

PART FIVE

CHAPTER I

That night I didn't get on board till just before midnight and Dominic could not conceal his relief at having me safely there. Why he should have been so uneasy it was impossible to say but at the time I had a sort of impression that my inner destruction (it was nothing less) had affected my appearance, that my doom was as it were written on my face. I was a mere receptacle for dust and ashes, a living testimony to the vanity of all things. My very thoughts were like a ghostly rustle of dead leaves. But we had an extremely successful trip, and for most of the time Dominic displayed an unwonted jocularly of a dry and biting kind with which, he maintained, he had been infected by no other person than myself. As, with all his force of character, he was very responsive to the moods of those he liked I have no doubt he spoke the truth. But I know nothing about it. The observer, more or less alert, whom each of us carries in his own consciousness, failed me altogether, had turned away his face in sheer horror, or else had fainted from the strain. And thus I had to live alone, unobserved even by myself.

But the trip had been successful. We re-entered the harbour very quietly as usual and when our craft had been moored unostentatiously amongst the plebeian stone-carriers, Dominic, whose grim joviality had subsided in the last twenty-four hours of our homeward run, abandoned me to myself as though indeed I had been a doomed man. He only stuck his head for a moment into our little cuddy where I was changing my clothes and being told in answer to his question that I had no special orders to give went ashore without waiting for me.

Generally we used to step on the quay together and I never failed to enter for a moment Madame Léonore's café. But this time when I got on the quay Dominic was nowhere to be seen. What was it? Abandonment—discretion—or had he quarrelled with his Léonore before leaving on the trip?

My way led me past the café and through the glass panes I saw that he was already there. On the other side of the little marble table Madame Léonore, leaning with mature grace on her elbow, was listening to him absorbed. Then I passed on and—what would you have!—I ended by making my way into the street of the Consuls. I had nowhere else to go. There were my things in the apartment on the first floor. I couldn't bear the thought of meeting anybody I knew.

The feeble gas flame in the hall was still there, on duty, as though it had never

been turned off since I last crossed the hall at half-past eleven in the evening to go to the harbour. The small flame had watched me letting myself out; and now, exactly of the same size, the poor little tongue of light (there was something wrong with that burner) watched me letting myself in, as indeed it had done many times before. Generally the impression was that of entering an untenanted house, but this time before I could reach the foot of the stairs Therese glided out of the passage leading into the studio. After the usual exclamations she assured me that everything was ready for me upstairs, had been for days, and offered to get me something to eat at once. I accepted and said I would be down in the studio in half an hour. I found her there by the side of the laid table ready for conversation. She began by telling me—the dear, poor young Monsieur—in a sort of plaintive chant, that there were no letters for me, no letters of any kind, no letters from anybody. Glances of absolutely terrifying tenderness mingled with flashes of cunning swept over me from head to foot while I tried to eat.

“Are you giving me Captain Blunt’s wine to drink?” I asked, noting the straw-coloured liquid in my glass.

She screwed up her mouth as if she had a twinge of toothache and assured me that the wine belonged to the house. I would have to pay her for it. As far as personal feelings go, Blunt, who addressed her always with polite seriousness, was not a favourite with her. The “charming, brave Monsieur” was now fighting for the King and religion against the impious Liberals. He went away the very morning after I had left and, oh! she remembered, he had asked her before going away whether I was still in the house. Wanted probably to say good-bye to me, shake my hand, the dear, polite Monsieur.

I let her run on in dread expectation of what she would say next but she stuck to the subject of Blunt for some time longer. He had written to her once about some of his things which he wanted her to send to Paris to his mother’s address; but she was going to do nothing of the kind. She announced this with a pious smile; and in answer to my questions I discovered that it was a stratagem to make Captain Blunt return to the house.

“You will get yourself into trouble with the police, Mademoiselle Therese, if you go on like that,” I said. But she was as obstinate as a mule and assured me with the utmost confidence that many people would be ready to defend a poor honest girl. There was something behind this attitude which I could not fathom. Suddenly she fetched a deep sigh.

“Our Rita, too, will end by coming to her sister.”

The name for which I had been waiting deprived me of speech for the moment.

The poor mad sinner had rushed off to some of her wickednesses in Paris. Did I know? No? How could she tell whether I did know or not? Well! I had hardly left the house, so to speak, when Rita was down with her maid behaving as if the house did really still belong to her. . .

“What time was it?” I managed to ask. And with the words my life itself was being forced out through my lips. But Therese, not noticing anything strange about me, said it was something like half-past seven in the morning. The “poor sinner” was all in black as if she were going to church (except for her expression, which was enough to shock any honest person), and after ordering her with frightful menaces not to let anybody know she was in the house she rushed upstairs and locked herself up in my bedroom, while “that French creature” (whom she seemed to love more than her own sister) went into my salon and hid herself behind the window curtain.

I had recovered sufficiently to ask in a quiet natural voice whether Doña Rita and Captain Blunt had seen each other. Apparently they had not seen each other. The polite captain had looked so stern while packing up his kit that Therese dared not speak to him at all. And he was in a hurry, too. He had to see his dear mother off to Paris before his own departure. Very stern. But he shook her hand with a very nice bow.

Therese elevated her right hand for me to see. It was broad and short with blunt fingers, as usual. The pressure of Captain Blunt’s handshake had not altered its unlovely shape.

“What was the good of telling him that our Rita was here?” went on Therese. “I would have been ashamed of her coming here and behaving as if the house belonged to her! I had already said some prayers at his intention at the half-past six mass, the brave gentleman. That maid of my sister Rita was upstairs watching him drive away with her evil eyes, but I made a sign of the cross after the fiacre, and then I went upstairs and banged at your door, my dear kind young Monsieur, and shouted to Rita that she had no right to lock herself in any of my locataires’ rooms. At last she opened it—and what do you think? All her hair was loose over her shoulders. I suppose it all came down when she flung her hat on your bed. I noticed when she arrived that her hair wasn’t done properly. She used your brushes to do it up again in front of your glass.”

“Wait a moment,” I said, and jumped up, upsetting my wine to run upstairs as fast as I could. I lighted the gas, all the three jets in the middle of the room, the jet by the bedside and two others flanking the dressing-table. I had been struck by the wild hope of finding a trace of Rita’s passage, a sign or something. I pulled out all the drawers violently, thinking that perhaps she had hidden there a scrap

of paper, a note. It was perfectly mad. Of course there was no chance of that. Therese would have seen to it. I picked up one after another all the various objects on the dressing-table. On laying my hands on the brushes I had a profound emotion, and with misty eyes I examined them meticulously with the new hope of finding one of Rita's tawny hairs entangled amongst the bristles by a miraculous chance. But Therese would have done away with that chance, too. There was nothing to be seen, though I held them up to the light with a beating heart. It was written that not even that trace of her passage on the earth should remain with me; not to help but, as it were, to soothe the memory. Then I lighted a cigarette and came downstairs slowly. My unhappiness became dulled, as the grief of those who mourn for the dead gets dulled in the overwhelming sensation that everything is over, that a part of themselves is lost beyond recall taking with it all the savour of life.

I discovered Therese still on the very same spot of the floor, her hands folded over each other and facing my empty chair before which the spilled wine had soaked a large portion of the table-cloth. She hadn't moved at all. She hadn't even picked up the overturned glass. But directly I appeared she began to speak in an ingratiating voice.

"If you have missed anything of yours upstairs, my dear young Monsieur, you mustn't say it's me. You don't know what our Rita is."

"I wish to goodness," I said, "that she had taken something."

And again I became inordinately agitated as though it were my absolute fate to be everlastingly dying and reviving to the tormenting fact of her existence. Perhaps she had taken something? Anything. Some small object. I thought suddenly of a Rhenish-stone match-box. Perhaps it was that. I didn't remember having seen it when upstairs. I wanted to make sure at once. At once. But I commanded myself to sit still.

"And she so wealthy," Therese went on. "Even you with your dear generous little heart can do nothing for our Rita. No man can do anything for her—except perhaps one, but she is so evilly disposed towards him that she wouldn't even see him, if in the goodness of his forgiving heart he were to offer his hand to her. It's her bad conscience that frightens her. He loves her more than his life, the dear, charitable man."

"You mean some rascal in Paris that I believe persecutes Doña Rita. Listen, Mademoiselle Therese, if you know where he hangs out you had better let him have word to be careful. I believe he, too, is mixed up in the Carlist intrigue. Don't you know that your sister can get him shut up any day or get him expelled

by the police?”

Therese sighed deeply and put on a look of pained virtue.

“Oh, the hardness of her heart. She tried to be tender with me. She is awful. I said to her, ‘Rita, have you sold your soul to the Devil?’ and she shouted like a fiend: ‘For happiness! Ha, ha, ha!’ She threw herself backwards on that couch in your room and laughed and laughed and laughed as if I had been tickling her, and she drummed on the floor with the heels of her shoes. She is possessed. Oh, my dear innocent young Monsieur, you have never seen anything like that. That wicked girl who serves her rushed in with a tiny glass bottle and put it to her nose; but I had a mind to run out and fetch the priest from the church where I go to early mass. Such a nice, stout, severe man. But that false, cheating creature (I am sure she is robbing our Rita from morning to night), she talked to our Rita very low and quieted her down. I am sure I don’t know what she said. She must be leagued with the devil. And then she asked me if I would go down and make a cup of chocolate for her Madame. Madame—that’s our Rita. Madame! It seems they were going off directly to Paris and her Madame had had nothing to eat since the morning of the day before. Fancy me being ordered to make chocolate for our Rita! However, the poor thing looked so exhausted and white-faced that I went. Ah! the devil can give you an awful shake up if he likes.”

Therese fetched another deep sigh and raising her eyes looked at me with great attention. I preserved an inscrutable expression, for I wanted to hear all she had to tell me of Rita. I watched her with the greatest anxiety composing her face into a cheerful expression.

“So Doña Rita is gone to Paris?” I asked negligently.

“Yes, my dear Monsieur. I believe she went straight to the railway station from here. When she first got up from the couch she could hardly stand. But before, while she was drinking the chocolate which I made for her, I tried to get her to sign a paper giving over the house to me, but she only closed her eyes and begged me to try and be a good sister and leave her alone for half an hour. And she lying there looking as if she wouldn’t live a day. But she always hated me.”

I said bitterly, “You needn’t have worried her like this. If she had not lived for another day you would have had this house and everything else besides; a bigger bit than even your wolfish throat can swallow, Mademoiselle Therese.”

I then said a few more things indicative of my disgust with her rapacity, but they were quite inadequate, as I wasn’t able to find words strong enough to express my real mind. But it didn’t matter really because I don’t think Therese heard me at

all. She seemed lost in rapt amazement.

“What do you say, my dear Monsieur? What! All for me without any sort of paper?”

She appeared distracted by my curt: “Yes.” Therese believed in my truthfulness. She believed me implicitly, except when I was telling her the truth about herself, mincing no words, when she used to stand smilingly bashful as if I were overwhelming her with compliments. I expected her to continue the horrible tale but apparently she had found something to think about which checked the flow. She fetched another sigh and muttered:

“Then the law can be just, if it does not require any paper. After all, I am her sister.”

“It’s very difficult to believe that—at sight,” I said roughly.

“Ah, but that I could prove. There are papers for that.”

After this declaration she began to clear the table, preserving a thoughtful silence.

I was not very surprised at the news of Doña Rita’s departure for Paris. It was not necessary to ask myself why she had gone. I didn’t even ask myself whether she had left the leased Villa on the Prado for ever. Later talking again with Therese, I learned that her sister had given it up for the use of the Carlist cause and that some sort of unofficial Consul, a Carlist agent of some sort, either was going to live there or had already taken possession. This, Rita herself had told her before her departure on that agitated morning spent in the house—in my rooms. A close investigation demonstrated to me that there was nothing missing from them. Even the wretched match-box which I really hoped was gone turned up in a drawer after I had, delightedly, given it up. It was a great blow. She might have taken that at least! She knew I used to carry it about with me constantly while ashore. She might have taken it! Apparently she meant that there should be no bond left even of that kind; and yet it was a long time before I gave up visiting and revisiting all the corners of all possible receptacles for something that she might have left behind on purpose. It was like the mania of those disordered minds who spend their days hunting for a treasure. I hoped for a forgotten hairpin, for some tiny piece of ribbon. Sometimes at night I reflected that such hopes were altogether insensate; but I remember once getting up at two in the morning to search for a little cardboard box in the bathroom, into which, I remembered, I had not looked before. Of course it was empty; and, anyway, Rita could not possibly have known of its existence. I got back to bed shivering violently, though

the night was warm, and with a distinct impression that this thing would end by making me mad. It was no longer a question of "this sort of thing" killing me. The moral atmosphere of this torture was different. It would make me mad. And at that thought great shudders ran down my prone body, because, once, I had visited a famous lunatic asylum where they had shown me a poor wretch who was mad, apparently, because he thought he had been abominably fooled by a woman. They told me that his grievance was quite imaginary. He was a young man with a thin fair beard, huddled up on the edge of his bed, hugging himself forlornly; and his incessant and lamentable wailing filled the long bare corridor, striking a chill into one's heart long before one came to the door of his cell.

And there was no one from whom I could hear, to whom I could speak, with whom I could evoke the image of Rita. Of course I could utter that word of four letters to Therese; but Therese for some reason took it into her head to avoid all topics connected with her sister. I felt as if I could pull out great handfuls of her hair hidden modestly under the black handkerchief of which the ends were sometimes tied under her chin. But, really, I could not have given her any intelligible excuse for that outrage. Moreover, she was very busy from the very top to the very bottom of the house, which she persisted in running alone because she couldn't make up her mind to part with a few francs every month to a servant. It seemed to me that I was no longer such a favourite with her as I used to be. That, strange to say, was exasperating, too. It was as if some idea, some fruitful notion had killed in her all the softer and more humane emotions. She went about with brooms and dusters wearing an air of sanctimonious thoughtfulness.

The man who to a certain extent took my place in Therese's favour was the old father of the dancing girls inhabiting the ground floor. In a tall hat and a well-to-do dark blue overcoat he allowed himself to be button-holed in the hall by Therese who would talk to him interminably with downcast eyes. He smiled gravely down at her, and meanwhile tried to edge towards the front door. I imagine he didn't put a great value on Therese's favour. Our stay in harbour was prolonged this time and I kept indoors like an invalid. One evening I asked that old man to come in and drink and smoke with me in the studio. He made no difficulties to accept, brought his wooden pipe with him, and was very entertaining in a pleasant voice. One couldn't tell whether he was an uncommon person or simply a ruffian, but in any case with his white beard he looked quite venerable. Naturally he couldn't give me much of his company as he had to look closely after his girls and their admirers; not that the girls were unduly frivolous, but of course being very young they had no experience. They were friendly creatures with pleasant, merry voices and he was very much devoted to them. He was a muscular man with a high colour and silvery locks curling round his bald pate and over his ears, like a barocco apostle. I had an idea that he had had a

lurid past and had seen some fighting in his youth. The admirers of the two girls stood in great awe of him, from instinct no doubt, because his behaviour to them was friendly and even somewhat obsequious, yet always with a certain truculent glint in his eye that made them pause in everything but their generosity—which was encouraged. I sometimes wondered whether those two careless, merry hard-working creatures understood the secret moral beauty of the situation.

My real company was the dummy in the studio and I can't say it was exactly satisfying. After taking possession of the studio I had raised it tenderly, dusted its mangled limbs and insensible, hard-wood bosom, and then had propped it up in a corner where it seemed to take on, of itself, a shy attitude. I knew its history. It was not an ordinary dummy. One day, talking with Doña Rita about her sister, I had told her that I thought Therese used to knock it down on purpose with a broom, and Doña Rita had laughed very much. This, she had said, was an instance of dislike from mere instinct. That dummy had been made to measure years before. It had to wear for days and days the Imperial Byzantine robes in which Doña Rita sat only once or twice herself; but of course the folds and bends of the stuff had to be preserved as in the first sketch. Doña Rita described amusingly how she had to stand in the middle of her room while Rose walked around her with a tape measure noting the figures down on a small piece of paper which was then sent to the maker, who presently returned it with an angry letter stating that those proportions were altogether impossible in any woman. Apparently Rose had muddled them all up; and it was a long time before the figure was finished and sent to the Pavilion in a long basket to take on itself the robes and the hieratic pose of the Empress. Later, it wore with the same patience the marvellous hat of the "Girl in the Hat." But Doña Rita couldn't understand how the poor thing ever found its way to Marseilles minus its turnip head. Probably it came down with the robes and a quantity of precious brocades which she herself had sent down from Paris. The knowledge of its origin, the contempt of Captain Blunt's references to it, with Therese's shocked dislike of the dummy, invested that summary reproduction with a sort of charm, gave me a faint and miserable illusion of the original, less artificial than a photograph, less precise, too. . . . But it can't be explained. I felt positively friendly to it as if it had been Rita's trusted personal attendant. I even went so far as to discover that it had a sort of grace of its own. But I never went so far as to address set speeches to it where it lurked shyly in its corner, or drag it out from there for contemplation. I left it in peace. I wasn't mad. I was only convinced that I soon would be.