

CHAPTER III

On our return from that expedition we came gliding into the old harbour so late that Dominic and I, making for the café kept by Madame Léonore, found it empty of customers, except for two rather sinister fellows playing cards together at a corner table near the door. The first thing done by Madame Léonore was to put her hands on Dominic's shoulders and look at arm's length into the eyes of that man of audacious deeds and wild stratagems who smiled straight at her from under his heavy and, at that time, uncurled moustaches.

Indeed we didn't present a neat appearance, our faces unshaven, with the traces of dried salt sprays on our smarting skins and the sleeplessness of full forty hours filming our eyes. At least it was so with me who saw as through a mist Madame Léonore moving with her mature nonchalant grace, setting before us wine and glasses with a faint swish of her ample black skirt. Under the elaborate structure of black hair her jet-black eyes sparkled like good-humoured stars and even I could see that she was tremendously excited at having this lawless wanderer Dominic within her reach and as it were in her power. Presently she sat down by us, touched lightly Dominic's curly head silvered on the temples (she couldn't really help it), gazed at me for a while with a quizzical smile, observed that I looked very tired, and asked Dominic whether for all that I was likely to sleep soundly to-night.

"I don't know," said Dominic, "He's young. And there is always the chance of dreams."

"What do you men dream of in those little barques of yours tossing for months on the water?"

"Mostly of nothing," said Dominic. "But it has happened to me to dream of furious fights."

"And of furious loves, too, no doubt," she caught him up in a mocking voice.

"No, that's for the waking hours," Dominic drawled, basking sleepily with his head between his hands in her ardent gaze. "The waking hours are longer."

"They must be, at sea," she said, never taking her eyes off him. "But I suppose you do talk of your loves sometimes."

"You may be sure, Madame Léonore," I interjected, noticing the hoarseness of my

voice, “that you at any rate are talked about a lot at sea.”

“I am not so sure of that now. There is that strange lady from the Prado that you took him to see, Signorino. She went to his head like a glass of wine into a tender youngster’s. He is such a child, and I suppose that I am another. Shame to confess it, the other morning I got a friend to look after the café for a couple of hours, wrapped up my head, and walked out there to the other end of the town. . . . Look at these two sitting up! And I thought they were so sleepy and tired, the poor fellows!”

She kept our curiosity in suspense for a moment.

“Well, I have seen your marvel, Dominic,” she continued in a calm voice. “She came flying out of the gate on horseback and it would have been all I would have seen of her if—and this is for you, Signorino—if she hadn’t pulled up in the main alley to wait for a very good-looking cavalier. He had his moustaches so, and his teeth were very white when he smiled at her. But his eyes are too deep in his head for my taste. I didn’t like it. It reminded me of a certain very severe priest who used to come to our village when I was young; younger even than your marvel, Dominic.”

“It was no priest in disguise, Madame Léonore,” I said, amused by her expression of disgust. “That’s an American.”

“Ah! Un Americano! Well, never mind him. It was her that I went to see.”

“What! Walked to the other end of the town to see Doña Rita!” Dominic addressed her in a low bantering tone. “Why, you were always telling me you couldn’t walk further than the end of the quay to save your life—or even mine, you said.”

“Well, I did; and I walked back again and between the two walks I had a good look. And you may be sure—that will surprise you both—that on the way back—oh, Santa Madre, wasn’t it a long way, too—I wasn’t thinking of any man at sea or on shore in that connection.”

“No. And you were not thinking of yourself, either, I suppose,” I said. Speaking was a matter of great effort for me, whether I was too tired or too sleepy, I can’t tell. “No, you were not thinking of yourself. You were thinking of a woman, though.”

“Si. As much a woman as any of us that ever breathed in the world. Yes, of her! Of that very one! You see, we women are not like you men, indifferent to each

other unless by some exception. Men say we are always against one another but that's only men's conceit. What can she be to me? I am not afraid of the big child here," and she tapped Dominic's forearm on which he rested his head with a fascinated stare. "With us two it is for life and death, and I am rather pleased that there is something yet in him that can catch fire on occasion. I would have thought less of him if he hadn't been able to get out of hand a little, for something really fine. As for you, Signorino," she turned on me with an unexpected and sarcastic sally, "I am not in love with you yet." She changed her tone from sarcasm to a soft and even dreamy note. "A head like a gem," went on that woman born in some by-street of Rome, and a plaything for years of God knows what obscure fates. "Yes, Dominic! Antica. I haven't been haunted by a face since—since I was sixteen years old. It was the face of a young cavalier in the street. He was on horseback, too. He never looked at me, I never saw him again, and I loved him for—for days and days and days. That was the sort of face he had. And her face is of the same sort. She had a man's hat, too, on her head. So high!"

"A man's hat on her head," remarked with profound displeasure Dominic, to whom this wonder, at least, of all the wonders of the earth, was apparently unknown.

"Si. And her face has haunted me. Not so long as that other but more touchingly because I am no longer sixteen and this is a woman. Yes, I did think of her, I myself was once that age and I, too, had a face of my own to show to the world, though not so superb. And I, too, didn't know why I had come into the world any more than she does."

"And now you know," Dominic growled softly, with his head still between his hands.

She looked at him for a long time, opened her lips but in the end only sighed lightly.

"And what do you know of her, you who have seen her so well as to be haunted by her face?" I asked.

I wouldn't have been surprised if she had answered me with another sigh. For she seemed only to be thinking of herself and looked not in my direction. But suddenly she roused up.

"Of her?" she repeated in a louder voice. "Why should I talk of another woman? And then she is a great lady."

At this I could not repress a smile which she detected at once.

“Isn’t she? Well, no, perhaps she isn’t; but you may be sure of one thing, that she is both flesh and shadow more than any one that I have seen. Keep that well in your mind: She is for no man! She would be vanishing out of their hands like water that cannot be held.”

I caught my breath. “Inconstant,” I whispered.

“I don’t say that. Maybe too proud, too wilful, too full of pity. Signorino, you don’t know much about women. And you may learn something yet or you may not; but what you learn from her you will never forget.”

“Not to be held,” I murmured; and she whom the quayside called Madame Léonore closed her outstretched hand before my face and opened it at once to show its emptiness in illustration of her expressed opinion. Dominic never moved.

I wished good-night to these two and left the café for the fresh air and the dark spaciousness of the quays augmented by all the width of the old Port where between the trails of light the shadows of heavy hulls appeared very black, merging their outlines in a great confusion. I left behind me the end of the Cannebière, a wide vista of tall houses and much-lighted pavements losing itself in the distance with an extinction of both shapes and lights. I slunk past it with only a side glance and sought the dimness of quiet streets away from the centre of the usual night gaieties of the town. The dress I wore was just that of a sailor come ashore from some coaster, a thick blue woollen shirt or rather a sort of jumper with a knitted cap like a tam-o’-shanter worn very much on one side and with a red tuft of wool in the centre. This was even the reason why I had lingered so long in the café. I didn’t want to be recognized in the streets in that costume and still less to be seen entering the house in the street of the Consuls. At that hour when the performances were over and all the sensible citizens in their beds I didn’t hesitate to cross the Place of the Opera. It was dark, the audience had already dispersed. The rare passers-by I met hurrying on their last affairs of the day paid no attention to me at all. The street of the Consuls I expected to find empty, as usual at that time of the night. But as I turned a corner into it I overtook three people who must have belonged to the locality. To me, somehow, they appeared strange. Two girls in dark cloaks walked ahead of a tall man in a top hat. I slowed down, not wishing to pass them by, the more so that the door of the house was only a few yards distant. But to my intense surprise those people stopped at it and the man in the top hat, producing a latchkey, let his two companions through, followed them, and with a heavy slam cut himself off from my astonished self and the rest of mankind.

In the stupid way people have I stood and meditated on the sight, before it occurred to me that this was the most useless thing to do. After waiting a little longer to let the others get away from the hall I entered in my turn. The small gas-jet seemed not to have been touched ever since that distant night when Mills and I trod the black-and-white marble hall for the first time on the heels of Captain Blunt—who lived by his sword. And in the dimness and solitude which kept no more trace of the three strangers than if they had been the merest ghosts I seemed to hear the ghostly murmur, “Américain, Catholique et gentilhomme. Amér. . . ” Unseen by human eye I ran up the flight of steps swiftly and on the first floor stepped into my sitting-room of which the door was open . . . “et gentilhomme.” I tugged at the bell pull and somewhere down below a bell rang as unexpected for Therese as a call from a ghost.

I had no notion whether Therese could hear me. I seemed to remember that she slept in any bed that happened to be vacant. For all I knew she might have been asleep in mine. As I had no matches on me I waited for a while in the dark. The house was perfectly still. Suddenly without the slightest preliminary sound light fell into the room and Therese stood in the open door with a candlestick in her hand.

She had on her peasant brown skirt. The rest of her was concealed in a black shawl which covered her head, her shoulders, arms, and elbows completely, down to her waist. The hand holding the candle protruded from that envelope which the other invisible hand clasped together under her very chin. And her face looked like a face in a painting. She said at once:

“You startled me, my young Monsieur.”

She addressed me most frequently in that way as though she liked the very word “young.” Her manner was certainly peasant-like with a sort of plaint in the voice, while the face was that of a serving Sister in some small and rustic convent.

“I meant to do it,” I said. “I am a very bad person.”

“The young are always full of fun,” she said as if she were gloating over the idea. “It is very pleasant.”

“But you are very brave,” I chaffed her, “for you didn’t expect a ring, and after all it might have been the devil who pulled the bell.”

“It might have been. But a poor girl like me is not afraid of the devil. I have a pure heart. I have been to confession last evening. No. But it might have been

an assassin that pulled the bell ready to kill a poor harmless woman. This is a very lonely street. What could prevent you to kill me now and then walk out again free as air?"

While she was talking like this she had lighted the gas and with the last words she glided through the bedroom door leaving me thunderstruck at the unexpected character of her thoughts.

I couldn't know that there had been during my absence a case of atrocious murder which had affected the imagination of the whole town; and though Therese did not read the papers (which she imagined to be full of impieties and immoralities invented by godless men) yet if she spoke at all with her kind, which she must have done at least in shops, she could not have helped hearing of it. It seems that for some days people could talk of nothing else. She returned gliding from the bedroom hermetically sealed in her black shawl just as she had gone in, with the protruding hand holding the lighted candle and relieved my perplexity as to her morbid turn of mind by telling me something of the murder story in a strange tone of indifference even while referring to its most horrible features. "That's what carnal sin (pêché de chair) leads to," she commented severely and passed her tongue over her thin lips. "And then the devil furnishes the occasion."

"I can't imagine the devil inciting me to murder you, Therese," I said, "and I didn't like that ready way you took me for an example, as it were. I suppose pretty near every lodger might be a potential murderer, but I expected to be made an exception."

With the candle held a little below her face, with that face of one tone and without relief she looked more than ever as though she had come out of an old, cracked, smoky painting, the subject of which was altogether beyond human conception. And she only compressed her lips.

"All right," I said, making myself comfortable on a sofa after pulling off my boots. "I suppose any one is liable to commit murder all of a sudden. Well, have you got many murderers in the house?"

"Yes," she said, "it's pretty good. Upstairs and downstairs," she sighed. "God sees to it."

"And by the by, who is that grey-headed murderer in a tall hat whom I saw shepherding two girls into this house?"

She put on a candid air in which one could detect a little of her peasant cunning.

“Oh, yes. They are two dancing girls at the Opera, sisters, as different from each other as I and our poor Rita. But they are both virtuous and that gentleman, their father, is very severe with them. Very severe indeed, poor motherless things. And it seems to be such a sinful occupation.”

“I bet you make them pay a big rent, Therese. With an occupation like that . . .”

She looked at me with eyes of invincible innocence and began to glide towards the door, so smoothly that the flame of the candle hardly swayed. “Good-night,” she murmured.

“Good-night, Mademoiselle.”

Then in the very doorway she turned right round as a marionette would turn.

“Oh, you ought to know, my dear young Monsieur, that Mr. Blunt, the dear handsome man, has arrived from Navarre three days ago or more. Oh,” she added with a priceless air of compunction, “he is such a charming gentleman.”

And the door shut after her.