CHAPTER IV

Through the great arched window of the hall I saw the hotel brougham waiting at the door. On passing the door of the front room (it was originally meant for a drawing-room but a bed for Blunt was put in there) I banged with my fist on the panel and shouted: "I am obliged to go out. Your mother's carriage is at the door." I didn't think he was asleep. My view now was that he was aware beforehand of the subject of the conversation, and if so I did not wish to appear as if I had slunk away from him after the interview. But I didn't stop—I didn't want to see him—and before he could answer I was already half way up the stairs running noiselessly up the thick carpet which also covered the floor of the landing. Therefore opening the door of my sitting-room quickly I caught by surprise the person who was in there watching the street half concealed by the window curtain. It was a woman. A totally unexpected woman. A perfect stranger. She came away quickly to meet me. Her face was veiled and she was dressed in a dark walking costume and a very simple form of hat. She murmured: "I had an idea that Monsieur was in the house," raising a gloved hand to lift her veil. It was Rose and she gave me a shock. I had never seen her before but with her little black silk apron and a white cap with ribbons on her head. This outdoor dress was like a disguise. I asked anxiously:

"What has happened to Madame?"

"Nothing. I have a letter," she murmured, and I saw it appear between the fingers of her extended hand, in a very white envelope which I tore open impatiently. It consisted of a few lines only. It began abruptly:

"If you are gone to sea then I can't forgive you for not sending the usual word at the last moment. If you are not gone why don't you come? Why did you leave me yesterday? You leave me crying—I who haven't cried for years and years, and you haven't the sense to come back within the hour, within twenty hours! This conduct is idiotic"—and a sprawling signature of the four magic letters at the bottom.

While I was putting the letter in my pocket the girl said in an earnest undertone: "I don't like to leave Madame by herself for any length of time."

"How long have you been in my room?" I asked.

"The time seemed long. I hope Monsieur won't mind the liberty. I sat for a little in the hall but then it struck me I might be seen. In fact, Madame told me not to

be seen if I could help it."

"Why did she tell you that?"

"I permitted myself to suggest that to Madame. It might have given a false impression. Madame is frank and open like the day but it won't do with everybody. There are people who would put a wrong construction on anything. Madame's sister told me Monsieur was out."

"And you didn't believe her?"

"Non, Monsieur. I have lived with Madame's sister for nearly a week when she first came into this house. She wanted me to leave the message, but I said I would wait a little. Then I sat down in the big porter's chair in the hall and after a while, everything being very quiet, I stole up here. I know the disposition of the apartments. I reckoned Madame's sister would think that I got tired of waiting and let myself out."

"And you have been amusing yourself watching the street ever since?"

"The time seemed long," she answered evasively. "An empty coupé came to the door about an hour ago and it's still waiting," she added, looking at me inquisitively.

"It seems strange."

"There are some dancing girls staying in the house," I said negligently. "Did you leave Madame alone?"

"There's the gardener and his wife in the house."

"Those people keep at the back. Is Madame alone? That's what I want to know."

"Monsieur forgets that I have been three hours away; but I assure Monsieur that here in this town it's perfectly safe for Madame to be alone."

"And wouldn't it be anywhere else? It's the first I hear of it."

"In Paris, in our apartments in the hotel, it's all right, too; but in the Pavilion, for instance, I wouldn't leave Madame by herself, not for half an hour."

"What is there in the Pavilion?" I asked.

"It's a sort of feeling I have," she murmured reluctantly . . . "Oh! There's that coupé going away."

She made a movement towards the window but checked herself. I hadn't moved. The rattle of wheels on the cobble-stones died out almost at once.

"Will Monsieur write an answer?" Rose suggested after a short silence.

"Hardly worth while," I said. "I will be there very soon after you. Meantime, please tell Madame from me that I am not anxious to see any more tears. Tell her this just like that, you understand. I will take the risk of not being received."

She dropped her eyes, said: "Oui, Monsieur," and at my suggestion waited, holding the door of the room half open, till I went downstairs to see the road clear.

It was a kind of deaf-and-dumb house. The black-and-white hall was empty and everything was perfectly still. Blunt himself had no doubt gone away with his mother in the brougham, but as to the others, the dancing girls, Therese, or anybody else that its walls may have contained, they might have been all murdering each other in perfect assurance that the house would not betray them by indulging in any unseemly murmurs. I emitted a low whistle which didn't seem to travel in that peculiar atmosphere more than two feet away from my lips, but all the same Rose came tripping down the stairs at once. With just a nod to my whisper: "Take a fiacre," she glided out and I shut the door noiselessly behind her.

The next time I saw her she was opening the door of the house on the Prado to me, with her cap and the little black silk apron on, and with that marked personality of her own, which had been concealed so perfectly in the dowdy walking dress, very much to the fore.

"I have given Madame the message," she said in her contained voice, swinging the door wide open. Then after relieving me of my hat and coat she announced me with the simple words: "Voilà Monsieur," and hurried away. Directly I appeared Doña Rita, away there on the couch, passed the tips of her fingers over her eyes and holding her hands up palms outwards on each side of her head, shouted to me down the whole length of the room: "The dry season has set in." I glanced at the pink tips of her fingers perfunctorily and then drew back. She let her hands fall negligently as if she had no use for them any more and put on a serious expression.

"So it seems," I said, sitting down opposite her. "For how long, I wonder."

"For years and years. One gets so little encouragement. First you bolt away from my tears, then you send an impertinent message, and then when you come at last you pretend to behave respectfully, though you don't know how to do it. You should sit much nearer the edge of the chair and hold yourself very stiff, and make it quite clear that you don't know what to do with your hands."

All this in a fascinating voice with a ripple of badinage that seemed to play upon the sober surface of her thoughts. Then seeing that I did not answer she altered the note a bit.

"Amigo George," she said, "I take the trouble to send for you and here I am before you, talking to you and you say nothing."

"What am I to say?"

"How can I tell? You might say a thousand things. You might, for instance, tell me that you were sorry for my tears."

"I might also tell you a thousand lies. What do I know about your tears? I am not a susceptible idiot. It all depends upon the cause. There are tears of quiet happiness. Peeling onions also will bring tears."

"Oh, you are not susceptible," she flew out at me. "But you are an idiot all the same."

"Is it to tell me this that you have written to me to come?" I asked with a certain animation.

"Yes. And if you had as much sense as the talking parrot I owned once you would have read between the lines that all I wanted you here for was to tell you what I think of you."

"Well, tell me what you think of me."

"I would in a moment if I could be half as impertinent as you are."

"What unexpected modesty," I said.

"These, I suppose, are your sea manners."

"I wouldn't put up with half that nonsense from anybody at sea. Don't you remember you told me yourself to go away? What was I to do?"

"How stupid you are. I don't mean that you pretend. You really are. Do you understand what I say? I will spell it for you. S-t-u-p-i-d. Ah, now I feel better. Oh, amigo George, my dear fellow-conspirator for the king—the king. Such a king! Vive le Roi! Come, why don't you shout Vive le Roi, too?"

"I am not your parrot," I said.

"No, he never sulked. He was a charming, good-mannered bird, accustomed to the best society, whereas you, I suppose, are nothing but a heartless vagabond like myself."

"I daresay you are, but I suppose nobody had the insolence to tell you that to your face."

"Well, very nearly. It was what it amounted to. I am not stupid. There is no need to spell out simple words for me. It just came out. Don Juan struggled desperately to keep the truth in. It was most pathetic. And yet he couldn't help himself. He talked very much like a parrot."

"Of the best society," I suggested.

"Yes, the most honourable of parrots. I don't like parrot-talk. It sounds so uncanny. Had I lived in the Middle Ages I am certain I would have believed that a talking bird must be possessed by the devil. I am sure Therese would believe that now. My own sister! She would cross herself many times and simply quake with terror."

"But you were not terrified," I said. "May I ask when that interesting communication took place?"

"Yesterday, just before you blundered in here of all days in the year. I was sorry for him."

"Why tell me this? I couldn't help noticing it. I regretted I hadn't my umbrella with me."

"Those unforgiven tears! Oh, you simple soul! Don't you know that people never cry for anybody but themselves? . . . Amigo George, tell me—what are we doing in this world?"

"Do you mean all the people, everybody?"

"No, only people like you and me. Simple people, in this world which is eaten up with charlatanism of all sorts so that even we, the simple, don't know any longer how to trust each other."

"Don't we? Then why don't you trust him? You are dying to do so, don't you know?"

She dropped her chin on her breast and from under her straight eyebrows the deep blue eyes remained fixed on me, impersonally, as if without thought.

"What have you been doing since you left me yesterday?" she asked.

"The first thing I remember I abused your sister horribly this morning."

"And how did she take it?"

"Like a warm shower in spring. She drank it all in and unfolded her petals."

"What poetical expressions he uses! That girl is more perverted than one would think possible, considering what she is and whence she came. It's true that I, too, come from the same spot."

"She is slightly crazy. I am a great favourite with her. I don't say this to boast."

"It must be very comforting."

"Yes, it has cheered me immensely. Then after a morning of delightful musings on one thing and another I went to lunch with a charming lady and spent most of the afternoon talking with her."

Doña Rita raised her head.

"A lady! Women seem such mysterious creatures to me. I don't know them. Did you abuse her? Did she—how did you say that?—unfold her petals, too? Was she really and truly . . .?"

"She is simply perfection in her way and the conversation was by no means banal. I fancy that if your late parrot had heard it, he would have fallen off his perch. For after all, in that Allègre Pavilion, my dear Rita, you were but a crowd of glorified bourgeois."

She was beautifully animated now. In her motionless blue eyes like melted sapphires, around those red lips that almost without moving could breathe

enchanting sounds into the world, there was a play of light, that mysterious ripple of gaiety that seemed always to run and faintly quiver under her skin even in her gravest moods; just as in her rare moments of gaiety its warmth and radiance seemed to come to one through infinite sadness, like the sunlight of our life hiding the invincible darkness in which the universe must work out its impenetrable destiny.

"Now I think of it! . . . Perhaps that's the reason I never could feel perfectly serious while they were demolishing the world about my ears. I fancy now that I could tell beforehand what each of them was going to say. They were repeating the same words over and over again, those great clever men, very much like parrots who also seem to know what they say. That doesn't apply to the master of the house, who never talked much. He sat there mostly silent and looming up three sizes bigger than any of them."

"The ruler of the aviary," I muttered viciously.

"It annoys you that I should talk of that time?" she asked in a tender voice. "Well, I won't, except for once to say that you must not make a mistake: in that aviary he was the man. I know because he used to talk to me afterwards sometimes. Strange! For six years he seemed to carry all the world and me with it in his hand. . . . "

"He dominates you yet," I shouted.

She shook her head innocently as a child would do.

"No, no. You brought him into the conversation yourself. You think of him much more than I do." Her voice drooped sadly to a hopeless note. "I hardly ever do. He is not the sort of person to merely flit through one's mind and so I have no time. Look. I had eleven letters this morning and there were also five telegrams before midday, which have tangled up everything. I am quite frightened."

And she explained to me that one of them—the long one on the top of the pile, on the table over there—seemed to contain ugly inferences directed at herself in a menacing way. She begged me to read it and see what I could make of it.

I knew enough of the general situation to see at a glance that she had misunderstood it thoroughly and even amazingly. I proved it to her very quickly. But her mistake was so ingenious in its wrongheadedness and arose so obviously from the distraction of an acute mind, that I couldn't help looking at her admiringly.

"Rita," I said, "you are a marvellous idiot."

"Am I? Imbecile," she retorted with an enchanting smile of relief. "But perhaps it only seems so to you in contrast with the lady so perfect in her way. What is her way?"

"Her way, I should say, lies somewhere between her sixtieth and seventieth year, and I have walked tête-à-tête with her for some little distance this afternoon."

"Heavens," she whispered, thunderstruck. "And meantime I had the son here. He arrived about five minutes after Rose left with that note for you," she went on in a tone of awe. "As a matter of fact, Rose saw him across the street but she thought she had better go on to you."

"I am furious with myself for not having guessed that much," I said bitterly. "I suppose you got him out of the house about five minutes after you heard I was coming here. Rose ought to have turned back when she saw him on his way to cheer your solitude. That girl is stupid after all, though she has got a certain amount of low cunning which no doubt is very useful at times."

"I forbid you to talk like this about Rose. I won't have it. Rose is not to be abused before me."

"I only mean to say that she failed in this instance to read your mind, that's all."

"This is, without exception, the most unintelligent thing you have said ever since I have known you. You may understand a lot about running contraband and about the minds of a certain class of people, but as to Rose's mind let me tell you that in comparison with hers yours is absolutely infantile, my adventurous friend. It would be contemptible if it weren't so—what shall I call it?—babyish. You ought to be slapped and put to bed." There was an extraordinary earnestness in her tone and when she ceased I listened yet to the seductive inflexions of her voice, that no matter in what mood she spoke seemed only fit for tenderness and love. And I thought suddenly of Azzolati being ordered to take himself off from her presence for ever, in that voice the very anger of which seemed to twine itself gently round one's heart. No wonder the poor wretch could not forget the scene and couldn't restrain his tears on the plain of Rambouillet. My moods of resentment against Rita, hot as they were, had no more duration than a blaze of straw. So I only said:

"Much you know about the management of children." The corners of her lips stirred quaintly; her animosity, especially when provoked by a personal attack upon herself, was always tinged by a sort of wistful humour of the most

disarming kind.

“Come, amigo George, let us leave poor Rose alone. You had better tell me what you heard from the lips of the charming old lady. Perfection, isn’t she? I have never seen her in my life, though she says she has seen me several times. But she has written to me on three separate occasions and every time I answered her as if I were writing to a queen. Amigo George, how does one write to a queen? How should a goatherd that could have been mistress of a king, how should she write to an old queen from very far away; from over the sea?”

“I will ask you as I have asked the old queen: why do you tell me all this, Doña Rita?”

“To discover what’s in your mind,” she said, a little impatiently.

“If you don’t know that yet!” I exclaimed under my breath.

“No, not in your mind. Can any one ever tell what is in a man’s mind? But I see you won’t tell.”

“What’s the good? You have written to her before, I understand. Do you think of continuing the correspondence?”

“Who knows?” she said in a profound tone. “She is the only woman that ever wrote to me. I returned her three letters to her with my last answer, explaining humbly that I preferred her to burn them herself. And I thought that would be the end of it. But an occasion may still arise.”

“Oh, if an occasion arises,” I said, trying to control my rage, “you may be able to begin your letter by the words ‘Chère Maman.’”

The cigarette box, which she had taken up without removing her eyes from me, flew out of her hand and opening in mid-air scattered cigarettes for quite a surprising distance all over the room. I got up at once and wandered off picking them up industriously. Doña Rita’s voice behind me said indifferently:

“Don’t trouble, I will ring for Rose.”

“No need,” I growled, without turning my head, “I can find my hat in the hall by myself, after I’ve finished picking up . . . ”

“Bear!”

I returned with the box and placed it on the divan near her. She sat cross-legged, leaning back on her arms, in the blue shimmer of her embroidered robe and with the tawny halo of her unruly hair about her face which she raised to mine with an air of resignation.

"George, my friend," she said, "we have no manners."

"You would never have made a career at court, Doña Rita," I observed. "You are too impulsive."

"This is not bad manners, that's sheer insolence. This has happened to you before. If it happens again, as I can't be expected to wrestle with a savage and desperate smuggler single-handed, I will go upstairs and lock myself in my room till you leave the house. Why did you say this to me?"

"Oh, just for nothing, out of a full heart."

"If your heart is full of things like that, then my dear friend, you had better take it out and give it to the crows. No! you said that for the pleasure of appearing terrible. And you see you are not terrible at all, you are rather amusing. Go on, continue to be amusing. Tell me something of what you heard from the lips of that aristocratic old lady who thinks that all men are equal and entitled to the pursuit of happiness."

"I hardly remember now. I heard something about the unworthiness of certain white geese out of stuffy drawing-rooms. It sounds mad, but the lady knows exactly what she wants. I also heard your praises sung. I sat there like a fool not knowing what to say."

"Why? You might have joined in the singing."

"I didn't feel in the humour, because, don't you see, I had been incidentally given to understand that I was an insignificant and superfluous person who had better get out of the way of serious people."

"Ah, par exemple!"

"In a sense, you know, it was flattering; but for the moment it made me feel as if I had been offered a pot of mustard to sniff."

She nodded with an amused air of understanding and I could see that she was interested. "Anything more?" she asked, with a flash of radiant eagerness in all her person and bending slightly forward towards me.

"Oh, it's hardly worth mentioning. It was a sort of threat wrapped up, I believe, in genuine anxiety as to what might happen to my youthful insignificance. If I hadn't been rather on the alert just then I wouldn't even have perceived the meaning. But really an allusion to 'hot Southern blood' I could have only one meaning. Of course I laughed at it, but only 'pour l'honneur' and to show I understood perfectly. In reality it left me completely indifferent."

Doña Rita looked very serious for a minute.

"Indifferent to the whole conversation?"

I looked at her angrily.

"To the whole . . . You see I got up rather out of sorts this morning. Unrefreshed, you know. As if tired of life."

The liquid blue in her eyes remained directed at me without any expression except that of its usual mysterious immobility, but all her face took on a sad and thoughtful cast. Then as if she had made up her mind under the pressure of necessity:

"Listen, amigo," she said, "I have suffered domination and it didn't crush me because I have been strong enough to live with it; I have known caprice, you may call it folly if you like, and it left me unharmed because I was great enough not to be captured by anything that wasn't really worthy of me. My dear, it went down like a house of cards before my breath. There is something in me that will not be dazzled by any sort of prestige in this world, worthy or unworthy. I am telling you this because you are younger than myself."

"If you want me to say that there is nothing petty or mean about you, Doña Rita, then I do say it."

She nodded at me with an air of accepting the rendered justice and went on with the utmost simplicity.

"And what is it that is coming to me now with all the airs of virtue? All the lawful conventions are coming to me, all the glamours of respectability! And nobody can say that I have made as much as the slightest little sign to them. Not so much as lifting my little finger. I suppose you know that?"

"I don't know. I do not doubt your sincerity in anything you say. I am ready to believe. You are not one of those who have to work."

"Have to work—what do you mean?"

"It's a phrase I have heard. What I meant was that it isn't necessary for you to make any signs."

She seemed to meditate over this for a while.

"Don't be so sure of that," she said, with a flash of mischief, which made her voice sound more melancholy than before. "I am not so sure myself," she continued with a curious, vanishing, intonation of despair. "I don't know the truth about myself because I never had an opportunity to compare myself to anything in the world. I have been offered mock adulation, treated with mock reserve or with mock devotion, I have been fawned upon with an appalling earnestness of purpose, I can tell you; but these later honours, my dear, came to me in the shape of a very loyal and very scrupulous gentleman. For he is all that. And as a matter of fact I was touched."

"I know. Even to tears," I said provokingly. But she wasn't provoked, she only shook her head in negation (which was absurd) and pursued the trend of her spoken thoughts.

"That was yesterday," she said. "And yesterday he was extremely correct and very full of extreme self-esteem which expressed itself in the exaggerated delicacy with which he talked. But I know him in all his moods. I have known him even playful. I didn't listen to him. I was thinking of something else. Of things that were neither correct nor playful and that had to be looked at steadily with all the best that was in me. And that was why, in the end—I cried—yesterday."

"I saw it yesterday and I had the weakness of being moved by those tears for a time."

"If you want to make me cry again I warn you you won't succeed."

"No, I know. He has been here to-day and the dry season has set in."

"Yes, he has been here. I assure you it was perfectly unexpected. Yesterday he was railing at the world at large, at me who certainly have not made it, at himself and even at his mother. All this rather in parrot language, in the words of tradition and morality as understood by the members of that exclusive club to which he belongs. And yet when I thought that all this, those poor hackneyed words, expressed a sincere passion I could have found in my heart to be sorry for him. But he ended by telling me that one couldn't believe a single word I said, or

something like that. You were here then, you heard it yourself."

"And it cut you to the quick," I said. "It made you depart from your dignity to the point of weeping on any shoulder that happened to be there. And considering that it was some more parrot talk after all (men have been saying that sort of thing to women from the beginning of the world) this sensibility seems to me childish."

"What perspicacity," she observed, with an indulgent, mocking smile, then changed her tone. "Therefore he wasn't expected to-day when he turned up, whereas you, who were expected, remained subject to the charms of conversation in that studio. It never occurred to you . . . did it? No! What had become of your perspicacity?"

"I tell you I was weary of life," I said in a passion.

She had another faint smile of a fugitive and unrelated kind as if she had been thinking of far-off things, then roused herself to grave animation.

"He came in full of smiling playfulness. How well I know that mood! Such self-command has its beauty; but it's no great help for a man with such fateful eyes. I could see he was moved in his correct, restrained way, and in his own way, too, he tried to move me with something that would be very simple. He told me that ever since we became friends, we two, he had not an hour of continuous sleep, unless perhaps when coming back dead-tired from outpost duty, and that he longed to get back to it and yet hadn't the courage to tear himself away from here. He was as simple as that. He's a très galant homme of absolute probity, even with himself. I said to him: The trouble is, Don Juan, that it isn't love but mistrust that keeps you in torment. I might have said jealousy, but I didn't like to use that word. A parrot would have added that I had given him no right to be jealous. But I am no parrot. I recognized the rights of his passion which I could very well see. He is jealous. He is not jealous of my past or of the future; but he is jealously mistrustful of me, of what I am, of my very soul. He believes in a soul in the same way Therese does, as something that can be touched with grace or go to perdition; and he doesn't want to be damned with me before his own judgment seat. He is a most noble and loyal gentleman, but I have my own Basque peasant soul and don't want to think that every time he goes away from my feet—yes, mon cher, on this carpet, look for the marks of scorching—that he goes away feeling tempted to brush the dust off his moral sleeve. That! Never!"

With brusque movements she took a cigarette out of the box, held it in her fingers for a moment, then dropped it unconsciously.

"And then, I don't love him," she uttered slowly as if speaking to herself and at the same time watching the very quality of that thought. "I never did. At first he fascinated me with his fatal aspect and his cold society smiles. But I have looked into those eyes too often. There are too many disdains in this aristocratic republican without a home. His fate may be cruel, but it will always be commonplace. While he sat there trying in a worldly tone to explain to me the problems, the scruples, of his suffering honour, I could see right into his heart and I was sorry for him. I was sorry enough for him to feel that if he had suddenly taken me by the throat and strangled me slowly, avec délices, I could forgive him while I choked. How correct he was! But bitterness against me peeped out of every second phrase. At last I raised my hand and said to him, 'Enough.' I believe he was shocked by my plebeian abruptness but he was too polite to show it. His conventions will always stand in the way of his nature. I told him that everything that had been said and done during the last seven or eight months was inexplicable unless on the assumption that he was in love with me,—and yet in everything there was an implication that he couldn't forgive me my very existence. I did ask him whether he didn't think that it was absurd on his part . . . "

"Didn't you say that it was exquisitely absurd?" I asked.

"Exquisitely! . . . " Doña Rita was surprised at my question. "No. Why should I say that?"

"It would have reconciled him to your abruptness. It's their family expression. It would have come with a familiar sound and would have been less offensive."

"Offensive," Doña Rita repeated earnestly. "I don't think he was offended; he suffered in another way, but I didn't care for that. It was I that had become offended in the end, without spite, you understand, but past bearing. I didn't spare him. I told him plainly that to want a woman formed in mind and body, mistress of herself, free in her choice, independent in her thoughts; to love her apparently for what she is and at the same time to demand from her the candour and the innocence that could be only a shocking pretence; to know her such as life had made her and at the same time to despise her secretly for every touch with which her life had fashioned her—that was neither generous nor high minded; it was positively frantic. He got up and went away to lean against the mantelpiece, there, on his elbow and with his head in his hand. You have no idea of the charm and the distinction of his pose. I couldn't help admiring him: the expression, the grace, the fatal suggestion of his immobility. Oh, yes, I am sensible to aesthetic impressions, I have been educated to believe that there is a soul in them."

With that enigmatic, under the eyebrows glance fixed on me she laughed her deep contralto laugh without mirth but also without irony, and profoundly moving by the mere purity of the sound.

"I suspect he was never so disgusted and appalled in his life. His self-command is the most admirable worldly thing I have ever seen. What made it beautiful was that one could feel in it a tragic suggestion as in a great work of art."

She paused with an inscrutable smile that a great painter might have put on the face of some symbolic figure for the speculation and wonder of many generations. I said:

"I always thought that love for you could work great wonders. And now I am certain."

"Are you trying to be ironic?" she said sadly and very much as a child might have spoken.

"I don't know," I answered in a tone of the same simplicity. "I find it very difficult to be generous."

"I, too," she said with a sort of funny eagerness. "I didn't treat him very generously. Only I didn't say much more. I found I didn't care what I said—and it would have been like throwing insults at a beautiful composition. He was well inspired not to move. It has spared him some disagreeable truths and perhaps I would even have said more than the truth. I am not fair. I am no more fair than other people. I would have been harsh. My very admiration was making me more angry. It's ridiculous to say of a man got up in correct tailor clothes, but there was a funereal grace in his attitude so that he might have been reproduced in marble on a monument to some woman in one of those atrocious Campo Santos: the bourgeois conception of an aristocratic mourning lover. When I came to that conclusion I became glad that I was angry or else I would have laughed right out before him."

"I have heard a woman say once, a woman of the people—do you hear me, Doña Rita?—therefore deserving your attention, that one should never laugh at love."

"My dear," she said gently, "I have been taught to laugh at most things by a man who never laughed himself; but it's true that he never spoke of love to me, love as a subject that is. So perhaps . . . But why?"

"Because (but maybe that old woman was crazy), because, she said, there was death in the mockery of love."

Doña Rita moved slightly her beautiful shoulders and went on:

"I am glad, then, I didn't laugh. And I am also glad I said nothing more. I was feeling so little generous that if I had known something then of his mother's allusion to 'white geese' I would have advised him to get one of them and lead it away on a beautiful blue ribbon. Mrs. Blunt was wrong, you know, to be so scornful. A white goose is exactly what her son wants. But look how badly the world is arranged. Such white birds cannot be got for nothing and he has not enough money even to buy a ribbon. Who knows! Maybe it was this which gave that tragic quality to his pose by the mantelpiece over there. Yes, that was it. Though no doubt I didn't see it then. As he didn't offer to move after I had done speaking I became quite unaffectedly sorry and advised him very gently to dismiss me from his mind definitely. He moved forward then and said to me in his usual voice and with his usual smile that it would have been excellent advice but unfortunately I was one of those women who can't be dismissed at will. And as I shook my head he insisted rather darkly: 'Oh, yes, Doña Rita, it is so. Cherish no illusions about that fact.' It sounded so threatening that in my surprise I didn't even acknowledge his parting bow. He went out of that false situation like a wounded man retreating after a fight. No, I have nothing to reproach myself with. I did nothing. I led him into nothing. Whatever illusions have passed through my head I kept my distance, and he was so loyal to what he seemed to think the redeeming proprieties of the situation that he has gone from me for good without so much as kissing the tips of my fingers. He must have felt like a man who had betrayed himself for nothing. It's horrible. It's the fault of that enormous fortune of mine, and I wish with all my heart that I could give it to him; for he couldn't help his hatred of the thing that is: and as to his love, which is just as real, well—could I have rushed away from him to shut myself up in a convent? Could I? After all I have a right to my share of daylight."