CHAPTER II

The windows of that room gave out on the street of the Consuls which as usual was silent. And the house itself below me and above me was soundless, perfectly still. In general the house was quiet, dumbly quiet, without resonances of any sort, something like what one would imagine the interior of a convent would be. I suppose it was very solidly built. Yet that morning I missed in the stillness that feeling of security and peace which ought to have been associated with it. It is, I believe, generally admitted that the dead are glad to be at rest. But I wasn't at rest. What was wrong with that silence? There was something incongruous in that peace. What was it that had got into that stillness? Suddenly I remembered: the mother of Captain Blunt.

Why had she come all the way from Paris? And why should I bother my head about it? H'm—the Blunt atmosphere, the reinforced Blunt vibration stealing through the walls, through the thick walls and the almost more solid stillness. Nothing to me, of course—the movements of Mme. Blunt, mère. It was maternal affection which had brought her south by either the evening or morning Rapide, to take anxious stock of the ravages of that insomnia. Very good thing, insomnia, for a cavalry officer perpetually on outpost duty, a real godsend, so to speak; but on leave a truly devilish condition to be in.

The above sequence of thoughts was entirely unsympathetic and it was followed by a feeling of satisfaction that I, at any rate, was not suffering from insomnia. I could always sleep in the end. In the end. Escape into a nightmare. Wouldn't he revel in that if he could! But that wasn't for him. He had to toss about open-eyed all night and get up weary, weary. But oh, wasn't I weary, too, waiting for a sleep without dreams.

I heard the door behind me open. I had been standing with my face to the window and, I declare, not knowing what I was looking at across the road—the Desert of Sahara or a wall of bricks, a landscape of rivers and forests or only the Consulate of Paraguay. But I had been thinking, apparently, of Mr. Blunt with such intensity that when I saw him enter the room it didn't really make much difference. When I turned about the door behind him was already shut. He advanced towards me, correct, supple, hollow-eyed, and smiling; and as to his costume ready to go out except for the old shooting jacket which he must have affectioned particularly, for he never lost any time in getting into it at every opportunity. Its material was some tweed mixture; it had gone inconceivably shabby, it was shrunk from old age, it was ragged at the elbows; but any one could see at a glance that it had been made in London by a celebrated tailor, by a

distinguished specialist. Blunt came towards me in all the elegance of his slimness and affirming in every line of his face and body, in the correct set of his shoulders and the careless freedom of his movements, the superiority, the inexpressible superiority, the unconscious, the unmarked, the not-to-be-described, and even not-to-be-caught, superiority of the naturally born and the perfectly finished man of the world, over the simple young man. He was smiling, easy, correct, perfectly delightful, fit to kill.

He had come to ask me, if I had no other engagement, to lunch with him and his mother in about an hour's time. He did it in a most dégagé tone. His mother had given him a surprise. The completest . . . The foundation of his mother's psychology was her delightful unexpectedness. She could never let things be (this in a peculiar tone which he checked at once) and he really would take it very kindly of me if I came to break the tête-à-tête for a while (that is if I had no other engagement. Flash of teeth). His mother was exquisitely and tenderly absurd. She had taken it into her head that his health was endangered in some way. And when she took anything into her head . . . Perhaps I might find something to say which would reassure her. His mother had two long conversations with Mills on his passage through Paris and had heard of me (I knew how that thick man could speak of people, he interjected ambiguously) and his mother, with an insatiable curiosity for anything that was rare (filially humorous accent here and a softer flash of teeth), was very anxious to have me presented to her (courteous intonation, but no teeth). He hoped I wouldn't mind if she treated me a little as an "interesting young man." His mother had never got over her seventeenth year, and the manner of the spoilt beauty of at least three counties at the back of the Carolinas. That again got overlaid by the sans-façon of a grande dame of the Second Empire.

I accepted the invitation with a worldly grin and a perfectly just intonation, because I really didn't care what I did. I only wondered vaguely why that fellow required all the air in the room for himself. There did not seem enough left to go down my throat. I didn't say that I would come with pleasure or that I would be delighted, but I said that I would come. He seemed to forget his tongue in his head, put his hands in his pockets and moved about vaguely. "I am a little nervous this morning," he said in French, stopping short and looking me straight in the eyes. His own were deep sunk, dark, fatal. I asked with some malice, that no one could have detected in my intonation, "How's that sleeplessness?"

He muttered through his teeth, "Mal. Je ne dors plus." He moved off to stand at the window with his back to the room. I sat down on a sofa that was there and put my feet up, and silence took possession of the room.

"Isn't this street ridiculous?" said Blunt suddenly, and crossing the room rapidly

waved his hand to me, “A bientôt donc,” and was gone. He had seared himself into my mind. I did not understand him nor his mother then; which made them more impressive; but I have discovered since that those two figures required no mystery to make them memorable. Of course it isn’t every day that one meets a mother that lives by her wits and a son that lives by his sword, but there was a perfect finish about their ambiguous personalities which is not to be met twice in a life-time. I shall never forget that grey dress with ample skirts and long corsage yet with infinite style, the ancient as if ghostly beauty of outlines, the black lace, the silver hair, the harmonious, restrained movements of those white, soft hands like the hands of a queen—or an abbess; and in the general fresh effect of her person the brilliant eyes like two stars with the calm reposeful way they had of moving on and off one, as if nothing in the world had the right to veil itself before their once sovereign beauty. Captain Blunt with smiling formality introduced me by name, adding with a certain relaxation of the formal tone the comment: “The Monsieur George! whose fame you tell me has reached even Paris.” Mrs. Blunt’s reception of me, glance, tones, even to the attitude of the admirably corseted figure, was most friendly, approaching the limit of half-familiarity. I had the feeling that I was beholding in her a captured ideal. No common experience! But I didn’t care. It was very lucky perhaps for me that in a way I was like a very sick man who has yet preserved all his lucidity. I was not even wondering to myself at what on earth I was doing there. She breathed out: “Comme c’est romantique,” at large to the dusty studio as it were; then pointing to a chair at her right hand, and bending slightly towards me she said:

“I have heard this name murmured by pretty lips in more than one royalist salon.”

I didn’t say anything to that ingratiating speech. I had only an odd thought that she could not have had such a figure, nothing like it, when she was seventeen and wore snowy muslin dresses on the family plantation in South Carolina, in pre-abolition days.

“You won’t mind, I am sure, if an old woman whose heart is still young elects to call you by it,” she declared.

“Certainly, Madame. It will be more romantic,” I assented with a respectful bow.

She dropped a calm: “Yes—there is nothing like romance while one is young. So I will call you Monsieur George,” she paused and then added, “I could never get old,” in a matter-of-fact final tone as one would remark, “I could never learn to swim,” and I had the presence of mind to say in a tone to match, “C’est évident, Madame.” It was evident. She couldn’t get old; and across the table her thirty-year-old son who couldn’t get sleep sat listening with courteous detachment and

the narrowest possible line of white underlining his silky black moustache.

"Your services are immensely appreciated," she said with an amusing touch of importance as of a great official lady. "Immensely appreciated by people in a position to understand the great significance of the Carlist movement in the South. There it has to combat anarchism, too. I who have lived through the Commune . . ."

Therese came in with a dish, and for the rest of the lunch the conversation so well begun drifted amongst the most appalling inanities of the religious-royalist-legitimist order. The ears of all the Bourbons in the world must have been burning. Mrs. Blunt seemed to have come into personal contact with a good many of them and the marvellous insipidity of her recollections was astonishing to my inexperience. I looked at her from time to time thinking: She has seen slavery, she has seen the Commune, she knows two continents, she has seen a civil war, the glory of the Second Empire, the horrors of two sieges; she has been in contact with marked personalities, with great events, she has lived on her wealth, on her personality, and there she is with her plumage unruffled, as glossy as ever, unable to get old:—a sort of Phoenix free from the slightest signs of ashes and dust, all complacent amongst those inanities as if there had been nothing else in the world. In my youthful haste I asked myself what sort of airy soul she had.

At last Therese put a dish of fruit on the table, a small collection of oranges, raisins, and nuts. No doubt she had bought that lot very cheap and it did not look at all inviting. Captain Blunt jumped up. "My mother can't stand tobacco smoke. Will you keep her company, mon cher, while I take a turn with a cigar in that ridiculous garden. The brougham from the hotel will be here very soon."

He left us in the white flash of an apologetic grin. Almost directly he reappeared, visible from head to foot through the glass side of the studio, pacing up and down the central path of that "ridiculous" garden: for its elegance and its air of good breeding the most remarkable figure that I have ever seen before or since. He had changed his coat. Madame Blunt mère lowered the long-handled glasses through which she had been contemplating him with an appraising, absorbed expression which had nothing maternal in it. But what she said to me was:

"You understand my anxieties while he is campaigning with the King."

She had spoken in French and she had used the expression "mes transes" but for all the rest, intonation, bearing, solemnity, she might have been referring to one of the Bourbons. I am sure that not a single one of them looked half as aristocratic as her son.

"I understand perfectly, Madame. But then that life is so romantic."

"Hundreds of young men belonging to a certain sphere are doing that," she said very distinctly, "only their case is different. They have their positions, their families to go back to; but we are different. We are exiles, except of course for the ideals, the kindred spirit, the friendships of old standing we have in France. Should my son come out unscathed he has no one but me and I have no one but him. I have to think of his life. Mr. Mills (what a distinguished mind that is!) has reassured me as to my son's health. But he sleeps very badly, doesn't he?"

I murmured something affirmative in a doubtful tone and she remarked quaintly, with a certain curtness, "It's so unnecessary, this worry! The unfortunate position of an exile has its advantages. At a certain height of social position (wealth has got nothing to do with it, we have been ruined in a most righteous cause), at a certain established height one can disregard narrow prejudices. You see examples in the aristocracies of all the countries. A chivalrous young American may offer his life for a remote ideal which yet may belong to his familial tradition. We, in our great country, have every sort of tradition. But a young man of good connections and distinguished relations must settle down some day, dispose of his life."

"No doubt, Madame," I said, raising my eyes to the figure outside—"Américain, Catholique et gentilhomme"—walking up and down the path with a cigar which he was not smoking. "For myself, I don't know anything about those necessities. I have broken away for ever from those things."

"Yes, Mr. Mills talked to me about you. What a golden heart that is. His sympathies are infinite."

I thought suddenly of Mills pronouncing on Mme. Blunt, whatever his text on me might have been: "She lives by her wits." Was she exercising her wits on me for some purpose of her own? And I observed coldly:

"I really know your son so very little."

"Oh, voyons," she protested. "I am aware that you are very much younger, but the similitudes of opinions, origins and perhaps at bottom, faintly, of character, of chivalrous devotion—no, you must be able to understand him in a measure. He is infinitely scrupulous and recklessly brave."

I listened deferentially to the end yet with every nerve in my body tingling in hostile response to the Blunt vibration, which seemed to have got into my very

hair.

“I am convinced of it, Madame. I have even heard of your son’s bravery. It’s extremely natural in a man who, in his own words, ‘lives by his sword.’”

She suddenly departed from her almost inhuman perfection, betrayed “nerves” like a common mortal, of course very slightly, but in her it meant more than a blaze of fury from a vessel of inferior clay. Her admirable little foot, marvellously shod in a black shoe, tapped the floor irritably. But even in that display there was something exquisitely delicate. The very anger in her voice was silvery, as it were, and more like the petulance of a seventeen-year-old beauty.

“What nonsense! A Blunt doesn’t hire himself.”

“Some princely families,” I said, “were founded by men who have done that very thing. The great Condottieri, you know.”

It was in an almost tempestuous tone that she made me observe that we were not living in the fifteenth century. She gave me also to understand with some spirit that there was no question here of founding a family. Her son was very far from being the first of the name. His importance lay rather in being the last of a race which had totally perished, she added in a completely drawing-room tone, “in our Civil War.”

She had mastered her irritation and through the glass side of the room sent a wistful smile to his address, but I noticed the yet unextinguished anger in her eyes full of fire under her beautiful white eyebrows. For she was growing old! Oh, yes, she was growing old, and secretly weary, and perhaps desperate.