

CHAPTER IV

That night I passed in a state, mostly open-eyed, I believe, but always on the border between dreams and waking. The only thing absolutely absent from it was the feeling of rest. The usual sufferings of a youth in love had nothing to do with it. I could leave her, go away from her, remain away from her, without an added pang or any augmented consciousness of that torturing sentiment of distance so acute that often it ends by wearing itself out in a few days. Far or near was all one to me, as if one could never get any further but also never any nearer to her secret: the state like that of some strange wild faiths that get hold of mankind with the cruel mystic grip of unattainable perfection, robbing them of both liberty and felicity on earth. A faith presents one with some hope, though. But I had no hope, and not even desire as a thing outside myself, that would come and go, exhaust or excite. It was in me just like life was in me; that life of which a popular saying affirms that "it is sweet." For the general wisdom of mankind will always stop short on the limit of the formidable.

What is best in a state of brimful, equable suffering is that it does away with the gnawings of petty sensations. Too far gone to be sensible to hope and desire I was spared the inferior pangs of elation and impatience. Hours with her or hours without her were all alike, all in her possession! But still there are shades and I will admit that the hours of that morning were perhaps a little more difficult to get through than the others. I had sent word of my arrival of course. I had written a note. I had rung the bell. Therese had appeared herself in her brown garb and as monachal as ever. I had said to her:

"Have this sent off at once."

She had gazed at the addressed envelope, smiled (I was looking up at her from my desk), and at last took it up with an effort of sanctimonious repugnance. But she remained with it in her hand looking at me as though she were piously gloating over something she could read in my face.

"Oh, that Rita, that Rita," she murmured. "And you, too! Why are you trying, you, too, like the others, to stand between her and the mercy of God? What's the good of all this to you? And you such a nice, dear, young gentleman. For no earthly good only making all the kind saints in heaven angry, and our mother ashamed in her place amongst the blessed."

"Mademoiselle Therese," I said, "vous êtes folle."

I believed she was crazy. She was cunning, too. I added an imperious: "Allez," and with a strange docility she glided out without another word. All I had to do then was to get dressed and wait till eleven o'clock.

The hour struck at last. If I could have plunged into a light wave and been transported instantaneously to Doña Rita's door it would no doubt have saved me an infinity of pangs too complex for analysis; but as this was impossible I elected to walk from end to end of that long way. My emotions and sensations were childlike and chaotic inasmuch that they were very intense and primitive, and that I lay very helpless in their unrelaxing grasp. If one could have kept a record of one's physical sensations it would have been a fine collection of absurdities and contradictions. Hardly touching the ground and yet leaden-footed; with a sinking heart and an excited brain; hot and trembling with a secret faintness, and yet as firm as a rock and with a sort of indifference to it all, I did reach the door which was frightfully like any other commonplace door, but at the same time had a fateful character: a few planks put together—and an awful symbol; not to be approached without awe—and yet coming open in the ordinary way to the ring of the bell.

It came open. Oh, yes, very much as usual. But in the ordinary course of events the first sight in the hall should have been the back of the ubiquitous, busy, silent maid hurrying off and already distant. But not at all! She actually waited for me to enter. I was extremely taken aback and I believe spoke to her for the first time in my life.

"Bonjour, Rose."

She dropped her dark eyelids over those eyes that ought to have been lustrous but were not, as if somebody had breathed on them the first thing in the morning. She was a girl without smiles. She shut the door after me, and not only did that but in the incredible idleness of that morning she, who had never a moment to spare, started helping me off with my overcoat. It was positively embarrassing from its novelty. While busying herself with those trifles she murmured without any marked intention:

"Captain Blunt is with Madame."

This didn't exactly surprise me. I knew he had come up to town; I only happened to have forgotten his existence for the moment. I looked at the girl also without any particular intention. But she arrested my movement towards the dining-room door by a low, hurried, if perfectly unemotional appeal:

"Monsieur George!"

That of course was not my name. It served me then as it will serve for this story. In all sorts of strange places I was alluded to as “that young gentleman they call Monsieur George.” Orders came from “Monsieur George” to men who nodded knowingly. Events pivoted about “Monsieur George.” I haven’t the slightest doubt that in the dark and tortuous streets of the old Town there were fingers pointed at my back: there goes “Monsieur George.” I had been introduced discreetly to several considerable persons as “Monsieur George.” I had learned to answer to the name quite naturally; and to simplify matters I was also “Monsieur George” in the street of the Consuls and in the Villa on the Prado. I verily believe that at that time I had the feeling that the name of George really belonged to me. I waited for what the girl had to say. I had to wait some time, though during that silence she gave no sign of distress or agitation. It was for her obviously a moment of reflection. Her lips were compressed a little in a characteristic, capable manner. I looked at her with a friendliness I really felt towards her slight, unattractive, and dependable person.

“Well,” I said at last, rather amused by this mental hesitation. I never took it for anything else. I was sure it was not distrust. She appreciated men and things and events solely in relation to Doña Rita’s welfare and safety. And as to that I believed myself above suspicion. At last she spoke.

“Madame is not happy.” This information was given to me not emotionally but as it were officially. It hadn’t even a tone of warning. A mere statement. Without waiting to see the effect she opened the dining-room door, not to announce my name in the usual way but to go in and shut it behind her. In that short moment I heard no voices inside. Not a sound reached me while the door remained shut; but in a few seconds it came open again and Rose stood aside to let me pass.

Then I heard something: Doña Rita’s voice raised a little on an impatient note (a very, very rare thing) finishing some phrase of protest with the words “. . . Of no consequence.”

I heard them as I would have heard any other words, for she had that kind of voice which carries a long distance. But the maid’s statement occupied all my mind. “Madame n’est pas heureuse.” It had a dreadful precision . . . “Not happy . . .” This unhappiness had almost a concrete form—something resembling a horrid bat. I was tired, excited, and generally overwrought. My head felt empty. What were the appearances of unhappiness? I was still naïve enough to associate them with tears, lamentations, extraordinary attitudes of the body and some sort of facial distortion, all very dreadful to behold. I didn’t know what I should see; but in what I did see there was nothing startling, at any rate from that nursery point of view which apparently I had not yet outgrown.

With immense relief the apprehensive child within me beheld Captain Blunt warming his back at the more distant of the two fireplaces; and as to Doña Rita there was nothing extraordinary in her attitude either, except perhaps that her hair was all loose about her shoulders. I hadn't the slightest doubt they had been riding together that morning, but she, with her impatience of all costume (and yet she could dress herself admirably and wore her dresses triumphantly), had divested herself of her riding habit and sat cross-legged enfolded in that ample blue robe like a young savage chieftain in a blanket. It covered her very feet. And before the normal fixity of her enigmatical eyes the smoke of the cigarette ascended ceremonially, straight up, in a slender spiral.

"How are you," was the greeting of Captain Blunt with the usual smile which would have been more amiable if his teeth hadn't been, just then, clenched quite so tight. How he managed to force his voice through that shining barrier I could never understand. Doña Rita tapped the couch engagingly by her side but I sat down instead in the armchair nearly opposite her, which, I imagine, must have been just vacated by Blunt. She inquired with that particular gleam of the eyes in which there was something immemorial and gay:

"Well?"

"Perfect success."

"I could hug you."

At any time her lips moved very little but in this instance the intense whisper of these words seemed to form itself right in my very heart; not as a conveyed sound but as an imparted emotion vibrating there with an awful intimacy of delight. And yet it left my heart heavy.

"Oh, yes, for joy," I said bitterly but very low; "for your Royalist, Legitimist, joy." Then with that trick of very precise politeness which I must have caught from Mr. Blunt I added:

"I don't want to be embraced—for the King."

And I might have stopped there. But I didn't. With a perversity which should be forgiven to those who suffer night and day and are as if drunk with an exalted unhappiness, I went on: "For the sake of an old cast-off glove; for I suppose a disdained love is not much more than a soiled, flabby thing that finds itself on a private rubbish heap because it has missed the fire."

She listened to me unreadable, unmoved, narrowed eyes, closed lips, slightly flushed face, as if carved six thousand years ago in order to fix for ever that something secret and obscure which is in all women. Not the gross immobility of a Sphinx proposing roadside riddles but the finer immobility, almost sacred, of a fateful figure seated at the very source of the passions that have moved men from the dawn of ages.

Captain Blunt, with his elbow on the high mantelpiece, had turned away a little from us and his attitude expressed excellently the detachment of a man who does not want to hear. As a matter of fact, I don't suppose he could have heard. He was too far away, our voices were too contained. Moreover, he didn't want to hear. There could be no doubt about it; but she addressed him unexpectedly.

"As I was saying to you, Don Juan, I have the greatest difficulty in getting myself, I won't say understood, but simply believed."

No pose of detachment could avail against the warm waves of that voice. He had to hear. After a moment he altered his position as it were reluctantly, to answer her.

"That's a difficulty that women generally have."

"Yet I have always spoken the truth."

"All women speak the truth," said Blunt imperturbably. And this annoyed her.

"Where are the men I have deceived?" she cried.

"Yes, where?" said Blunt in a tone of alacrity as though he had been ready to go out and look for them outside.

"No! But show me one. I say—where is he?"

He threw his affectation of detachment to the winds, moved his shoulders slightly, very slightly, made a step nearer to the couch, and looked down on her with an expression of amused courtesy.

"Oh, I don't know. Probably nowhere. But if such a man could be found I am certain he would turn out a very stupid person. You can't be expected to furnish every one who approaches you with a mind. To expect that would be too much, even from you who know how to work wonders at such little cost to yourself."

"To myself," she repeated in a loud tone.

“Why this indignation? I am simply taking your word for it.”

“Such little cost!” she exclaimed under her breath.

“I mean to your person.”

“Oh, yes,” she murmured, glanced down, as it were upon herself, then added very low: “This body.”

“Well, it is you,” said Blunt with visibly contained irritation. “You don’t pretend it’s somebody else’s. It can’t be. You haven’t borrowed it. . . . It fits you too well,” he ended between his teeth.

“You take pleasure in tormenting yourself,” she remonstrated, suddenly placated; “and I would be sorry for you if I didn’t think it’s the mere revolt of your pride. And you know you are indulging your pride at my expense. As to the rest of it, as to my living, acting, working wonders at a little cost. . . . it has all but killed me morally. Do you hear? Killed.”

“Oh, you are not dead yet,” he muttered,

“No,” she said with gentle patience. “There is still some feeling left in me; and if it is any satisfaction to you to know it, you may be certain that I shall be conscious of the last stab.”

He remained silent for a while and then with a polite smile and a movement of the head in my direction he warned her.

“Our audience will get bored.”

“I am perfectly aware that Monsieur George is here, and that he has been breathing a very different atmosphere from what he gets in this room. Don’t you find this room extremely confined?” she asked me.

The room was very large but it is a fact that I felt oppressed at that moment. This mysterious quarrel between those two people, revealing something more close in their intercourse than I had ever before suspected, made me so profoundly unhappy that I didn’t even attempt to answer. And she continued:

“More space. More air. Give me air, air.” She seized the embroidered edges of her blue robe under her white throat and made as if to tear them apart, to fling it open on her breast, recklessly, before our eyes. We both remained perfectly still.

Her hands dropped nervelessly by her side. "I envy you, Monsieur George. If I am to go under I should prefer to be drowned in the sea with the wind on my face. What luck, to feel nothing less than all the world closing over one's head!"

A short silence ensued before Mr. Blunt's drawing-room voice was heard with playful familiarity.

"I have often asked myself whether you weren't really a very ambitious person, Doña Rita."

"And I ask myself whether you have any heart." She was looking straight at him and he gratified her with the usual cold white flash of his even teeth before he answered.

"Asking yourself? That means that you are really asking me. But why do it so publicly? I mean it. One single, detached presence is enough to make a public. One alone. Why not wait till he returns to those regions of space and air—from which he came."

His particular trick of speaking of any third person as of a lay figure was exasperating. Yet at the moment I did not know how to resent it, but, in any case, Doña Rita would not have given me time. Without a moment's hesitation she cried out:

"I only wish he could take me out there with him."

For a moment Mr. Blunt's face became as still as a mask and then instead of an angry it assumed an indulgent expression. As to me I had a rapid vision of Dominic's astonishment, awe, and sarcasm which was always as tolerant as it is possible for sarcasm to be. But what a charming, gentle, gay, and fearless companion she would have made! I believed in her fearlessness in any adventure that would interest her. It would be a new occasion for me, a new viewpoint for that faculty of admiration she had awakened in me at sight—at first sight—before she opened her lips—before she ever turned her eyes on me. She would have to wear some sort of sailor costume, a blue woollen shirt open at the throat. . . . Dominic's hooded cloak would envelop her amply, and her face under the black hood would have a luminous quality, adolescent charm, and an enigmatic expression. The confined space of the little vessel's quarterdeck would lend itself to her cross-legged attitudes, and the blue sea would balance gently her characteristic immobility that seemed to hide thoughts as old and profound as itself. As restless, too—perhaps.

But the picture I had in my eye, coloured and simple like an illustration to a

nursery-book tale of two venturesome children's escapade, was what fascinated me most. Indeed I felt that we two were like children under the gaze of a man of the world—who lived by his sword. And I said recklessly:

"Yes, you ought to come along with us for a trip. You would see a lot of things for yourself."

Mr. Blunt's expression had grown even more indulgent if that were possible. Yet there was something ineradicably ambiguous about that man. I did not like the indefinable tone in which he observed:

"You are perfectly reckless in what you say, Doña Rita. It has become a habit with you of late."

"While with you reserve is a second nature, Don Juan."

This was uttered with the gentlest, almost tender, irony. Mr. Blunt waited a while before he said:

"Certainly. . . . Would you have liked me to be otherwise?"

She extended her hand to him on a sudden impulse.

"Forgive me! I may have been unjust, and you may only have been loyal. The falseness is not in us. The fault is in life itself, I suppose. I have been always frank with you."

"And I obedient," he said, bowing low over her hand. He turned away, paused to look at me for some time and finally gave me the correct sort of nod. But he said nothing and went out, or rather lounged out with his worldly manner of perfect ease under all conceivable circumstances. With her head lowered Doña Rita watched him till he actually shut the door behind him. I was facing her and only heard the door close.

"Don't stare at me," were the first words she said.

It was difficult to obey that request. I didn't know exactly where to look, while I sat facing her. So I got up, vaguely full of goodwill, prepared even to move off as far as the window, when she commanded:

"Don't turn your back on me."

I chose to understand it symbolically.

“You know very well I could never do that. I couldn’t. Not even if I wanted to.”
And I added: “It’s too late now.”

“Well, then, sit down. Sit down on this couch.”

I sat down on the couch. Unwillingly? Yes. I was at that stage when all her words, all her gestures, all her silences were a heavy trial to me, put a stress on my resolution, on that fidelity to myself and to her which lay like a leaden weight on my untried heart. But I didn’t sit down very far away from her, though that soft and billowy couch was big enough, God knows! No, not very far from her. Self-control, dignity, hopelessness itself, have their limits. The halo of her tawny hair stirred as I let myself drop by her side. Whereupon she flung one arm round my neck, leaned her temple against my shoulder and began to sob; but that I could only guess from her slight, convulsive movements because in our relative positions I could only see the mass of her tawny hair brushed back, yet with a halo of escaped hair which as I bent my head over her tickled my lips, my cheek, in a maddening manner.

We sat like two venturesome children in an illustration to a tale, scared by their adventure. But not for long. As I instinctively, yet timidly, sought for her other hand I felt a tear strike the back of mine, big and heavy as if fallen from a great height. It was too much for me. I must have given a nervous start. At once I heard a murmur: “You had better go away now.”

I withdrew myself gently from under the light weight of her head, from this unspeakable bliss and inconceivable misery, and had the absurd impression of leaving her suspended in the air. And I moved away on tiptoe.

Like an inspired blind man led by Providence I found my way out of the room but really I saw nothing, till in the hall the maid appeared by enchantment before me holding up my overcoat. I let her help me into it. And then (again as if by enchantment) she had my hat in her hand.

“No. Madame isn’t happy,” I whispered to her distractedly.

She let me take my hat out of her hand and while I was putting it on my head I heard an austere whisper:

“Madame should listen to her heart.”

Austere is not the word; it was almost freezing, this unexpected, dispassionate rustle of words. I had to repress a shudder, and as coldly as herself I murmured:

“She has done that once too often.”

Rose was standing very close to me and I caught distinctly the note of scorn in her indulgent compassion.

“Oh, that! . . . Madame is like a child.” It was impossible to get the bearing of that utterance from that girl who, as Doña Rita herself had told me, was the most taciturn of human beings; and yet of all human beings the one nearest to herself. I seized her head in my hands and turning up her face I looked straight down into her black eyes which should have been lustrous. Like a piece of glass breathed upon they reflected no light, revealed no depths, and under my ardent gaze remained tarnished, misty, unconscious.

“Will Monsieur kindly let me go. Monsieur shouldn’t play the child, either.” (I let her go.) “Madame could have the world at her feet. Indeed she has it there only she doesn’t care for it.”

How talkative she was, this maid with unsealed lips! For some reason or other this last statement of hers brought me immense comfort.

“Yes?” I whispered breathlessly.

“Yes! But in that case what’s the use of living in fear and torment?” she went on, revealing a little more of herself to my astonishment. She opened the door for me and added:

“Those that don’t care to stoop ought at least make themselves happy.”

I turned in the very doorway: “There is something which prevents that?” I suggested.

“To be sure there is. Bonjour, Monsieur.”