but in a moment the confident eagerness of her face died out as if killed by a sudden thought. I didn't know then her shrinking from all falsehood and evasion; her dread of insincerity and disloyalty of every kind. But even then I felt that at the very last moment her being had recoiled before some shadow of a suspicion. And it occurred to me, too, to wonder what sort of business Mr. Blunt could have had to transact with our odious visitor, of a nature so urgent as to make him run out after him into the hall? Unless to beat him a little with one of the sticks that were to be found there? White hair so much like an expensive wig could not be considered a serious protection. But it couldn't have been that. The transaction, whatever it was, had been much too quiet. I must say that none of us had looked out of the window and that I didn't know when the man did go or if he was gone at all. As a matter of fact he was already far away; and I may just as well say here that I never saw him again in my life. His passage across my field of vision was like that of other figures of that time: not to be forgotten, a little fantastic, infinitely enlightening for my contempt, darkening for my memory which struggles still with the clear lights and the ugly shadows of those unforgotten days.