CHAPTER V

I took my eyes from her face and became aware that dusk was beginning to steal into the room. How strange it seemed. Except for the glazed rotunda part its long walls, divided into narrow panels separated by an order of flat pilasters, presented, depicted on a black background and in vivid colours, slender women with butterfly wings and lean youths with narrow birds' wings. The effect was supposed to be Pompeiian and Rita and I had often laughed at the delirious fancy of some enriched shopkeeper. But still it was a display of fancy, a sign of grace; but at that moment these figures appeared to me weird and intrusive and strangely alive in their attenuated grace of unearthly beings concealing a power to see and hear.

Without words, without gestures, Doña Rita was heard again. "It may have been as near coming to pass as this." She showed me the breadth of her little finger nail. "Yes, as near as that. Why? How? Just like that, for nothing. Because it had come up. Because a wild notion had entered a practical old woman's head. Yes. And the best of it is that I have nothing to complain of. Had I surrendered I would have been perfectly safe with these two. It is they or rather he who couldn't trust me, or rather that something which I express, which I stand for. Mills would never tell me what it was. Perhaps he didn't know exactly himself. He said it was something like genius. My genius! Oh, I am not conscious of it, believe me, I am not conscious of it. But if I were I wouldn't pluck it out and cast it away. I am ashamed of nothing, of nothing! Don't be stupid enough to think that I have the slightest regret. There is no regret. First of all because I am I—and then because . . . My dear, believe me, I have had a horrible time of it myself lately."

This seemed to be the last word. Outwardly quiet, all the time, it was only then that she became composed enough to light an enormous cigarette of the same pattern as those made specially for the king—por el Rey! After a time, tipping the ash into the bowl on her left hand, she asked me in a friendly, almost tender, tone:

"What are you thinking of, amigo?"

"I was thinking of your immense generosity. You want to give a crown to one man, a fortune to another. That is very fine. But I suppose there is a limit to your generosity somewhere."

"I don't see why there should be any limit—to fine intentions! Yes, one would like

to pay ransom and be done with it all."

"That's the feeling of a captive; and yet somehow I can't think of you as ever having been anybody's captive."

"You do display some wonderful insight sometimes. My dear, I begin to suspect that men are rather conceited about their powers. They think they dominate us. Even exceptional men will think that; men too great for mere vanity, men like Henry Allègre for instance, who by his consistent and serene detachment was certainly fit to dominate all sorts of people. Yet for the most part they can only do it because women choose more or less consciously to let them do so. Henry Allègre, if any man, might have been certain of his own power; and yet, look: I was a chit of a girl, I was sitting with a book where I had no business to be, in his own garden, when he suddenly came upon me, an ignorant girl of seventeen, a most uninviting creature with a tousled head, in an old black frock and shabby boots. I could have run away. I was perfectly capable of it. But I stayed looking up at him and—in the end it was HE who went away and it was I who stayed."

"Consciously?" I murmured.

"Consciously? You may just as well ask my shadow that lay so still by me on the young grass in that morning sunshine. I never knew before how still I could keep. It wasn't the stillness of terror. I remained, knowing perfectly well that if I ran he was not the man to run after me. I remember perfectly his deep-toned, politely indifferent 'Restez donc.' He was mistaken. Already then I hadn't the slightest intention to move. And if you ask me again how far conscious all this was the nearest answer I can make you is this: that I remained on purpose, but I didn't know for what purpose I remained. Really, that couldn't be expected. . . . Why do you sigh like this? Would you have preferred me to be idiotically innocent or abominably wise?"

"These are not the questions that trouble me," I said. "If I sighed it is because I am weary."

"And getting stiff, too, I should say, in this Pompeiian armchair. You had better get out of it and sit on this couch as you always used to do. That, at any rate, is not Pompeiian. You have been growing of late extremely formal, I don't know why. If it is a pose then for goodness' sake drop it. Are you going to model yourself on Captain Blunt? You couldn't, you know. You are too young."

"I don't want to model myself on anybody," I said. "And anyway Blunt is too romantic; and, moreover, he has been and is yet in love with you—a thing that requires some style, an attitude, something of which I am altogether incapable."

"You know it isn't so stupid, this what you have just said. Yes, there is something in this."

"I am not stupid," I protested, without much heat.

"Oh, yes, you are. You don't know the world enough to judge. You don't know how wise men can be. Owls are nothing to them. Why do you try to look like an owl? There are thousands and thousands of them waiting for me outside the door: the staring, hissing beasts. You don't know what a relief of mental ease and intimacy you have been to me in the frankness of gestures and speeches and thoughts, sane or insane, that we have been throwing at each other. I have known nothing of this in my life but with you. There had always been some fear, some constraint, lurking in the background behind everybody, everybody—except you, my friend."

"An unmannerly, Arcadian state of affairs. I am glad you like it. Perhaps it's because you were intelligent enough to perceive that I was not in love with you in any sort of style."

"No, you were always your own self, unwise and reckless and with something in it kindred to mine, if I may say so without offence."

"You may say anything without offence. But has it never occurred to your sagacity that I just, simply, loved you?"

"Just—simply," she repeated in a wistful tone.

"You didn't want to trouble your head about it, is that it?"

"My poor head. From your tone one might think you yearned to cut it off. No, my dear, I have made up my mind not to lose my head."

"You would be astonished to know how little I care for your mind."

"Would I? Come and sit on the couch all the same," she said after a moment of hesitation. Then, as I did not move at once, she added with indifference: "You may sit as far away as you like, it's big enough, goodness knows."

The light was ebbing slowly out of the rotunda and to my bodily eyes she was beginning to grow shadowy. I sat down on the couch and for a long time no word passed between us. We made no movement. We did not even turn towards each other. All I was conscious of was the softness of the seat which seemed somehow

to cause a relaxation of my stern mood, I won't say against my will but without any will on my part. Another thing I was conscious of, strangely enough, was the enormous brass bowl for cigarette ends. Quietly, with the least possible action, Doña Rita moved it to the other side of her motionless person. Slowly, the fantastic women with butterflies' wings and the slender-limbed youths with the gorgeous pinions on their shoulders were vanishing into their black backgrounds with an effect of silent discretion, leaving us to ourselves.

I felt suddenly extremely exhausted, absolutely overcome with fatigue since I had moved; as if to sit on that Pompeiian chair had been a task almost beyond human strength, a sort of labour that must end in collapse. I fought against it for a moment and then my resistance gave way. Not all at once but as if yielding to an irresistible pressure (for I was not conscious of any irresistible attraction) I found myself with my head resting, with a weight I felt must be crushing, on Doña Rita's shoulder which yet did not give way, did not flinch at all. A faint scent of violets filled the tragic emptiness of my head and it seemed impossible to me that I should not cry from sheer weakness. But I remained dry-eyed. I only felt myself slipping lower and lower and I caught her round the waist clinging to her not from any intention but purely by instinct. All that time she hadn't stirred. There was only the slight movement of her breathing that showed her to be alive; and with closed eyes I imagined her to be lost in thought, removed by an incredible meditation while I clung to her, to an immense distance from the earth. The distance must have been immense because the silence was so perfect, the feeling as if of eternal stillness. I had a distinct impression of being in contact with an infinity that had the slightest possible rise and fall, was pervaded by a warm, delicate scent of violets and through which came a hand from somewhere to rest lightly on my head. Presently my ear caught the faint and regular pulsation of her heart, firm and quick, infinitely touching in its persistent mystery, disclosing itself into my very ear—and my felicity became complete.

It was a dreamlike state combined with a dreamlike sense of insecurity. Then in that warm and scented infinity, or eternity, in which I rested lost in bliss but ready for any catastrophe, I heard the distant, hardly audible, and fit to strike terror into the heart, ringing of a bell. At this sound the greatness of spaces departed. I felt the world close about me; the world of darkened walls, of very deep grey dusk against the panes, and I asked in a pained voice:

"Why did you ring, Rita?"

There was a bell rope within reach of her hand. I had not felt her move, but she said very low:

"I rang for the lights."

"You didn't want the lights."

"It was time," she whispered secretly.

Somewhere within the house a door slammed. I got away from her feeling small and weak as if the best part of me had been torn away and irretrievably lost. Rose must have been somewhere near the door.

"It's abominable," I murmured to the still, idol-like shadow on the couch.

The answer was a hurried, nervous whisper: "I tell you it was time. I rang because I had no strength to push you away."

I suffered a moment of giddiness before the door opened, light streamed in, and Rose entered, preceding a man in a green baize apron whom I had never seen, carrying on an enormous tray three Argand lamps fitted into vases of Pompeiian form. Rose distributed them over the room. In the flood of soft light the winged youths and the butterfly women reappeared on the panels, affected, gorgeous, callously unconscious of anything having happened during their absence. Rose attended to the lamp on the nearest mantelpiece, then turned about and asked in a confident undertone.

"Monsieur dîne?"

I had lost myself with my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands, but I heard the words distinctly. I heard also the silence which ensued. I sat up and took the responsibility of the answer on myself.

"Impossible. I am going to sea this evening."

This was perfectly true only I had totally forgotten it till then. For the last two days my being was no longer composed of memories but exclusively of sensations of the most absorbing, disturbing, exhausting nature. I was like a man who has been buffeted by the sea or by a mob till he loses all hold on the world in the misery of his helplessness. But now I was recovering. And naturally the first thing I remembered was the fact that I was going to sea.

"You have heard, Rose," Doña Rita said at last with some impatience.

The girl waited a moment longer before she said:

"Oh, yes! There is a man waiting for Monsieur in the hall. A seaman."

It could be no one but Dominic. It dawned upon me that since the evening of our return I had not been near him or the ship, which was completely unusual, unheard of, and well calculated to startle Dominic.

"I have seen him before," continued Rose, "and as he told me he has been pursuing Monsieur all the afternoon and didn't like to go away without seeing Monsieur for a moment, I proposed to him to wait in the hall till Monsieur was at liberty."

I said: "Very well," and with a sudden resumption of her extremely busy, not-a-moment-to-lose manner Rose departed from the room. I lingered in an imaginary world full of tender light, of unheard-of colours, with a mad riot of flowers and an inconceivable happiness under the sky arched above its yawning precipices, while a feeling of awe enveloped me like its own proper atmosphere. But everything vanished at the sound of Doña Rita's loud whisper full of boundless dismay, such as to make one's hair stir on one's head.

"Mon Dieu! And what is going to happen now?"

She got down from the couch and walked to a window. When the lights had been brought into the room all the panes had turned inky black; for the night had come and the garden was full of tall bushes and trees screening off the gas lamps of the main alley of the Prado. Whatever the question meant she was not likely to see an answer to it outside. But her whisper had offended me, had hurt something infinitely deep, infinitely subtle and infinitely clear-eyed in my nature. I said after her from the couch on which I had remained, "Don't lose your composure. You will always have some sort of bell at hand."

I saw her shrug her uncovered shoulders impatiently. Her forehead was against the very blackness of the panes; pulled upward from the beautiful, strong nape of her neck, the twisted mass of her tawny hair was held high upon her head by the arrow of gold.

"You set up for being unforgiving," she said without anger.

I sprang to my feet while she turned about and came towards me bravely, with a wistful smile on her bold, adolescent face.

"It seems to me," she went on in a voice like a wave of love itself, "that one should try to understand before one sets up for being unforgiving. Forgiveness is a very fine word. It is a fine invocation."

"There are other fine words in the language such as fascination, fidelity, also frivolity; and as for invocations there are plenty of them, too; for instance: alas, heaven help me."

We stood very close together, her narrow eyes were as enigmatic as ever, but that face, which, like some ideal conception of art, was incapable of anything like untruth and grimace, expressed by some mysterious means such a depth of infinite patience that I felt profoundly ashamed of myself.

"This thing is beyond words altogether," I said. "Beyond forgiveness, beyond forgetting, beyond anger or jealousy. . . . There is nothing between us two that could make us act together."

"Then we must fall back perhaps on something within us, that—you admit it?—we have in common."

"Don't be childish," I said. "You give one with a perpetual and intense freshness feelings and sensations that are as old as the world itself, and you imagine that your enchantment can be broken off anywhere, at any time! But it can't be broken. And forgetfulness, like everything else, can only come from you. It's an impossible situation to stand up against."

She listened with slightly parted lips as if to catch some further resonances.

"There is a sort of generous ardour about you," she said, "which I don't really understand. No, I don't know it. Believe me, it is not of myself I am thinking. And you—you are going out to-night to make another landing."

"Yes, it is a fact that before many hours I will be sailing away from you to try my luck once more."

"Your wonderful luck," she breathed out.

"Oh, yes, I am wonderfully lucky. Unless the luck really is yours—in having found somebody like me, who cares at the same time so much and so little for what you have at heart."

"What time will you be leaving the harbour?" she asked.

"Some time between midnight and daybreak. Our men may be a little late in joining, but certainly we will be gone before the first streak of light."

"What freedom!" she murmured enviously. "It's something I shall never know. . .

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"Freedom!" I protested. "I am a slave to my word. There will be a siring of carts and mules on a certain part of the coast, and a most ruffianly lot of men, men you understand, men with wives and children and sweethearts, who from the very moment they start on a trip risk a bullet in the head at any moment, but who have a perfect conviction that I will never fail them. That's my freedom. I wonder what they would think if they knew of your existence."

"I don't exist," she said.

"That's easy to say. But I will go as if you didn't exist—yet only because you do exist. You exist in me. I don't know where I end and you begin. You have got into my heart and into my veins and into my brain."

"Take this fancy out and trample it down in the dust," she said in a tone of timid entreaty.

"Heroically," I suggested with the sarcasm of despair.

"Well, yes, heroically," she said; and there passed between us dim smiles, I have no doubt of the most touching imbecility on earth. We were standing by then in the middle of the room with its vivid colours on a black background, with its multitude of winged figures with pale limbs, with hair like halos or flames, all strangely tense in their strained, decorative attitudes. Doña Rita made a step towards me, and as I attempted to seize her hand she flung her arms round my neck. I felt their strength drawing me towards her and by a sort of blind and desperate effort I resisted. And all the time she was repeating with nervous insistence:

"But it is true that you will go. You will surely. Not because of those people but because of me. You will go away because you feel you must."

With every word urging me to get away, her clasp tightened, she hugged my head closer to her breast. I submitted, knowing well that I could free myself by one more effort which it was in my power to make. But before I made it, in a sort of desperation, I pressed a long kiss into the hollow of her throat. And lo—there was no need for any effort. With a stifled cry of surprise her arms fell off me as if she had been shot. I must have been giddy, and perhaps we both were giddy, but the next thing I knew there was a good foot of space between us in the peaceful glow of the ground-glass globes, in the everlasting stillness of the winged figures. Something in the quality of her exclamation, something utterly unexpected, something I had never heard before, and also the way she was looking at me with

a sort of incredulous, concentrated attention, disconcerted me exceedingly. I knew perfectly well what I had done and yet I felt that I didn't understand what had happened. I became suddenly abashed and I muttered that I had better go and dismiss that poor Dominic. She made no answer, gave no sign. She stood there lost in a vision—or was it a sensation?—of the most absorbing kind. I hurried out into the hall, shamefaced, as if I were making my escape while she wasn't looking. And yet I felt her looking fixedly at me, with a sort of stupefaction on her features—in her whole attitude—as though she had never even heard of such a thing as a kiss in her life.

A dim lamp (of Pompeiian form) hanging on a long chain left the hall practically dark. Dominic, advancing towards me from a distant corner, was but a little more opaque shadow than the others. He had expected me on board every moment till about three o'clock, but as I didn't turn up and gave no sign of life in any other way he started on his hunt. He sought news of me from the garçons at the various cafés, from the cochers de fiacre in front of the Exchange, from the tobacconist lady at the counter of the fashionable Débit de Tabac, from the old man who sold papers outside the cercle, and from the flower-girl at the door of the fashionable restaurant where I had my table. That young woman, whose business name was Irma, had come on duty about mid-day. She said to Dominic: "I think I've seen all his friends this morning but I haven't seen him for a week. What has become of him?"

"That's exactly what I want to know," Dominic replied in a fury and then went back to the harbour on the chance that I might have called either on board or at Madame Léonore's café.

I expressed to him my surprise that he should fuss about me like an old hen over a chick. It wasn't like him at all. And he said that "en effet" it was Madame Léonore who wouldn't give him any peace. He hoped I wouldn't mind, it was best to humour women in little things; and so he started off again, made straight for the street of the Consuls, was told there that I wasn't at home but the woman of the house looked so funny that he didn't know what to make of it. Therefore, after some hesitation, he took the liberty to inquire at this house, too, and being told that I couldn't be disturbed, had made up his mind not to go on board without actually setting his eyes on me and hearing from my own lips that nothing was changed as to sailing orders.

"There is nothing changed, Dominic," I said.

"No change of any sort?" he insisted, looking very sombre and speaking gloomily from under his black moustaches in the dim glow of the alabaster lamp hanging above his head. He peered at me in an extraordinary manner as if he wanted to

make sure that I had all my limbs about me. I asked him to call for my bag at the other house, on his way to the harbour, and he departed reassured, not, however, without remarking ironically that ever since she saw that American cavalier Madame Léonore was not easy in her mind about me.

As I stood alone in the hall, without a sound of any sort, Rose appeared before me.

"Monsieur will dine after all," she whispered calmly.

"My good girl, I am going to sea to-night."

"What am I going to do with Madame?" she murmured to herself. "She will insist on returning to Paris."

"Oh, have you heard of it?"

"I never get more than two hours' notice," she said. "But I know how it will be," her voice lost its calmness. "I can look after Madame up to a certain point but I cannot be altogether responsible. There is a dangerous person who is everlastingly trying to see Madame alone. I have managed to keep him off several times but there is a beastly old journalist who is encouraging him in his attempts, and I daren't even speak to Madame about it."

"What sort of person do you mean?"

"Why, a man," she said scornfully.

I snatched up my coat and hat.

"Aren't there dozens of them?"

"Oh! But this one is dangerous. Madame must have given him a hold on her in some way. I ought not to talk like this about Madame and I wouldn't to anybody but Monsieur. I am always on the watch, but what is a poor girl to do? . . . Isn't Monsieur going back to Madame?"

"No, I am not going back. Not this time." A mist seemed to fall before my eyes. I could hardly see the girl standing by the closed door of the Pempeiian room with extended hand, as if turned to stone. But my voice was firm enough. "Not this time," I repeated, and became aware of the great noise of the wind amongst the trees, with the lashing of a rain squall against the door.

“Perhaps some other time,” I added.

I heard her say twice to herself: “Mon Dieu! Mon, Dieu!” and then a dismayed: “What can Monsieur expect me to do?” But I had to appear insensible to her distress and that not altogether because, in fact, I had no option but to go away. I remember also a distinct wilfulness in my attitude and something half-contemptuous in my words as I laid my hand on the knob of the front door.

“You will tell Madame that I am gone. It will please her. Tell her that I am gone—heroically.”

Rose had come up close to me. She met my words by a despairing outward movement of her hands as though she were giving everything up.

“I see it clearly now that Madame has no friends,” she declared with such a force of restrained bitterness that it nearly made me pause. But the very obscurity of actuating motives drove me on and I stepped out through the doorway muttering: “Everything is as Madame wishes it.”

She shot at me a swift: “You should resist,” of an extraordinary intensity, but I strode on down the path. Then Rose’s schooled temper gave way at last and I heard her angry voice screaming after me furiously through the wind and rain: “No! Madame has no friends. Not one!”