

## CHAPTER II

Notwithstanding my misanthropy I had to see a few people on account of all these Royalist affairs which I couldn't very well drop, and in truth did not wish to drop. They were my excuse for remaining in Europe, which somehow I had not the strength of mind to leave for the West Indies, or elsewhere. On the other hand, my adventurous pursuit kept me in contact with the sea where I found occupation, protection, consolation, the mental relief of grappling with concrete problems, the sanity one acquires from close contact with simple mankind, a little self-confidence born from the dealings with the elemental powers of nature. I couldn't give all that up. And besides all this was related to Doña Rita. I had, as it were, received it all from her own hand, from that hand the clasp of which was as frank as a man's and yet conveyed a unique sensation. The very memory of it would go through me like a wave of heat. It was over that hand that we first got into the habit of quarrelling, with the irritability of sufferers from some obscure pain and yet half unconscious of their disease. Rita's own spirit hovered over the troubled waters of Legitimacy. But as to the sound of the four magic letters of her name I was not very likely to hear it fall sweetly on my ear. For instance, the distinguished personality in the world of finance with whom I had to confer several times, alluded to the irresistible seduction of the power which reigned over my heart and my mind; which had a mysterious and unforgettable face, the brilliance of sunshine together with the unfathomable splendour of the night as—Madame de Lastaola. That's how that steel-grey man called the greatest mystery of the universe. When uttering that assumed name he would make for himself a guardedly solemn and reserved face as though he were afraid lest I should presume to smile, lest he himself should venture to smile, and the sacred formality of our relations should be outraged beyond mending.

He would refer in a studiously grave tone to Madame de Lastaola's wishes, plans, activities, instructions, movements; or picking up a letter from the usual litter of paper found on such men's desks, glance at it to refresh his memory; and, while the very sight of the handwriting would make my lips go dry, would ask me in a bloodless voice whether perchance I had "a direct communication from—er—Paris lately." And there would be other maddening circumstances connected with those visits. He would treat me as a serious person having a clear view of certain eventualities, while at the very moment my vision could see nothing but streaming across the wall at his back, abundant and misty, unearthly and adorable, a mass of tawny hair that seemed to have hot sparks tangled in it. Another nuisance was the atmosphere of Royalism, of Legitimacy, that pervaded the room, thin as air, intangible, as though no Legitimist of flesh and blood had ever existed to the man's mind except perhaps myself. He, of course, was just

simply a banker, a very distinguished, a very influential, and a very impeccable banker. He persisted also in deferring to my judgment and sense with an over-emphasis called out by his perpetual surprise at my youth. Though he had seen me many times (I even knew his wife) he could never get over my immature age. He himself was born about fifty years old, all complete, with his iron-grey whiskers and his bilious eyes, which he had the habit of frequently closing during a conversation. On one occasion he said to me. "By the by, the Marquis of Villarel is here for a time. He inquired after you the last time he called on me. May I let him know that you are in town?"

I didn't say anything to that. The Marquis of Villarel was the Don Rafael of Rita's own story. What had I to do with Spanish grandees? And for that matter what had she, the woman of all time, to do with all the villainous or splendid disguises human dust takes upon itself? All this was in the past, and I was acutely aware that for me there was no present, no future, nothing but a hollow pain, a vain passion of such magnitude that being locked up within my breast it gave me an illusion of lonely greatness with my miserable head uplifted amongst the stars. But when I made up my mind (which I did quickly, to be done with it) to call on the banker's wife, almost the first thing she said to me was that the Marquis de Villarel was "amongst us." She said it joyously. If in her husband's room at the bank legitimism was a mere unpopulated principle, in her salon Legitimacy was nothing but persons. "Il m'a causé beaucoup de vous," she said as if there had been a joke in it of which I ought to be proud. I slunk away from her. I couldn't believe that the grandee had talked to her about me. I had never felt myself part of the great Royalist enterprise. I confess that I was so indifferent to everything, so profoundly demoralized, that having once got into that drawing-room I hadn't the strength to get away; though I could see perfectly well my volatile hostess going from one to another of her acquaintances in order to tell them with a little gesture, "Look! Over there—in that corner. That's the notorious Monsieur George." At last she herself drove me out by coming to sit by me vivaciously and going into ecstasies over "ce cher Monsieur Mills" and that magnificent Lord X; and ultimately, with a perfectly odious snap in the eyes and drop in the voice, dragging in the name of Madame de Lastaola and asking me whether I was really so much in the confidence of that astonishing person. "Vous devez bien regretter son départ pour Paris," she cooed, looking with affected bashfulness at her fan. . . . How I got out of the room I really don't know. There was also a staircase. I did not fall down it head first—that much I am certain of; and I also remember that I wandered for a long time about the seashore and went home very late, by the way of the Prado, giving in passing a fearful glance at the Villa. It showed not a gleam of light through the thin foliage of its trees.

I spent the next day with Dominic on board the little craft watching the shipwrights at work on her deck. From the way they went about their business

those men must have been perfectly sane; and I felt greatly refreshed by my company during the day. Dominic, too, devoted himself to his business, but his taciturnity was sardonic. Then I dropped in at the café and Madame Léonore's loud "Eh, Signorino, here you are at last!" pleased me by its resonant friendliness. But I found the sparkle of her black eyes as she sat down for a moment opposite me while I was having my drink rather difficult to bear. That man and that woman seemed to know something. What did they know? At parting she pressed my hand significantly. What did she mean? But I didn't feel offended by these manifestations. The souls within these people's breasts were not volatile in the manner of slightly scented and inflated bladders. Neither had they the impervious skins which seem the rule in the fine world that wants only to get on. Somehow they had sensed that there was something wrong; and whatever impression they might have formed for themselves I had the certitude that it would not be for them a matter of grins at my expense.

That day on returning home I found Therese looking out for me, a very unusual occurrence of late. She handed me a card bearing the name of the Marquis de Villarel.

"How did you come by this?" I asked. She turned on at once the tap of her volubility and I was not surprised to learn that the grandee had not done such an extraordinary thing as to call upon me in person. A young gentleman had brought it. Such a nice young gentleman, she interjected with her piously ghoulis expression. He was not very tall. He had a very smooth complexion (that woman was incorrigible) and a nice, tiny black moustache. Therese was sure that he must have been an officer en las filas legitimas. With that notion in her head she had asked him about the welfare of that other model of charm and elegance, Captain Blunt. To her extreme surprise the charming young gentleman with beautiful eyes had apparently never heard of Blunt. But he seemed very much interested in his surroundings, looked all round the hall, noted the costly wood of the door panels, paid some attention to the silver statuette holding up the defective gas burner at the foot of the stairs, and, finally, asked whether this was in very truth the house of the most excellent Señora Doña Rita de Lastaola. The question staggered Therese, but with great presence of mind she answered the young gentleman that she didn't know what excellence there was about it, but that the house was her property, having been given to her by her own sister. At this the young gentleman looked both puzzled and angry, turned on his heel, and got back into his fiacre. Why should people be angry with a poor girl who had never done a single reprehensible thing in her whole life?

"I suppose our Rita does tell people awful lies about her poor sister." She sighed deeply (she had several kinds of sighs and this was the hopeless kind) and added reflectively, "Sin on sin, wickedness on wickedness! And the longer she lives the

worse it will be. It would be better for our Rita to be dead.”

I told “Mademoiselle Therese” that it was really impossible to tell whether she was more stupid or atrocious; but I wasn’t really very much shocked. These outbursts did not signify anything in Therese. One got used to them. They were merely the expression of her rapacity and her righteousness; so that our conversation ended by my asking her whether she had any dinner ready for me that evening.

“What’s the good of getting you anything to eat, my dear young Monsieur,” she quizzed me tenderly. “You just only peck like a little bird. Much better let me save the money for you.” It will show the super-terrestrial nature of my misery when I say that I was quite surprised at Therese’s view of my appetite. Perhaps she was right. I certainly did not know. I stared hard at her and in the end she admitted that the dinner was in fact ready that very moment.

The new young gentleman within Therese’s horizon didn’t surprise me very much. Villarel would travel with some sort of suite, a couple of secretaries at least. I had heard enough of Carlist headquarters to know that the man had been (very likely was still) Captain General of the Royal Bodyguard and was a person of great political (and domestic) influence at Court. The card was, under its social form, a mere command to present myself before the grandee. No Royalist devoted by conviction, as I must have appeared to him, could have mistaken the meaning. I put the card in my pocket and after dining or not dining—I really don’t remember—spent the evening smoking in the studio, pursuing thoughts of tenderness and grief, visions exalting and cruel. From time to time I looked at the dummy. I even got up once from the couch on which I had been writhing like a worm and walked towards it as if to touch it, but refrained, not from sudden shame but from sheer despair. By and by Therese drifted in. It was then late and, I imagine, she was on her way to bed. She looked the picture of cheerful, rustic innocence and started propounding to me a conundrum which began with the words:

“If our Rita were to die before long . . .”

She didn’t get any further because I had jumped up and frightened her by shouting: “Is she ill? What has happened? Have you had a letter?”

She had had a letter. I didn’t ask her to show it to me, though I daresay she would have done so. I had an idea that there was no meaning in anything, at least no meaning that mattered. But the interruption had made Therese apparently forget her sinister conundrum. She observed me with her shrewd, unintelligent eyes for a bit, and then with the fatuous remark about the Law

being just she left me to the horrors of the studio. I believe I went to sleep there from sheer exhaustion. Some time during the night I woke up chilled to the bone and in the dark. These were horrors and no mistake. I dragged myself upstairs to bed past the indefatigable statuette holding up the ever-miserable light. The black-and-white hall was like an ice-house.

The main consideration which induced me to call on the Marquis of Villarel was the fact that after all I was a discovery of Doña Rita's, her own recruit. My fidelity and steadfastness had been guaranteed by her and no one else. I couldn't bear the idea of her being criticized by every empty-headed chatterer belonging to the Cause. And as, apart from that, nothing mattered much, why, then—I would get this over.

But it appeared that I had not reflected sufficiently on all the consequences of that step. First of all the sight of the Villa looking shabbily cheerful in the sunshine (but not containing her any longer) was so perturbing that I very nearly went away from the gate. Then when I got in after much hesitation—being admitted by the man in the green baize apron who recognized me—the thought of entering that room, out of which she was gone as completely as if she had been dead, gave me such an emotion that I had to steady myself against the table till the faintness was past. Yet I was irritated as at a treason when the man in the baize apron instead of letting me into the Pompeian dining-room crossed the hall to another door not at all in the Pompeian style (more Louis XV rather—that Villa was like a *Salade Russe* of styles) and introduced me into a big, light room full of very modern furniture. The portrait en pied of an officer in a sky-blue uniform hung on the end wall. The officer had a small head, a black beard cut square, a robust body, and leaned with gauntleted hands on the simple hilt of a straight sword. That striking picture dominated a massive mahogany desk, and, in front of this desk, a very roomy, tall-backed armchair of dark green velvet. I thought I had been announced into an empty room till glancing along the extremely loud carpet I detected a pair of feet under the armchair.

I advanced towards it and discovered a little man, who had made no sound or movement till I came into his view, sunk deep in the green velvet. He altered his position slowly and rested his hollow, black, quietly burning eyes on my face in prolonged scrutiny. I detected something comminatory in his yellow, emaciated countenance, but I believe now he was simply startled by my youth. I bowed profoundly. He extended a meagre little hand.

“Take a chair, Don Jorge.”

He was very small, frail, and thin, but his voice was not languid, though he spoke hardly above his breath. Such was the envelope and the voice of the fanatical

soul belonging to the Grand-master of Ceremonies and Captain General of the Bodyguard at the Headquarters of the Legitimist Court, now detached on a special mission. He was all fidelity, inflexibility, and sombre conviction, but like some great saints he had very little body to keep all these merits in.

“You are very young,” he remarked, to begin with. “The matters on which I desired to converse with you are very grave.”

“I was under the impression that your Excellency wished to see me at once. But if your Excellency prefers it I will return in, say, seven years’ time when I may perhaps be old enough to talk about grave matters.”

He didn’t stir hand or foot and not even the quiver of an eyelid proved that he had heard my shockingly unbecoming retort.

“You have been recommended to us by a noble and loyal lady, in whom His Majesty—whom God preserve—reposes an entire confidence. God will reward her as she deserves and you, too, Señor, according to the disposition you bring to this great work which has the blessing (here he crossed himself) of our Holy Mother the Church.”

“I suppose your Excellency understands that in all this I am not looking for reward of any kind.”

At this he made a faint, almost ethereal grimace.

“I was speaking of the spiritual blessing which rewards the service of religion and will be of benefit to your soul,” he explained with a slight touch of acidity. “The other is perfectly understood and your fidelity is taken for granted. His Majesty—whom God preserve—has been already pleased to signify his satisfaction with your services to the most noble and loyal Doña Rita by a letter in his own hand.”

Perhaps he expected me to acknowledge this announcement in some way, speech, or bow, or something, because before my immobility he made a slight movement in his chair which smacked of impatience. “I am afraid, Señor, that you are affected by the spirit of scoffing and irreverence which pervades this unhappy country of France in which both you and I are strangers, I believe. Are you a young man of that sort?”

“I am a very good gun-runner, your Excellency,” I answered quietly.

He bowed his head gravely. “We are aware. But I was looking for the motives which ought to have their pure source in religion.”

“I must confess frankly that I have not reflected on my motives,” I said. “It is enough for me to know that they are not dishonourable and that anybody can see they are not the motives of an adventurer seeking some sordid advantage.”

He had listened patiently and when he saw that there was nothing more to come he ended the discussion.

“Señor, we should reflect upon our motives. It is salutary for our conscience and is recommended (he crossed himself) by our Holy Mother the Church. I have here certain letters from Paris on which I would consult your young sagacity which is accredited to us by the most loyal Doña Rita.”

The sound of that name on his lips was simply odious. I was convinced that this man of forms and ceremonies and fanatical royalism was perfectly heartless. Perhaps he reflected on his motives; but it seemed to me that his conscience could be nothing else but a monstrous thing which very few actions could disturb appreciably. Yet for the credit of Doña Rita I did not withhold from him my young sagacity. What he thought of it I don't know. The matters we discussed were not of course of high policy, though from the point of view of the war in the south they were important enough. We agreed on certain things to be done, and finally, always out of regard for Doña Rita's credit, I put myself generally at his disposition or of any Carlist agent he would appoint in his place; for I did not suppose that he would remain very long in Marseilles. He got out of the chair laboriously, like a sick child might have done. The audience was over but he noticed my eyes wandering to the portrait and he said in his measured, breathed-out tones:

“I owe the pleasure of having this admirable work here to the gracious attention of Madame de Lastaola, who, knowing my attachment to the royal person of my Master, has sent it down from Paris to greet me in this house which has been given up for my occupation also through her generosity to the Royal Cause. Unfortunately she, too, is touched by the infection of this irreverent and unfaithful age. But she is young yet. She is young.”

These last words were pronounced in a strange tone of menace as though he were supernaturally aware of some suspended disasters. With his burning eyes he was the image of an Inquisitor with an unconquerable soul in that frail body. But suddenly he dropped his eyelids and the conversation finished as characteristically as it had begun: with a slow, dismissing inclination of the head and an “Adios, Señor—may God guard you from sin.”