CHAPTER III

Without caring much about it I was conscious of sudden illumination. I said to myself confidently that these two people had been quarrelling all the morning. I had discovered the secret of my invitation to that lunch. They did not care to face the strain of some obstinate, inconclusive discussion for fear, maybe, of it ending in a serious quarrel. And so they had agreed that I should be fetched downstairs to create a diversion. I cannot say I felt annoyed. I didn't care. My perspicacity did not please me either. I wished they had left me alone—but nothing mattered. They must have been in their superiority accustomed to make use of people, without compunction. From necessity, too. She especially. She lived by her wits. The silence had grown so marked that I had at last to raise my eyes; and the first thing I observed was that Captain Blunt was no longer to be seen in the garden. Must have gone indoors. Would rejoin us in a moment. Then I would leave mother and son to themselves.

The next thing I noticed was that a great mellowness had descended upon the mother of the last of his race. But these terms, irritation, mellowness, appeared gross when applied to her. It is impossible to give an idea of the refinement and subtlety of all her transformations. She smiled faintly at me.

"But all this is beside the point. The real point is that my son, like all fine natures, is a being of strange contradictions which the trials of life have not yet reconciled in him. With me it is a little different. The trials fell mainly to my share—and of course I have lived longer. And then men are much more complex than women, much more difficult, too. And you, Monsieur George? Are you complex, with unexpected resistances and difficulties in your être intime—your inner self? I wonder now . . ."

The Blunt atmosphere seemed to vibrate all over my skin. I disregarded the symptom. "Madame," I said, "I have never tried to find out what sort of being I am."

"Ah, that's very wrong. We ought to reflect on what manner of beings we are. Of course we are all sinners. My John is a sinner like the others," she declared further, with a sort of proud tenderness as though our common lot must have felt honoured and to a certain extent purified by this condescending recognition.

"You are too young perhaps as yet . . . But as to my John," she broke off, leaning her elbow on the table and supporting her head on her old, impeccably shaped, white fore-arm emerging from a lot of precious, still older, lace trimming the short

sleeve. "The trouble is that he suffers from a profound discord between the necessary reactions to life and even the impulses of nature and the lofty idealism of his feelings; I may say, of his principles. I assure you that he won't even let his heart speak uncontradicted."

I am sure I don't know what particular devil looks after the associations of memory, and I can't even imagine the shock which it would have been for Mrs. Blunt to learn that the words issuing from her lips had awakened in me the visual perception of a dark-skinned, hard-driven lady's maid with tarnished eyes; even of the tireless Rose handing me my hat while breathing out the enigmatic words: "Madame should listen to her heart." A wave from the atmosphere of another house rolled in, overwhelming and fiery, seductive and cruel, through the Blunt vibration, bursting through it as through tissue paper and filling my heart with sweet murmurs and distracting images, till it seemed to break, leaving an empty stillness in my breast.

After that for a long time I heard Mme. Blunt mère talking with extreme fluency and I even caught the individual words, but I could not in the revulsion of my feelings get hold of the sense. She talked apparently of life in general, of its difficulties, moral and physical, of its surprising turns, of its unexpected contacts, of the choice and rare personalities that drift on it as if on the sea; of the distinction that letters and art gave to it, the nobility and consolations there are in aesthetics, of the privileges they confer on individuals and (this was the first connected statement I caught) that Mills agreed with her in the general point of view as to the inner worth of individualities and in the particular instance of it on which she had opened to him her innermost heart. Mills had a universal mind. His sympathy was universal, too. He had that large comprehension—oh, not cynical, not at all cynical, in fact rather tender—which was found in its perfection only in some rare, very rare Englishmen. The dear creature was romantic, too. Of course he was reserved in his speech but she understood Mills perfectly. Mills apparently liked me very much.

It was time for me to say something. There was a challenge in the reposeful black eyes resting upon my face. I murmured that I was very glad to hear it. She waited a little, then uttered meaningly, "Mr. Mills is a little bit uneasy about you."

"It's very good of him," I said. And indeed I thought that it was very good of him, though I did ask myself vaguely in my dulled brain why he should be uneasy.

Somehow it didn't occur to me to ask Mrs. Blunt. Whether she had expected me to do so or not I don't know but after a while she changed the pose she had kept so long and folded her wonderfully preserved white arms. She looked a perfect picture in silver and grey, with touches of black here and there. Still I said

nothing more in my dull misery. She waited a little longer, then she woke me up with a crash. It was as if the house had fallen, and yet she had only asked me:

"I believe you are received on very friendly terms by Madame de Lastaola on account of your common exertions for the cause. Very good friends, are you not?"

"You mean Rita," I said stupidly, but I felt stupid, like a man who wakes up only to be hit on the head.

"Oh, Rita," she repeated with unexpected acidity, which somehow made me feel guilty of an incredible breach of good manners. "H'm, Rita. . . . Oh, well, let it be Rita—for the present. Though why she should be deprived of her name in conversation about her, really I don't understand. Unless a very special intimacy . . ."

She was distinctly annoyed. I said sulkily, "It isn't her name."

"It is her choice, I understand, which seems almost a better title to recognition on the part of the world. It didn't strike you so before? Well, it seems to me that choice has got more right to be respected than heredity or law. Moreover, Mme. de Lastaola," she continued in an insinuating voice, "that most rare and fascinating young woman is, as a friend like you cannot deny, outside legality altogether. Even in that she is an exceptional creature. For she is exceptional—you agree?"

I had gone dumb, I could only stare at her.

"Oh, I see, you agree. No friend of hers could deny."

"Madame," I burst out, "I don't know where a question of friendship comes in here with a person whom you yourself call so exceptional. I really don't know how she looks upon me. Our intercourse is of course very close and confidential. Is that also talked about in Paris?"

"Not at all, not in the least," said Mrs. Blunt, easy, equable, but with her calm, sparkling eyes holding me in angry subjection. "Nothing of the sort is being talked about. The references to Mme. de Lastaola are in a very different tone, I can assure you, thanks to her discretion in remaining here. And, I must say, thanks to the discreet efforts of her friends. I am also a friend of Mme. de Lastaola, you must know. Oh, no, I have never spoken to her in my life and have seen her only twice, I believe. I wrote to her though, that I admit. She or rather the image of her has come into my life, into that part of it where art and letters

reign undisputed like a sort of religion of beauty to which I have been faithful through all the vicissitudes of my existence. Yes, I did write to her and I have been preoccupied with her for a long time. It arose from a picture, from two pictures and also from a phrase pronounced by a man, who in the science of life and in the perception of aesthetic truth had no equal in the world of culture. He said that there was something in her of the women of all time. I suppose he meant the inheritance of all the gifts that make up an irresistible fascination—a great personality. Such women are not born often. Most of them lack opportunities. They never develop. They end obscurely. Here and there one survives to make her mark even in history. . . . And even that is not a very enviable fate. They are at another pole from the so-called dangerous women who are merely coquettes. A coquette has got to work for

her success. The others have nothing to do but simply exist. You perceive the view I take of the difference?"

I perceived the view. I said to myself that nothing in the world could be more aristocratic. This was the slave-owning woman who had never worked, even if she had been reduced to live by her wits. She was a wonderful old woman. She made me dumb. She held me fascinated by the well-bred attitude, something sublimely aloof in her air of wisdom.

I just simply let myself go admiring her as though I had been a mere slave of aesthetics: the perfect grace, the amazing poise of that venerable head, the assured as if royal—yes, royal even flow of the voice. . . . But what was it she was talking about now? These were no longer considerations about fatal women. She was talking about her son again. My interest turned into mere bitterness of contemptuous attention. For I couldn't withhold it though I tried to let the stuff go by. Educated in the most aristocratic college in Paris . . . at eighteen . . . call of duty . . . with General Lee to the very last cruel minute . . . after that catastrophe end of the world—return to France—to old friendships, infinite kindness—but a life hollow, without occupation. . . Then 1870—and chivalrous response to adopted country's call and again emptiness, the chafing of a proud spirit without aim and handicapped not exactly by poverty but by lack of fortune. And she, the mother, having to look on at this wasting of a most accomplished man, of a most chivalrous nature that practically had no future before it.

"You understand me well, Monsieur George. A nature like this! It is the most refined cruelty of fate to look at. I don't know whether I suffered more in times of war or in times of peace. You understand?"

I bowed my head in silence. What I couldn't understand was why he delayed so long in joining us again. Unless he had had enough of his mother? I thought

without any great resentment that I was being victimized; but then it occurred to me that the cause of his absence was quite simple. I was familiar enough with his habits by this time to know that he often managed to snatch an hour's sleep or so during the day. He had gone and thrown himself on his bed.

"I admire him exceedingly," Mrs. Blunt was saying in a tone which was not at all maternal. "His distinction, his fastidiousness, the earnest warmth of his heart. I know him well. I assure you that I would never have dared to suggest," she continued with an extraordinary haughtiness of attitude and tone that aroused my attention, "I would never have dared to put before him my views of the extraordinary merits and the uncertain fate of the exquisite woman of whom we speak, if I had not been certain that, partly by my fault, I admit, his attention has been attracted to her and his—his—his heart engaged."

It was as if some one had poured a bucket of cold water over my head. I woke up with a great shudder to the acute perception of my own feelings and of that aristocrat's incredible purpose. How it could have germinated, grown and matured in that exclusive soil was inconceivable. She had been inciting her son all the time to undertake wonderful salvage work by annexing the heiress of Henry Allègre—the woman and the fortune.

There must have been an amazed incredulity in my eyes, to which her own responded by an unflinching black brilliance which suddenly seemed to develop a scorching quality even to the point of making me feel extremely thirsty all of a sudden. For a time my tongue literally clove to the roof of my mouth. I don't know whether it was an illusion but it seemed to me that Mrs. Blunt had nodded at me twice as if to say: "You are right, that's so." I made an effort to speak but it was very poor. If she did hear me it was because she must have been on the watch for the faintest sound.

"His heart engaged. Like two hundred others, or two thousand, all around," I mumbled.

"Altogether different. And it's no disparagement to a woman surely. Of course her great fortune protects her in a certain measure."

"Does it?" I faltered out and that time I really doubt whether she heard me. Her aspect in my eyes had changed. Her purpose being disclosed, her well-bred ease appeared sinister, her aristocratic repose a treacherous device, her venerable graciousness a mask of unbounded contempt for all human beings whatever. She was a terrible old woman with those straight, white wolfish eye-brows. How blind I had been! Those eyebrows alone ought to have been enough to give her away. Yet they were as beautifully smooth as her voice when she admitted: "That

protection naturally is only partial. There is the danger of her own self, poor girl. She requires guidance."

I marvelled at the villainy of my tone as I spoke, but it was only assumed.

"I don't think she has done badly for herself, so far," I forced myself to say. "I suppose you know that she began life by herding the village goats."

In the course of that phrase I noticed her wince just the least bit. Oh, yes, she winced; but at the end of it she smiled easily.

"No, I didn't know. So she told you her story! Oh, well, I suppose you are very good friends. A goatherd—really? In the fairy tale I believe the girl that marries the prince is-—what is it?—-a gardeuse d'oies. And what a thing to drag out against a woman. One might just as soon reproach any of them for coming unclothed into the world. They all do, you know. And then they become—what you will discover when you have lived longer, Monsieur George—for the most part futile creatures, without any sense of truth and beauty, drudges of all sorts, or else dolls to dress. In a word—ordinary."

The implication of scorn in her tranquil manner was immense. It seemed to condemn all those that were not born in the Blunt connection. It was the perfect pride of Republican aristocracy, which has no gradations and knows no limit, and, as if created by the grace of God, thinks it ennobles everything it touches: people, ideas, even passing tastes!

"How many of them," pursued Mrs. Blunt, "have had the good fortune, the leisure to develop their intelligence and their beauty in aesthetic conditions as this charming woman had? Not one in a million. Perhaps not one in an age."

"The heiress of Henry Allègre," I murmured.

"Precisely. But John wouldn't be marrying the heiress of Henry Allègre."

It was the first time that the frank word, the clear idea, came into the conversation and it made me feel ill with a sort of enraged faintness.

"No," I said. "It would be Mme. de Lastaola then."

"Mme. la Comtesse de Lastaola as soon as she likes after the success of this war."

"And you believe in its success?"

"Do you?"

"Not for a moment," I declared, and was surprised to see her look pleased.

She was an aristocrat to the tips of her fingers; she really didn't care for anybody. She had passed through the Empire, she had lived through a siege, had rubbed shoulders with the Commune, had seen everything, no doubt, of what men are capable in the pursuit of their desires or in the extremity of their distress, for love, for money, and even for honour; and in her precarious connection with the very highest spheres she had kept her own honourability unscathed while she had lost all her prejudices. She was above all that. Perhaps "the world" was the only thing that could have the slightest checking influence; but when I ventured to say something about the view it might take of such an alliance she looked at me for a moment with visible surprise.

"My dear Monsieur George, I have lived in the great world all my life. It's the best that there is, but that's only because there is nothing merely decent anywhere. It will accept anything, forgive anything, forget anything in a few days. And after all who will he be marrying? A charming, clever, rich and altogether uncommon woman. What did the world hear of her? Nothing. The little it saw of her was in the Bois for a few hours every year, riding by the side of a man of unique distinction and of exclusive tastes, devoted to the cult of aesthetic impressions; a man of whom, as far as aspect, manner, and behaviour goes, she might have been the daughter. I have seen her myself. I went on purpose. I was immensely struck. I was even moved. Yes. She might have been—except for that something radiant in her that marked her apart from all the other daughters of men. The few remarkable personalities that count in society and who were admitted into Henry Allègre's Pavilion treated her with punctilious reserve. I know that, I have made enquiries. I know she sat there amongst them like a marvellous child, and for the rest what can they say about her? That when abandoned to herself by the death of Allègre she has made a mistake? I think that any woman ought to be allowed one mistake in her life. The worst they can say of her is that she discovered it, that she had sent away a man in love directly she found out that his love was not worth having; that she had told him to go and look for his crown, and that, after dismissing him she had remained generously faithful to his cause, in her person and fortune. And this, you will allow, is rather uncommon upon the whole."

"You make her out very magnificent," I murmured, looking down upon the floor.

"Isn't she?" exclaimed the aristocratic Mrs. Blunt, with an almost youthful ingenuousness, and in those black eyes which looked at me so calmly there was a flash of the Southern beauty, still naïve and romantic, as if altogether untouched

by experience. "I don't think there is a single grain of vulgarity in all her enchanting person. Neither is there in my son. I suppose you won't deny that he is uncommon." She paused.

"Absolutely," I said in a perfectly conventional tone, I was now on my mettle that she should not discover what there was humanly common in my nature. She took my answer at her own valuation and was satisfied.

"They can't fail to understand each other on the very highest level of idealistic perceptions. Can you imagine my John thrown away on some enamoured white goose out of a stuffy old salon? Why, she couldn't even begin to understand what he feels or what he needs."

"Yes," I said impenetrably, "he is not easy to understand."

"I have reason to think," she said with a suppressed smile, "that he has a certain power over women. Of course I don't know anything about his intimate life but a whisper or two have reached me, like that, floating in the air, and I could hardly suppose that he would find an exceptional resistance in that quarter of all others. But I should like to know the exact degree."

I disregarded an annoying tendency to feel dizzy that came over me and was very careful in managing my voice.

"May I ask, Madame, why you are telling me all this?"

"For two reasons," she condescended graciously. "First of all because Mr. Mills told me that you were much more mature than one would expect. In fact you look much younger than I was prepared for."

"Madame," I interrupted her, "I may have a certain capacity for action and for responsibility, but as to the regions into which this very unexpected conversation has taken me I am a great novice. They are outside my interest. I have had no experience."

"Don't make yourself out so hopeless," she said in a spoilt-beauty tone. "You have your intuitions. At any rate you have a pair of eyes. You are everlastingly over there, so I understand. Surely you have seen how far they are . . ."

I interrupted again and this time bitterly, but always in a tone of polite enquiry:

"You think her facile, Madame?"

She looked offended. "I think her most fastidious. It is my son who is in question here."

And I understood then that she looked on her son as irresistible. For my part I was just beginning to think that it would be impossible for me to wait for his return. I figured him to myself lying dressed on his bed sleeping like a stone. But there was no denying that the mother was holding me with an awful, tortured interest. Twice Therese had opened the door, had put her small head in and drawn it back like a tortoise. But for some time I had lost the sense of us two being quite alone in the studio. I had perceived the familiar dummy in its corner but it lay now on the floor as if Therese had knocked it down angrily with a broom for a heathen idol. It lay there prostrate, handless, without its head, pathetic, like the mangled victim of a crime.

"John is fastidious, too," began Mrs. Blunt again. "Of course you wouldn't suppose anything vulgar in his resistances to a very real sentiment. One has got to understand his psychology. He can't leave himself in peace. He is exquisitely absurd."

I recognized the phrase. Mother and son talked of each other in identical terms. But perhaps "exquisitely absurd" was the Blunt family saying? There are such sayings in families and generally there is some truth in them. Perhaps this old woman was simply absurd. She continued:

"We had a most painful discussion all this morning. He is angry with me for suggesting the very thing his whole being desires. I don't feel guilty. It's he who is tormenting himself with his infinite scrupulosity."

"Ah," I said, looking at the mangled dummy like the model of some atrocious murder. "Ah, the fortune. But that can be left alone."

"What nonsense! How is it possible? It isn't contained in a bag, you can't throw it into the sea. And moreover, it isn't her fault. I am astonished that you should have thought of that vulgar hypocrisy. No, it isn't her fortune that cheeks my son; it's something much more subtle. Not so much her history as her position. He is absurd. It isn't what has happened in her life. It's her very freedom that makes him torment himself and her, too—as far as I can understand."

I suppressed a groan and said to myself that I must really get away from there.

Mrs. Blunt was fairly launched now.

"For all his superiority he is a man of the world and shares to a certain extent its

current opinions. He has no power over her. She intimidates him. He wishes he had never set eyes on her. Once or twice this morning he looked at me as if he could find it in his heart to hate his old mother. There is no doubt about it—he loves her, Monsieur George. He loves her, this poor, luckless, perfect homme du monde."

The silence lasted for some time and then I heard a murmur: "It's a matter of the utmost delicacy between two beings so sensitive, so proud. It has to be managed."

I found myself suddenly on my feet and saying with the utmost politeness that I had to beg her permission to leave her alone as I had an engagement; but she motioned me simply to sit down—and I sat down again.

"I told you I had a request to make," she said. "I have understood from Mr. Mills that you have been to the West Indies, that you have some interests there."

I was astounded. "Interests! I certainly have been there," I said, "but . . ."

She caught me up. "Then why not go there again? I am speaking to you frankly because . . ."

"But, Madame, I am engaged in this affair with Doña Rita, even if I had any interests elsewhere. I won't tell you about the importance of my work. I didn't suspect it but you brought the news of it to me, and so I needn't point it out to you."

And now we were frankly arguing with each other.

"But where will it lead you in the end? You have all your life before you, all your plans, prospects, perhaps dreams, at any rate your own tastes and all your life-time before you. And would you sacrifice all this to—the Pretender? A mere figure for the front page of illustrated papers."'

"I never think of him," I said curtly, "but I suppose Doña Rita's feelings, instincts, call it what you like—or only her chivalrous fidelity to her mistakes—"

"Doña Rita's presence here in this town, her withdrawal from the possible complications of her life in Paris has produced an excellent effect on my son. It simplifies infinite difficulties, I mean moral as well as material. It's extremely to the advantage of her dignity, of her future, and of her peace of mind. But I am thinking, of course, mainly of my son. He is most exacting."

I felt extremely sick at heart. "And so I am to drop everything and vanish," I said,

rising from my chair again. And this time Mrs. Blunt got up, too, with a lofty and inflexible manner but she didn't dismiss me yet.

"Yes," she said distinctly. "All this, my dear Monsieur George, is such an accident. What have you got to do here? You look to me like somebody who would find adventures wherever he went as interesting and perhaps less dangerous than this one."

She slurred over the word dangerous but I picked it up.

"What do you know of its dangers, Madame, may I ask?" But she did not condescend to hear.

"And then you, too, have your chivalrous feelings," she went on, unswerving, distinct, and tranquil. "You are not absurd. But my son is. He would shut her up in a convent for a time if he could."

"He isn't the only one," I muttered.

"Indeed!" she was startled, then lower, "Yes. That woman must be the centre of all sorts of passions," she mused audibly. "But what have you got to do with all this? It's nothing to you."

She waited for me to speak.

"Exactly, Madame," I said, "and therefore I don't see why I should concern myself in all this one way or another."

"No," she assented with a weary air, "except that you might ask yourself what is the good of tormenting a man of noble feelings, however absurd. His Southern blood makes him very violent sometimes. I fear—" And then for the first time during this conversation, for the first time since I left Doña Rita the day before, for the first time I laughed.

"Do you mean to hint, Madame, that Southern gentlemen are dead shots? I am aware of that—from novels."

I spoke looking her straight in the face and I made that exquisite, aristocratic old woman positively blink by my directness. There was a faint flush on her delicate old cheeks but she didn't move a muscle of her face. I made her a most respectful bow and went out of the studio.