

CHAPTER II

Doña Rita was curious to know how I got on with her peasant sister and all I could say in return for that inquiry was that the peasant sister was in her own way amiable. At this she clicked her tongue amusingly and repeated a remark she had made before: "She likes young men. The younger the better." The mere thought of those two women being sisters aroused one's wonder. Physically they were altogether of different design. It was also the difference between living tissue of glowing loveliness with a divine breath, and a hard hollow figure of baked clay.

Indeed Therese did somehow resemble an achievement, wonderful enough in its way, in unglazed earthenware. The only gleam perhaps that one could find on her was that of her teeth, which one used to get between her dull lips unexpectedly, startlingly, and a little inexplicably, because it was never associated with a smile. She smiled with compressed mouth. It was indeed difficult to conceive of those two birds coming from the same nest. And yet . . . Contrary to what generally happens, it was when one saw those two women together that one lost all belief in the possibility of their relationship near or far. It extended even to their common humanity. One, as it were, doubted it. If one of the two was representative, then the other was either something more or less than human. One wondered whether these two women belonged to the same scheme of creation. One was secretly amazed to see them standing together, speaking to each other, having words in common, understanding each other. And yet! . . . Our psychological sense is the crudest of all; we don't know, we don't perceive how superficial we are. The simplest shades escape us, the secret of changes, of relations. No, upon the whole, the only feature (and yet with enormous differences) which Therese had in common with her sister, as I told Doña Rita, was amiability.

"For, you know, you are a most amiable person yourself," I went on. "It's one of your characteristics, of course much more precious than in other people. You transmute the commonest traits into gold of your own; but after all there are no new names. You are amiable. You were most amiable to me when I first saw you."

"Really. I was not aware. Not specially . . ."

"I had never the presumption to think that it was special. Moreover, my head was in a whirl. I was lost in astonishment first of all at what I had been listening to all night. Your history, you know, a wonderful tale with a flavour of wine in it and wreathed in clouds, with that amazing decapitated, mutilated dummy of a

woman lurking in a corner, and with Blunt's smile gleaming through a fog, the fog in my eyes, from Mills' pipe, you know. I was feeling quite inanimate as to body and frightfully stimulated as to mind all the time. I had never heard anything like that talk about you before. Of course I wasn't sleepy, but still I am not used to do altogether without sleep like Blunt . . ."

"Kept awake all night listening to my story!" She marvelled.

"Yes. You don't think I am complaining, do you? I wouldn't have missed it for the world. Blunt in a ragged old jacket and a white tie and that incisive polite voice of his seemed strange and weird. It seemed as though he were inventing it all rather angrily. I had doubts as to your existence."

"Mr. Blunt is very much interested in my story."

"Anybody would be," I said. "I was. I didn't sleep a wink. I was expecting to see you soon—and even then I had my doubts."

"As to my existence?"

"It wasn't exactly that, though of course I couldn't tell that you weren't a product of Captain Blunt's sleeplessness. He seemed to dread exceedingly to be left alone and your story might have been a device to detain us . . ."

"He hasn't enough imagination for that," she said.

"It didn't occur to me. But there was Mills, who apparently believed in your existence. I could trust Mills. My doubts were about the propriety. I couldn't see any good reason for being taken to see you. Strange that it should be my connection with the sea which brought me here to the Villa."

"Unexpected perhaps."

"No. I mean particularly strange and significant."

"Why?"

"Because my friends are in the habit of telling me (and each other) that the sea is my only love. They were always chaffing me because they couldn't see or guess in my life at any woman, open or secret. . ."

"And is that really so?" she inquired negligently.

“Why, yes. I don’t mean to say that I am like an innocent shepherd in one of those interminable stories of the eighteenth century. But I don’t throw the word love about indiscriminately. It may be all true about the sea; but some people would say that they love sausages.”

“You are horrible.”

“I am surprised.”

“I mean your choice of words.”

“And you have never uttered a word yet that didn’t change into a pearl as it dropped from your lips. At least not before me.”

She glanced down deliberately and said, “This is better. But I don’t see any of them on the floor.”

“It’s you who are horrible in the implications of your language. Don’t see any on the floor! Haven’t I caught up and treasured them all in my heart? I am not the animal from which sausages are made.”

She looked at me suavely and then with the sweetest possible smile breathed out the word: “No.”

And we both laughed very loud. O! days of innocence! On this occasion we parted from each other on a light-hearted note. But already I had acquired the conviction that there was nothing more lovable in the world than that woman; nothing more life-giving, inspiring, and illuminating than the emanation of her charm. I meant it absolutely—not excepting the light of the sun.

From this there was only one step further to take. The step into a conscious surrender; the open perception that this charm, warming like a flame, was also all-revealing like a great light; giving new depth to shades, new brilliance to colours, an amazing vividness to all sensations and vitality to all thoughts: so that all that had been lived before seemed to have been lived in a drab world and with a languid pulse.

A great revelation this. I don’t mean to say it was soul-shaking. The soul was already a captive before doubt, anguish, or dismay could touch its surrender and its exaltation. But all the same the revelation turned many things into dust; and, amongst others, the sense of the careless freedom of my life. If that life ever had any purpose or any aim outside itself I would have said that it threw a shadow across its path. But it hadn’t. There had been no path. But there was a shadow,

the inseparable companion of all light. No illumination can sweep all mystery out of the world. After the departed darkness the shadows remain, more mysterious because as if more enduring; and one feels a dread of them from which one was free before. What if they were to be victorious at the last? They, or what perhaps lurks in them: fear, deception, desire, disillusion—all silent at first before the song of triumphant love vibrating in the light. Yes. Silent. Even desire itself! All silent. But not for long!

This was, I think, before the third expedition. Yes, it must have been the third, for I remember that it was boldly planned and that it was carried out without a hitch. The tentative period was over; all our arrangements had been perfected. There was, so to speak, always an unfailing smoke on the hill and an unfailing lantern on the shore. Our friends, mostly bought for hard cash and therefore valuable, had acquired confidence in us. This, they seemed to say, is no unfathomable roguery of penniless adventurers. This is but the reckless enterprise of men of wealth and sense and needn't be inquired into. The young caballero has got real gold pieces in the belt he wears next his skin; and the man with the heavy moustaches and unbelieving eyes is indeed very much of a man. They gave to Dominic all their respect and to me a great show of deference; for I had all the money, while they thought that Dominic had all the sense. That judgment was not exactly correct. I had my share of judgment and audacity which surprises me now that the years have chilled the blood without dimming the memory. I remember going about the business with light-hearted, clear-headed recklessness which, according as its decisions were sudden or considered, made Dominic draw his breath through his clenched teeth, or look hard at me before he gave me either a slight nod of assent or a sarcastic "Oh, certainly"—just as the humour of the moment prompted him.

One night as we were lying on a bit of dry sand under the lee of a rock, side by side, watching the light of our little vessel dancing away at sea in the windy distance, Dominic spoke suddenly to me.

"I suppose Alphonso and Carlos, Carlos and Alphonso, they are nothing to you, together or separately?"

I said: "Dominic, if they were both to vanish from the earth together or separately it would make no difference to my feelings."

He remarked: "Just so. A man mourns only for his friends. I suppose they are no more friends to you than they are to me. Those Carlists make a great consumption of cartridges. That is well. But why should we do all those mad things that you will insist on us doing till my hair," he pursued with grave, mocking exaggeration, "till my hair tries to stand up on my head? and all for that

Carlos, let God and the devil each guard his own, for that Majesty as they call him, but after all a man like another and—no friend.”

“Yes, why?” I murmured, feeling my body nestled at ease in the sand.

It was very dark under the overhanging rock on that night of clouds and of wind that died and rose and died again. Dominic’s voice was heard speaking low between the short gusts.

“Friend of the Señora, eh?”

“That’s what the world says, Dominic.”

“Half of what the world says are lies,” he pronounced dogmatically. “For all his majesty he may be a good enough man. Yet he is only a king in the mountains and to-morrow he may be no more than you. Still a woman like that—one, somehow, would grudge her to a better king. She ought to be set up on a high pillar for people that walk on the ground to raise their eyes up to. But you are otherwise, you gentlemen. You, for instance, Monsieur, you wouldn’t want to see her set up on a pillar.”

“That sort of thing, Dominic,” I said, “that sort of thing, you understand me, ought to be done early.”

He was silent for a time. And then his manly voice was heard in the shadow of the rock.

“I see well enough what you mean. I spoke of the multitude, that only raise their eyes. But for kings and suchlike that is not enough. Well, no heart need despair; for there is not a woman that wouldn’t at some time or other get down from her pillar for no bigger bribe perhaps than just a flower which is fresh to-day and withered to-morrow. And then, what’s the good of asking how long any woman has been up there? There is a true saying that lips that have been kissed do not lose their freshness.”

I don’t know what answer I could have made. I imagine Dominic thought himself unanswerable. As a matter of fact, before I could speak, a voice came to us down the face of the rock crying secretly, “Olà, down there! All is safe ashore.”

It was the boy who used to hang about the stable of a muleteer’s inn in a little shallow valley with a shallow little stream in it, and where we had been hiding most of the day before coming down to the shore. We both started to our feet and Dominic said, “A good boy that. You didn’t hear him either come or go above our

heads. Don't reward him with more than one peseta, Señor, whatever he does. If you were to give him two he would go mad at the sight of so much wealth and throw up his job at the Fonda, where he is so useful to run errands, in that way he has of skimming along the paths without displacing a stone."

Meantime he was busying himself with striking a fire to set alight a small heap of dry sticks he had made ready beforehand on that spot which in all the circuit of the Bay was perfectly screened from observation from the land side.

The clear flame shooting up revealed him in the black cloak with a hood of a Mediterranean sailor. His eyes watched the dancing dim light to seaward. And he talked the while.

"The only fault you have, Señor, is being too generous with your money. In this world you must give sparingly. The only things you may deal out without counting, in this life of ours which is but a little fight and a little love, is blows to your enemy and kisses to a woman. . . . Ah! here they are coming in."

I noticed the dancing light in the dark west much closer to the shore now. Its motion had altered. It swayed slowly as it ran towards us, and, suddenly, the darker shadow as of a great pointed wing appeared gliding in the night. Under it a human voice shouted something confidently.

"Bueno," muttered Dominic. From some receptacle I didn't see he poured a lot of water on the blaze, like a magician at the end of a successful incantation that had called out a shadow and a voice from the immense space of the sea. And his hooded figure vanished from my sight in a great hiss and the warm feel of ascending steam.

"That's all over," he said, "and now we go back for more work, more toil, more trouble, more exertion with hands and feet, for hours and hours. And all the time the head turned over the shoulder, too."

We were climbing a precipitous path sufficiently dangerous in the dark, Dominic, more familiar with it, going first and I scrambling close behind in order that I might grab at his cloak if I chanced to slip or miss my footing. I remonstrated against this arrangement as we stopped to rest. I had no doubt I would grab at his cloak if I felt myself falling. I couldn't help doing that. But I would probably only drag him down with me.

With one hand grasping a shadowy bush above his head he growled that all this was possible, but that it was all in the bargain, and urged me onwards.

When we got on to the level that man whose even breathing no exertion, no danger, no fear or anger could disturb, remarked as we strode side by side:

“I will say this for us, that we are carrying out all this deadly foolishness as conscientiously as though the eyes of the Señora were on us all the time. And as to risk, I suppose we take more than she would approve of, I fancy, if she ever gave a moment’s thought to us out here. Now, for instance, in the next half hour, we may come any moment on three carabineers who would let off their pieces without asking questions. Even your way of flinging money about cannot make safety for men set on defying a whole big country for the sake of—what is it exactly?—the blue eyes, or the white arms of the Señora.”

He kept his voice equably low. It was a lonely spot and but for a vague shape of a dwarf tree here and there we had only the flying clouds for company. Very far off a tiny light twinkled a little way up the seaward shoulder of an invisible mountain. Dominic moved on.

“Fancy yourself lying here, on this wild spot, with a leg smashed by a shot or perhaps with a bullet in your side. It might happen. A star might fall. I have watched stars falling in scores on clear nights in the Atlantic. And it was nothing. The flash of a pinch of gunpowder in your face may be a bigger matter. Yet somehow it’s pleasant as we stumble in the dark to think of our Señora in that long room with a shiny floor and all that lot of glass at the end, sitting on that divan, you call it, covered with carpets as if expecting a king indeed. And very still . . .”

He remembered her—whose image could not be dismissed.

I laid my hand on his shoulder.

“That light on the mountain side flickers exceedingly, Dominic. Are we in the path?”

He addressed me then in French, which was between us the language of more formal moments.

“Prenez mon bras, monsieur. Take a firm hold, or I will have you stumbling again and falling into one of those beastly holes, with a good chance to crack your head. And there is no need to take offence. For, speaking with all respect, why should you, and I with you, be here on this lonely spot, barking our shins in the dark on the way to a confounded flickering light where there will be no other supper but a piece of a stale sausage and a draught of leathery wine out of a stinking skin. Pah!”

I had good hold of his arm. Suddenly he dropped the formal French and pronounced in his inflexible voice:

“For a pair of white arms, Señor. Bueno.”

He could understand.