

PART THREE

CHAPTER I

It was on our return from that first trip that I took Dominic up to the Villa to be presented to Doña Rita. If she wanted to look on the embodiment of fidelity, resource, and courage, she could behold it all in that man. Apparently she was not disappointed. Neither was Dominic disappointed. During the half-hour's interview they got into touch with each other in a wonderful way as if they had some common and secret standpoint in life. Maybe it was their common lawlessness, and their knowledge of things as old as the world. Her seduction, his recklessness, were both simple, masterful and, in a sense, worthy of each other.

Dominic was, I won't say awed by this interview. No woman could awe Dominic. But he was, as it were, rendered thoughtful by it, like a man who had not so much an experience as a sort of revelation vouchsafed to him. Later, at sea, he used to refer to La Señora in a particular tone and I knew that henceforth his devotion was not for me alone. And I understood the inevitability of it extremely well. As to Doña Rita she, after Dominic left the room, had turned to me with animation and said: "But he is perfect, this man." Afterwards she often asked after him and used to refer to him in conversation. More than once she said to me: "One would like to put the care of one's personal safety into the hands of that man. He looks as if he simply couldn't fail one." I admitted that this was very true, especially at sea. Dominic couldn't fail. But at the same time I rather chaffed Rita on her preoccupation as to personal safety that so often cropped up in her talk.

"One would think you were a crowned head in a revolutionary world," I used to tell her.

"That would be different. One would be standing then for something, either worth or not worth dying for. One could even run away then and be done with it. But I can't run away unless I got out of my skin and left that behind. Don't you understand? You are very stupid . . ." But she had the grace to add, "On purpose."

I don't know about the on purpose. I am not certain about the stupidity. Her words bewildered one often and bewilderment is a sort of stupidity. I remedied it by simply disregarding the sense of what she said. The sound was there and also

her poignant heart-gripping presence giving occupation enough to one's faculties. In the power of those things over one there was mystery enough. It was more absorbing than the mere obscurity of her speeches. But I daresay she couldn't understand that.

Hence, at times, the amusing outbreaks of temper in word and gesture that only strengthened the natural, the invincible force of the spell. Sometimes the brass bowl would get upset or the cigarette box would fly up, dropping a shower of cigarettes on the floor. We would pick them up, re-establish everything, and fall into a long silence, so close that the sound of the first word would come with all the pain of a separation.

It was at that time, too, that she suggested I should take up my quarters in her house in the street of the Consuls. There were certain advantages in that move. In my present abode my sudden absences might have been in the long run subject to comment. On the other hand, the house in the street of Consuls was a known out-post of Legitimacy. But then it was covered by the occult influence of her who was referred to in confidential talks, secret communications, and discreet whispers of Royalist salons as: "Madame de Lastaola."

That was the name which the heiress of Henry Allègre had decided to adopt when, according to her own expression, she had found herself precipitated at a moment's notice into the crowd of mankind. It is strange how the death of Henry Allègre, which certainly the poor man had not planned, acquired in my view the character of a heartless desertion. It gave one a glimpse of amazing egoism in a sentiment to which one could hardly give a name, a mysterious appropriation of one human being by another as if in defiance of unexpressed things and for an unheard-of satisfaction of an inconceivable pride. If he had hated her he could not have flung that enormous fortune more brutally at her head. And his unrepentant death seemed to lift for a moment the curtain on something lofty and sinister like an Olympian's caprice.

Doña Rita said to me once with humorous resignation: "You know, it appears that one must have a name. That's what Henry Allègre's man of business told me. He was quite impatient with me about it. But my name, amigo, Henry Allègre had taken from me like all the rest of what I had been once. All that is buried with him in his grave. It wouldn't have been true. That is how I felt about it. So I took that one." She whispered to herself: "Lastaola," not as if to test the sound but as if in a dream.

To this day I am not quite certain whether it was the name of any human habitation, a lonely caserío with a half-effaced carving of a coat of arms over its door, or of some hamlet at the dead end of a ravine with a stony slope at the

back. It might have been a hill for all I know or perhaps a stream. A wood, or perhaps a combination of all these: just a bit of the earth's surface. Once I asked her where exactly it was situated and she answered, waving her hand cavalierly at the dead wall of the room: "Oh, over there." I thought that this was all that I was going to hear but she added moodily, "I used to take my goats there, a dozen or so of them, for the day. From after my uncle had said his Mass till the ringing of the evening bell."

I saw suddenly the lonely spot, sketched for me some time ago by a few words from Mr. Blunt, populated by the agile, bearded beasts with cynical heads, and a little misty figure dark in the sunlight with a halo of dishevelled rust-coloured hair about its head.

The epithet of rust-coloured comes from her. It was really tawny. Once or twice in my hearing she had referred to "my rust-coloured hair" with laughing vexation. Even then it was unruly, abhorring the restraints of civilization, and often in the heat of a dispute getting into the eyes of Madame de Lastaola, the possessor of coveted art treasures, the heiress of Henry Allègre. She proceeded in a reminiscent mood, with a faint flash of gaiety all over her face, except her dark blue eyes that moved so seldom out of their fixed scrutiny of things invisible to other human beings.

"The goats were very good. We clambered amongst the stones together. They beat me at that game. I used to catch my hair in the bushes."

"Your rust-coloured hair," I whispered.

"Yes, it was always this colour. And I used to leave bits of my frock on thorns here and there. It was pretty thin, I can tell you. There wasn't much at that time between my skin and the blue of the sky. My legs were as sunburnt as my face; but really I didn't tan very much. I had plenty of freckles though. There were no looking-glasses in the Presbytery but uncle had a piece not bigger than my two hands for his shaving. One Sunday I crept into his room and had a peep at myself. And wasn't I startled to see my own eyes looking at me! But it was fascinating, too. I was about eleven years old then, and I was very friendly with the goats, and I was as shrill as a cicada and as slender as a match. Heavens! When I overhear myself speaking sometimes, or look at my limbs, it doesn't seem to be possible. And yet it is the same one. I do remember every single goat. They were very clever. Goats are no trouble really; they don't scatter much. Mine never did even if I had to hide myself out of their sight for ever so long."

It was but natural to ask her why she wanted to hide, and she uttered vaguely what was rather a comment on my question:

“It was like fate.” But I chose to take it otherwise, teasingly, because we were often like a pair of children.

“Oh, really,” I said, “you talk like a pagan. What could you know of fate at that time? What was it like? Did it come down from Heaven?”

“Don’t be stupid. It used to come along a cart-track that was there and it looked like a boy. Wasn’t he a little devil though. You understand, I couldn’t know that. He was a wealthy cousin of mine. Round there we are all related, all cousins—as in Brittany. He wasn’t much bigger than myself but he was older, just a boy in blue breeches and with good shoes on his feet, which of course interested and impressed me. He yelled to me from below, I screamed to him from above, he came up and sat down near me on a stone, never said a word, let me look at him for half an hour before he condescended to ask me who I was. And the airs he gave himself! He quite intimidated me sitting there perfectly dumb. I remember trying to hide my bare feet under the edge of my skirt as I sat below him on the ground.

“C’est comique, eh!” she interrupted herself to comment in a melancholy tone. I looked at her sympathetically and she went on:

“He was the only son from a rich farmhouse two miles down the slope. In winter they used to send him to school at Tolosa. He had an enormous opinion of himself; he was going to keep a shop in a town by and by and he was about the most dissatisfied creature I have ever seen. He had an unhappy mouth and unhappy eyes and he was always wretched about something: about the treatment he received, about being kept in the country and chained to work. He was moaning and complaining and threatening all the world, including his father and mother. He used to curse God, yes, that boy, sitting there on a piece of rock like a wretched little Prometheus with a sparrow pecking at his miserable little liver. And the grand scenery of mountains all round, ha, ha, ha!”

She laughed in contralto: a penetrating sound with something generous in it; not infectious, but in others provoking a smile.

“Of course I, poor little animal, I didn’t know what to make of it, and I was even a little frightened. But at first because of his miserable eyes I was sorry for him, almost as much as if he had been a sick goat. But, frightened or sorry, I don’t know how it is, I always wanted to laugh at him, too, I mean from the very first day when he let me admire him for half an hour. Yes, even then I had to put my hand over my mouth more than once for the sake of good manners, you understand. And yet, you know, I was never a laughing child.

“One day he came up and sat down very dignified a little bit away from me and told me he had been thrashed for wandering in the hills.

“To be with me?’ I asked. And he said: ‘To be with you! No. My people don’t know what I do.’ I can’t tell why, but I was annoyed. So instead of raising a clamour of pity over him, which I suppose he expected me to do, I asked him if the thrashing hurt very much. He got up, he had a switch in his hand, and walked up to me, saying, ‘I will soon show you.’ I went stiff with fright; but instead of slashing at me he dropped down by my side and kissed me on the cheek. Then he did it again, and by that time I was gone dead all over and he could have done what he liked with the corpse but he left off suddenly and then I came to life again and I bolted away. Not very far. I couldn’t leave the goats altogether. He chased me round and about the rocks, but of course I was too quick for him in his nice town boots. When he got tired of that game he started throwing stones. After that he made my life very lively for me. Sometimes he used to come on me unawares and then I had to sit still and listen to his miserable ravings, because he would catch me round the waist and hold me very tight. And yet, I often felt inclined to laugh. But if I caught sight of him at a distance and tried to dodge out of the way he would start stoning me into a shelter I knew of and then sit outside with a heap of stones at hand so that I daren’t show the end of my nose for hours. He would sit there and rave and abuse me till I would burst into a crazy laugh in my hole; and then I could see him through the leaves rolling on the ground and biting his fists with rage. Didn’t he hate me! At the same time I was often terrified. I am convinced now that if I had started crying he would have rushed in and perhaps strangled me there. Then as the sun was about to set he would make me swear that I would marry him when I was grown up. ‘Swear, you little wretched beggar,’ he would yell to me. And I would swear. I was hungry, and I didn’t want to be made black and blue all over with stones. Oh, I swore ever so many times to be his wife. Thirty times a month for two months. I couldn’t help myself. It was no use complaining to my sister Therese. When I showed her my bruises and tried to tell her a little about my trouble she was quite scandalized. She called me a sinful girl, a shameless creature. I assure you it puzzled my head so that, between Therese my sister and José the boy, I lived in a state of idiocy almost. But luckily at the end of the two months they sent him away from home for good. Curious story to happen to a goatherd living all her days out under God’s eye, as my uncle the Cura might have said. My sister Therese was keeping house in the Presbytery. She’s a terrible person.”

“I have heard of your sister Therese,” I said.

“Oh, you have! Of my big sister Therese, six, ten years older than myself perhaps? She just comes a little above my shoulder, but then I was always a long

thing. I never knew my mother. I don't even know how she looked. There are no paintings or photographs in our farmhouses amongst the hills. I haven't even heard her described to me. I believe I was never good enough to be told these things. Therese decided that I was a lump of wickedness, and now she believes that I will lose my soul altogether unless I take some steps to save it. Well, I have no particular taste that way. I suppose it is annoying to have a sister going fast to eternal perdition, but there are compensations. The funniest thing is that it's Therese, I believe, who managed to keep me out of the Presbytery when I went out of my way to look in on them on my return from my visit to the Quartel Real last year. I couldn't have stayed much more than half an hour with them anyway, but still I would have liked to get over the old doorstep. I am certain that Therese persuaded my uncle to go out and meet me at the bottom of the hill. I saw the old man a long way off and I understood how it was. I dismounted at once and met him on foot. We had half an hour together walking up and down the road. He is a peasant priest, he didn't know how to treat me. And of course I was uncomfortable, too. There wasn't a single goat about to keep me in countenance. I ought to have embraced him. I was always fond of the stern, simple old man. But he drew himself up when I approached him and actually took off his hat to me. So simple as that! I bowed my head and asked for his blessing. And he said 'I would never refuse a blessing to a good Legitimist.' So stern as that! And when I think that I was perhaps the only girl of the family or in the whole world that he ever in his priest's life patted on the head! When I think of that I . . . I believe at that moment I was as wretched as he was himself. I handed him an envelope with a big red seal which quite startled him. I had asked the Marquis de Villarel to give me a few words for him, because my uncle has a great influence in his district; and the Marquis penned with his own hand some compliments and an inquiry about the spirit of the population. My uncle read the letter, looked up at me with an air of mournful awe, and begged me to tell his excellency that the people were all for God, their lawful King and their old privileges. I said to him then, after he had asked me about the health of His Majesty in an awfully gloomy tone—I said then: 'There is only one thing that remains for me to do, uncle, and that is to give you two pounds of the very best snuff I have brought here for you.' What else could I have got for the poor old man? I had no trunks with me. I had to leave behind a spare pair of shoes in the hotel to make room in my little bag for that snuff. And fancy! That old priest absolutely pushed the parcel away. I could have thrown it at his head; but I thought suddenly of that hard, prayerful life, knowing nothing of any ease or pleasure in the world, absolutely nothing but a pinch of snuff now and then. I remembered how wretched he used to be when he lacked a copper or two to get some snuff with. My face was hot with indignation, but before I could fly out at him I remembered how simple he was. So I said with great dignity that as the present came from the King and as he wouldn't receive it from my hand there was nothing else for me to do but to throw it into the brook; and I made as if I were going to do it, too. He shouted: 'Stay,

unhappy girl! Is it really from His Majesty, whom God preserve?' I said contemptuously, 'Of course.' He looked at me with great pity in his eyes, sighed deeply, and took the little tin from my hand. I suppose he imagined me in my abandoned way wheedling the necessary cash out of the King for the purchase of that snuff. You can't imagine how simple he is. Nothing was easier than to deceive him; but don't imagine I deceived him from the vainglory of a mere sinner. I lied to the dear man, simply because I couldn't bear the idea of him being deprived of the only gratification his big, ascetic, gaunt body ever knew on earth. As I mounted my mule to go away he murmured coldly: 'God guard you, Señora! Señora! What sternness! We were off a little way already when his heart softened and he shouted after me in a terrible voice: 'The road to Heaven is repentance!' And then, after a silence, again the great shout 'Repentance!' thundered after me. Was that sternness or simplicity, I wonder? Or a mere unmeaning superstition, a mechanical thing? If there lives anybody completely honest in this world, surely it must be my uncle. And yet—who knows?

"Would you guess what was the next thing I did? Directly I got over the frontier I wrote from Bayonne asking the old man to send me out my sister here. I said it was for the service of the King. You see, I had thought suddenly of that house of mine in which you once spent the night talking with Mr. Mills and Don Juan Blunt. I thought it would do extremely well for Carlist officers coming this way on leave or on a mission. In hotels they might have been molested, but I knew that I could get protection for my house. Just a word from the ministry in Paris to the Prefect. But I wanted a woman to manage it for me. And where was I to find a trustworthy woman? How was I to know one when I saw her? I don't know how to talk to women. Of course my Rose would have done for me that or anything else; but what could I have done myself without her? She has looked after me from the first. It was Henry Allègre who got her for me eight years ago. I don't know whether he meant it for a kindness but she's the only human being on whom I can lean. She knows . . . What doesn't she know about me! She has never failed to do the right thing for me unasked. I couldn't part with her. And I couldn't think of anybody else but my sister.

"After all it was somebody belonging to me. But it seemed the wildest idea. Yet she came at once. Of course I took care to send her some money. She likes money. As to my uncle there is nothing that he wouldn't have given up for the service of the King. Rose went to meet her at the railway station. She told me afterwards that there had been no need for me to be anxious about her recognizing Mademoiselle Therese. There was nobody else in the train that could be mistaken for her. I should think not! She had made for herself a dress of some brown stuff like a nun's habit and had a crooked stick and carried all her belongings tied up in a handkerchief. She looked like a pilgrim to a saint's shrine. Rose took her to the house. She asked when she saw it: 'And does this

big place really belong to our Rita?’ My maid of course said that it was mine. ‘And how long did our Rita live here?’—‘Madame has never seen it unless perhaps the outside, as far as I know. I believe Mr. Allègre lived here for some time when he was a young man.’—‘The sinner that’s dead?’—‘Just so,’ says Rose. You know nothing ever startles Rose. ‘Well, his sins are gone with him,’ said my sister, and began to make herself at home.

“Rose was going to stop with her for a week but on the third day she was back with me with the remark that Mlle. Therese knew her way about very well already and preferred to be left to herself. Some little time afterwards I went to see that sister of mine. The first thing she said to me, ‘I wouldn’t have recognized you, Rita,’ and I said, ‘What a funny dress you have, Therese, more fit for the portress of a convent than for this house.’—‘Yes,’ she said, ‘and unless you give this house to me, Rita, I will go back to our country. I will have nothing to do with your life, Rita. Your life is no secret for me.’

“I was going from room to room and Therese was following me. ‘I don’t know that my life is a secret to anybody,’ I said to her, ‘but how do you know anything about it?’ And then she told me that it was through a cousin of ours, that horrid wretch of a boy, you know. He had finished his schooling and was a clerk in a Spanish commercial house of some kind, in Paris, and apparently had made it his business to write home whatever he could hear about me or ferret out from those relations of mine with whom I lived as a girl. I got suddenly very furious. I raged up and down the room (we were alone upstairs), and Therese scuttled away from me as far as the door. I heard her say to herself, ‘It’s the evil spirit in her that makes her like this.’ She was absolutely convinced of that. She made the sign of the cross in the air to protect herself. I was quite astounded. And then I really couldn’t help myself. I burst into a laugh. I laughed and laughed; I really couldn’t stop till Therese ran away. I went downstairs still laughing and found her in the hall with her face to the wall and her fingers in her ears kneeling in a corner. I had to pull her out by the shoulders from there. I don’t think she was frightened; she was only shocked. But I don’t suppose her heart is desperately bad, because when I dropped into a chair feeling very tired she came and knelt in front of me and put her arms round my waist and entreated me to cast off from me my evil ways with the help of saints and priests. Quite a little programme for a reformed sinner. I got away at last. I left her sunk on her heels before the empty chair looking after me. ‘I pray for you every night and morning, Rita,’ she said.—‘Oh, yes. I know you are a good sister,’ I said to her. I was letting myself out when she called after me, ‘And what about this house, Rita?’ I said to her, ‘Oh, you may keep it till the day I reform and enter a convent.’ The last I saw of her she was still on her knees looking after me with her mouth open. I have seen her since several times, but our intercourse is, at any rate on her side, as of a frozen nun with some great lady. But I believe she really knows how to make men

comfortable. Upon my word I think she likes to look after men. They don't seem to be such great sinners as women are. I think you could do worse than take up your quarters at number 10. She will no doubt develop a saintly sort of affection for you, too."

I don't know that the prospect of becoming a favourite of Doña Rita's peasant sister was very fascinating to me. If I went to live very willingly at No. 10 it was because everything connected with Doña Rita had for me a peculiar fascination. She had only passed through the house once as far as I knew; but it was enough. She was one of those beings that leave a trace. I am not unreasonable—I mean for those that knew her. That is, I suppose, because she was so unforgettable. Let us remember the tragedy of Azzolati the ruthless, the ridiculous financier with a criminal soul (or shall we say heart) and facile tears. No wonder, then, that for me, who may flatter myself without undue vanity with being much finer than that grotesque international intriguer, the mere knowledge that Doña Rita had passed through the very rooms in which I was going to live between the strenuous times of the sea-expeditions, was enough to fill my inner being with a great content. Her glance, her darkly brilliant blue glance, had run over the walls of that room which most likely would be mine to slumber in. Behind me, somewhere near the door, Therese, the peasant sister, said in a funnily compassionate tone and in an amazingly landlady-of-a-boarding-house spirit of false persuasiveness:

"You will be very comfortable here, Señor. It is so peaceful here in the street. Sometimes one may think oneself in a village. It's only a hundred and twenty-five francs for the friends of the King. And I shall take such good care of you that your very heart will be able to rest."