

PART FOUR

CHAPTER I

“Such a charming lady in a grey silk dress and a hand as white as snow. She looked at me through such funny glasses on the end of a long handle. A very great lady but her voice was as kind as the voice of a saint. I have never seen anything like that. She made me feel so timid.”

The voice uttering these words was the voice of Therese and I looked at her from a bed draped heavily in brown silk curtains fantastically looped up from ceiling to floor. The glow of a sunshiny day was toned down by closed jalousies to a mere transparency of darkness. In this thin medium Therese’s form appeared flat, without detail, as if cut out of black paper. It glided towards the window and with a click and a scrape let in the full flood of light which smote my aching eyeballs painfully.

In truth all that night had been the abomination of desolation to me. After wrestling with my thoughts, if the acute consciousness of a woman’s existence may be called a thought, I had apparently dropped off to sleep only to go on wrestling with a nightmare, a senseless and terrifying dream of being in bonds which, even after waking, made me feel powerless in all my limbs. I lay still, suffering acutely from a renewed sense of existence, unable to lift an arm, and wondering why I was not at sea, how long I had slept, how long Therese had been talking before her voice had reached me in that purgatory of hopeless longing and unanswerable questions to which I was condemned.

It was Therese’s habit to begin talking directly she entered the room with the tray of morning coffee. This was her method for waking me up. I generally regained the consciousness of the external world on some pious phrase asserting the spiritual comfort of early mass, or on angry lamentations about the unconscionable rapacity of the dealers in fish and vegetables; for after mass it was Therese’s practice to do the marketing for the house. As a matter of fact the necessity of having to pay, to actually give money to people, infuriated the pious Therese. But the matter of this morning’s speech was so extraordinary that it might have been the prolongation of a nightmare: a man in bonds having to listen to weird and unaccountable speeches against which, he doesn’t know why, his very soul revolts.

In sober truth my soul remained in revolt though I was convinced that I was no

longer dreaming. I watched Therese coming away from the window with that helpless dread a man bound hand and foot may be excused to feel. For in such a situation even the absurd may appear ominous. She came up close to the bed and folding her hands meekly in front of her turned her eyes up to the ceiling.

“If I had been her daughter she couldn’t have spoken more softly to me,” she said sentimentally.

I made a great effort to speak.

“Mademoiselle Therese, you are raving.”

“She addressed me as Mademoiselle, too, so nicely. I was struck with veneration for her white hair but her face, believe me, my dear young Monsieur, has not so many wrinkles as mine.”

She compressed her lips with an angry glance at me as if I could help her wrinkles, then she sighed.

“God sends wrinkles, but what is our face?” she digressed in a tone of great humility. “We shall have glorious faces in Paradise. But meantime God has permitted me to preserve a smooth heart.”

“Are you going to keep on like this much longer?” I fairly shouted at her. “What are you talking about?”

“I am talking about the sweet old lady who came in a carriage. Not a fiacre. I can tell a fiacre. In a little carriage shut in with glass all in front. I suppose she is very rich. The carriage was very shiny outside and all beautiful grey stuff inside. I opened the door to her myself. She got out slowly like a queen. I was struck all of a heap. Such a shiny beautiful little carriage. There were blue silk tassels inside, beautiful silk tassels.”

Obviously Therese had been very much impressed by a brougham, though she didn’t know the name for it. Of all the town she knew nothing but the streets which led to a neighbouring church frequented only by the poorer classes and the humble quarter around, where she did her marketing. Besides, she was accustomed to glide along the walls with her eyes cast down; for her natural boldness would never show itself through that nun-like mien except when bargaining, if only on a matter of threepence. Such a turn-out had never been presented to her notice before. The traffic in the street of the Consuls was mostly pedestrian and far from fashionable. And anyhow Therese never looked out of the window. She lurked in the depths of the house like some kind of spider that

shuns attention. She used to dart at one from some dark recesses which I never explored.

Yet it seemed to me that she exaggerated her raptures for some reason or other. With her it was very difficult to distinguish between craft and innocence.

“Do you mean to say,” I asked suspiciously, “that an old lady wants to hire an apartment here? I hope you told her there was no room, because, you know, this house is not exactly the thing for venerable old ladies.”

“Don’t make me angry, my dear young Monsieur. I have been to confession this morning. Aren’t you comfortable? Isn’t the house appointed richly enough for anybody?”

That girl with a peasant-nun’s face had never seen the inside of a house other than some half-ruined caserio in her native hills.

I pointed out to her that this was not a matter of splendour or comfort but of “convenances.” She pricked up her ears at that word which probably she had never heard before; but with woman’s uncanny intuition I believe she understood perfectly what I meant. Her air of saintly patience became so pronounced that with my own poor intuition I perceived that she was raging at me inwardly. Her weather-tanned complexion, already affected by her confined life, took on an extraordinary clayey aspect which reminded me of a strange head painted by El Greco which my friend Prax had hung on one of his walls and used to rail at; yet not without a certain respect.

Therese, with her hands still meekly folded about her waist, had mastered the feelings of anger so unbecoming to a person whose sins had been absolved only about three hours before, and asked me with an insinuating softness whether she wasn’t an honest girl enough to look after any old lady belonging to a world which after all was sinful. She reminded me that she had kept house ever since she was “so high” for her uncle the priest: a man well-known for his saintliness in a large district extending even beyond Pampeluna. The character of a house depended upon the person who ruled it. She didn’t know what impenitent wretches had been breathing within these walls in the time of that godless and wicked man who had planted every seed of perdition in “our Rita’s” ill-disposed heart. But he was dead and she, Therese, knew for certain that wickedness perished utterly, because of God’s anger (*la colère du bon Dieu*). She would have no hesitation in receiving a bishop, if need be, since “our, Rita,” with her poor, wretched, unbelieving heart, had nothing more to do with the house.

All this came out of her like an unctuous trickle of some acrid oil. The low,

voluble delivery was enough by itself to compel my attention.

“You think you know your sister’s heart,” I asked.

She made small eyes at me to discover if I was angry. She seemed to have an invincible faith in the virtuous dispositions of young men. And as I had spoken in measured tones and hadn’t got red in the face she let herself go.

“Black, my dear young Monsieur. Black. I always knew it. Uncle, poor saintly man, was too holy to take notice of anything. He was too busy with his thoughts to listen to anything I had to say to him. For instance as to her shamelessness. She was always ready to run half naked about the hills. . . .”

“Yes. After your goats. All day long. Why didn’t you mend her frocks?”

“Oh, you know about the goats. My dear young Monsieur, I could never tell when she would fling over her pretended sweetness and put her tongue out at me. Did she tell you about a boy, the son of pious and rich parents, whom she tried to lead astray into the wildness of thoughts like her own, till the poor dear child drove her off because she outraged his modesty? I saw him often with his parents at Sunday mass. The grace of God preserved him and made him quite a gentleman in Paris. Perhaps it will touch Rita’s heart, too, some day. But she was awful then. When I wouldn’t listen to her complaints she would say: ‘All right, sister, I would just as soon go clothed in rain and wind.’ And such a bag of bones, too, like the picture of a devil’s imp. Ah, my dear young Monsieur, you don’t know how wicked her heart is. You aren’t bad enough for that yourself. I don’t believe you are evil at all in your innocent little heart. I never heard you jeer at holy things. You are only thoughtless. For instance, I have never seen you make the sign of the cross in the morning. Why don’t you make a practice of crossing yourself directly you open your eyes. It’s a very good thing. It keeps Satan off for the day.”

She proffered that advice in a most matter-of-fact tone as if it were a precaution against a cold, compressed her lips, then returning to her fixed idea, “But the house is mine,” she insisted very quietly with an accent which made me feel that Satan himself would never manage to tear it out of her hands.

“And so I told the great lady in grey. I told her that my sister had given it to me and that surely God would not let her take it away again.”

“You told that grey-headed lady, an utter stranger! You are getting more crazy every day. You have neither good sense nor good feeling, Mademoiselle Therese, let me tell you. Do you talk about your sister to the butcher and the greengrocer,

too? A downright savage would have more restraint. What's your object? What do you expect from it? What pleasure do you get from it? Do you think you please God by abusing your sister? What do you think you are?"

"A poor lone girl amongst a lot of wicked people. Do you think I wanted to go forth amongst those abominations? it's that poor sinful Rita that wouldn't let me be where I was, serving a holy man, next door to a church, and sure of my share of Paradise. I simply obeyed my uncle. It's he who told me to go forth and attempt to save her soul, bring her back to us, to a virtuous life. But what would be the good of that? She is given over to worldly, carnal thoughts. Of course we are a good family and my uncle is a great man in the country, but where is the reputable farmer or God-fearing man of that kind that would dare to bring such a girl into his house to his mother and sisters. No, let her give her ill-gotten wealth up to the deserving and devote the rest of her life to repentance."

She uttered these righteous reflections and presented this programme for the salvation of her sister's soul in a reasonable convinced tone which was enough to give goose flesh to one all over.

"Mademoiselle Therese," I said, "you are nothing less than a monster."

She received that true expression of my opinion as though I had given her a sweet of a particularly delicious kind. She liked to be abused. It pleased her to be called names. I did let her have that satisfaction to her heart's content. At last I stopped because I could do no more, unless I got out of bed to beat her. I have a vague notion that she would have liked that, too, but I didn't try. After I had stopped she waited a little before she raised her downcast eyes.

"You are a dear, ignorant, flighty young gentleman," she said. "Nobody can tell what a cross my sister is to me except the good priest in the church where I go every day."

"And the mysterious lady in grey," I suggested sarcastically.

"Such a person might have guessed it," answered Therese, seriously, "but I told her nothing except that this house had been given me in full property by our Rita. And I wouldn't have done that if she hadn't spoken to me of my sister first. I can't tell too many people about that. One can't trust Rita. I know she doesn't fear God but perhaps human respect may keep her from taking this house back from me. If she doesn't want me to talk about her to people why doesn't she give me a properly stamped piece of paper for it?"

She said all this rapidly in one breath and at the end had a sort of anxious gasp

which gave me the opportunity to voice my surprise. It was immense.

“That lady, the strange lady, spoke to you of your sister first!” I cried.

“The lady asked me, after she had been in a little time, whether really this house belonged to Madame de Lastaola. She had been so sweet and kind and condescending that I did not mind humiliating my spirit before such a good Christian. I told her that I didn’t know how the poor sinner in her mad blindness called herself, but that this house had been given to me truly enough by my sister. She raised her eyebrows at that but she looked at me at the same time so kindly, as much as to say, ‘Don’t trust much to that, my dear girl,’ that I couldn’t help taking up her hand, soft as down, and kissing it. She took it away pretty quick but she was not offended. But she only said, ‘That’s very generous on your sister’s part,’ in a way that made me run cold all over. I suppose all the world knows our Rita for a shameless girl. It was then that the lady took up those glasses on a long gold handle and looked at me through them till I felt very much abashed. She said to me, ‘There is nothing to be unhappy about. Madame de Lastaola is a very remarkable person who has done many surprising things. She is not to be judged like other people and as far as I know she has never wronged a single human being. . . .’ That put heart into me, I can tell you; and the lady told me then not to disturb her son. She would wait till he woke up. She knew he was a bad sleeper. I said to her: ‘Why, I can hear the dear sweet gentleman this moment having his bath in the fencing-room,’ and I took her into the studio. They are there now and they are going to have their lunch together at twelve o’clock.”

“Why on earth didn’t you tell me at first that the lady was Mrs. Blunt?”

“Didn’t I? I thought I did,” she said innocently. I felt a sudden desire to get out of that house, to fly from the reinforced Blunt element which was to me so oppressive.

“I want to get up and dress, Mademoiselle Therese,” I said.

She gave a slight start and without looking at me again glided out of the room, the many folds of her brown skirt remaining undisturbed as she moved.

I looked at my watch; it was ten o’clock. Therese had been late with my coffee. The delay was clearly caused by the unexpected arrival of Mr. Blunt’s mother, which might or might not have been expected by her son. The existence of those Blunts made me feel uncomfortable in a peculiar way as though they had been the denizens of another planet with a subtly different point of view and something in the intelligence which was bound to remain unknown to me. It caused in me a feeling of inferiority which I intensely disliked. This did not arise from the actual

fact that those people originated in another continent. I had met Americans before. And the Blunts were Americans. But so little! That was the trouble. Captain Blunt might have been a Frenchman as far as languages, tones, and manners went. But you could not have mistaken him for one. . . . Why? You couldn't tell. It was something indefinite. It occurred to me while I was towelling hard my hair, face, and the back of my neck, that I could not meet J. K. Blunt on equal terms in any relation of life except perhaps arms in hand, and in preference with pistols, which are less intimate, acting at a distance—but arms of some sort. For physically his life, which could be taken away from him, was exactly like mine, held on the same terms and of the same vanishing quality.

I would have smiled at my absurdity if all, even the most intimate, vestige of gaiety had not been crushed out of my heart by the intolerable weight of my love for Rita. It crushed, it overshadowed, too, it was immense. If there were any smiles in the world (which I didn't believe) I could not have seen them. Love for Rita . . . if it was love, I asked myself despairingly, while I brushed my hair before a glass. It did not seem to have any sort of beginning as far as I could remember. A thing the origin of which you cannot trace cannot be seriously considered. It is an illusion. Or perhaps mine was a physical state, some sort of disease akin to melancholia which is a form of insanity? The only moments of relief I could remember were when she and I would start squabbling like two passionate infants in a nursery, over anything under heaven, over a phrase, a word sometimes, in the great light of the glass rotunda, disregarding the quiet entrances and exits of the ever-active Rose, in great bursts of voices and peals of laughter. . . .

I felt tears come into my eyes at the memory of her laughter, the true memory of the senses almost more penetrating than the reality itself. It haunted me. All that appertained to her haunted me with the same awful intimacy, her whole form in the familiar pose, her very substance in its colour and texture, her eyes, her lips, the gleam of her teeth, the tawny mist of her hair, the smoothness of her forehead, the faint scent that she used, the very shape, feel, and warmth of her high-heeled slipper that would sometimes in the heat of the discussion drop on the floor with a crash, and which I would (always in the heat of the discussion) pick up and toss back on the couch without ceasing to argue. And besides being haunted by what was Rita on earth I was haunted also by her waywardness, her gentleness and her flame, by that which the high gods called Rita when speaking of her amongst themselves. Oh, yes, certainly I was haunted by her but so was her sister Therese—who was crazy. It proved nothing. As to her tears, since I had not caused them, they only aroused my indignation. To put her head on my shoulder, to weep these strange tears, was nothing short of an outrageous liberty. It was a mere emotional trick. She would have just as soon leaned her head against the over-mantel of one of those tall, red granite chimney-pieces in order to

weep comfortably. And then when she had no longer any need of support she dispensed with it by simply telling me to go away. How convenient! The request had sounded pathetic, almost sacredly so, but then it might have been the exhibition of the coolest possible impudence. With her one could not tell. Sorrow, indifference, tears, smiles, all with her seemed to have a hidden meaning. Nothing could be trusted. . . Heavens! Am I as crazy as Therese I asked myself with a passing chill of fear, while occupied in equalizing the ends of my neck-tie.

I felt suddenly that “this sort of thing” would kill me. The definition of the cause was vague, but the thought itself was no mere morbid artificiality of sentiment but a genuine conviction. “That sort of thing” was what I would have to die from. It wouldn’t be from the innumerable doubts. Any sort of certitude would be also deadly. It wouldn’t be from a stab—a kiss would kill me as surely. It would not be from a frown or from any particular word or any particular act—but from having to bear them all, together and in succession—from having to live with “that sort of thing.” About the time I finished with my neck-tie I had done with life too. I absolutely did not care because I couldn’t tell whether, mentally and physically, from the roots of my hair to the soles of my feet—whether I was more weary or unhappy.

And now my toilet was finished, my occupation was gone. An immense distress descended upon me. It has been observed that the routine of daily life, that arbitrary system of trifles, is a great moral support. But my toilet was finished, I had nothing more to do of those things consecrated by usage and which leave you no option. The exercise of any kind of volition by a man whose consciousness is reduced to the sensation that he is being killed by “that sort of thing” cannot be anything but mere trifling with death, an insincere pose before himself. I wasn’t capable of it. It was then that I discovered that being killed by “that sort of thing,” I mean the absolute conviction of it, was, so to speak, nothing in itself. The horrible part was the waiting. That was the cruelty, the tragedy, the bitterness of it. “Why the devil don’t I drop dead now?” I asked myself peevishly, taking a clean handkerchief out of the drawer and stuffing it in my pocket.

This was absolutely the last thing, the last ceremony of an imperative rite. I was abandoned to myself now and it was terrible. Generally I used to go out, walk down to the port, take a look at the craft I loved with a sentiment that was extremely complex, being mixed up with the image of a woman; perhaps go on board, not because there was anything for me to do there but just for nothing, for happiness, simply as a man will sit contented in the companionship of the beloved object. For lunch I had the choice of two places, one Bohemian, the other select, even aristocratic, where I had still my reserved table in the petit salon, up the white staircase. In both places I had friends who treated my erratic appearances with discretion, in one case tinged with respect, in the other with a

certain amused tolerance. I owed this tolerance to the most careless, the most confirmed of those Bohemians (his beard had streaks of grey amongst its many other tints) who, once bringing his heavy hand down on my shoulder, took my defence against the charge of being disloyal and even foreign to that milieu of earnest visions taking beautiful and revolutionary shapes in the smoke of pipes, in the jingle of glasses.

“That fellow (ce garçon) is a primitive nature, but he may be an artist in a sense. He has broken away from his conventions. He is trying to put a special vibration and his own notion of colour into his life; and perhaps even to give it a modelling according to his own ideas. And for all you know he may be on the track of a masterpiece; but observe: if it happens to be one nobody will see it. It can be only for himself. And even he won't be able to see it in its completeness except on his death-bed. There is something fine in that.”

I had blushed with pleasure; such fine ideas had never entered my head. But there was something fine. . . . How far all this seemed! How mute and how still! What a phantom he was, that man with a beard of at least seven tones of brown. And those shades of the other kind such as Baptiste with the shaven diplomatic face, the maître d'hôtel in charge of the petit salon, taking my hat and stick from me with a deferential remark: “Monsieur is not very often seen nowadays.” And those other well-groomed heads raised and nodding at my passage—“Bonjour.” “Bonjour”—following me with interested eyes; these young X.s and Z.s, low-toned, markedly discreet, lounging up to my table on their way out with murmurs: “Are you well?”—“Will one see you anywhere this evening?”—not from curiosity, God forbid, but just from friendliness; and passing on almost without waiting for an answer. What had I to do with them, this elegant dust, these moulds of provincial fashion?

I also often lunched with Doña Rita without invitation. But that was now unthinkable. What had I to do with a woman who allowed somebody else to make her cry and then with an amazing lack of good feeling did her offensive weeping on my shoulder? Obviously I could have nothing to do with her. My five minutes' meditation in the middle of the bedroom came to an end without even a sigh. The dead don't sigh, and for all practical purposes I was that, except for the final consummation, the growing cold, the rigor mortis—that blessed state! With measured steps I crossed the landing to my sitting-room.