

CHAPTER V

Coming out of the bright light of the studio I didn't make out Therese very distinctly. She, however, having groped in dark cupboards, must have had her pupils sufficiently dilated to have seen that I had my hat on my head. This has its importance because after what I had said to her upstairs it must have convinced her that I was going out on some midnight business. I passed her without a word and heard behind me the door of the studio close with an unexpected crash. It strikes me now that under the circumstances I might have without shame gone back to listen at the keyhole. But truth to say the association of events was not so clear in my mind as it may be to the reader of this story. Neither were the exact connections of persons present to my mind. And, besides, one doesn't listen at a keyhole but in pursuance of some plan; unless one is afflicted by a vulgar and fatuous curiosity. But that vice is not in my character. As to plan, I had none. I moved along the passage between the dead wall and the black-and-white marble elevation of the staircase with hushed footsteps, as though there had been a mortally sick person somewhere in the house. And the only person that could have answered to that description was Señor Ortega. I moved on, stealthy, absorbed, undecided; asking myself earnestly: "What on earth am I going to do with him?" That exclusive preoccupation of my mind was as dangerous to Señor Ortega as typhoid fever would have been. It strikes me that this comparison is very exact. People recover from typhoid fever, but generally the chance is considered poor. This was precisely his case. His chance was poor; though I had no more animosity towards him than a virulent disease has against the victim it lays low. He really would have nothing to reproach me with; he had run up against me, unwittingly, as a man enters an infected place, and now he was very ill, very ill indeed. No, I had no plans against him. I had only the feeling that he was in mortal danger.

I believe that men of the most daring character (and I make no claim to it) often do shrink from the logical processes of thought. It is only the devil, they say, that loves logic. But I was not a devil. I was not even a victim of the devil. It was only that I had given up the direction of my intelligence before the problem; or rather that the problem had dispossessed my intelligence and reigned in its stead side by side with a superstitious awe. A dreadful order seemed to lurk in the darkest shadows of life. The madness of that Carlist with the soul of a Jacobin, the vile fears of Baron H., that excellent organizer of supplies, the contact of their two ferocious stupidities, and last, by a remote disaster at sea, my love brought into direct contact with the situation: all that was enough to make one shudder—not at the chance, but at the design.

For it was my love that was called upon to act here, and nothing else. And love which elevates us above all safeguards, above restraining principles, above all littlenesses of self-possession, yet keeps its feet always firmly on earth, remains marvellously practical in its suggestions.

I discovered that however much I had imagined I had given up Rita, that whatever agonies I had gone through, my hope of her had never been lost. Plucked out, stamped down, torn to shreds, it had remained with me secret, intact, invincible. Before the danger of the situation it sprang, full of life, up in arms—the undying child of immortal love. What incited me was independent of honour and compassion; it was the prompting of a love supreme, practical, remorseless in its aim; it was the practical thought that no woman need be counted as lost for ever, unless she be dead!

This excluded for the moment all considerations of ways and means and risks and difficulties. Its tremendous intensity robbed it of all direction and left me adrift in the big black-and-white hall as on a silent sea. It was not, properly speaking, irresolution. It was merely hesitation as to the next immediate step, and that step even of no great importance: hesitation merely as to the best way I could spend the rest of the night. I didn't think further forward for many reasons, more or less optimistic, but mainly because I have no homicidal vein in my composition. The disposition to gloat over homicide was in that miserable creature in the studio, the potential Jacobin; in that confounded buyer of agricultural produce, the punctual employé of Hernandez Brothers, the jealous wretch with an obscene tongue and an imagination of the same kind to drive him mad. I thought of him without pity but also without contempt. I reflected that there were no means of sending a warning to Doña Rita in Tolosa; for of course no postal communication existed with the Headquarters. And moreover what would a warning be worth in this particular case, supposing it would reach her, that she would believe it, and that she would know what to do? How could I communicate to another that certitude which was in my mind, the more absolute because without proofs that one could produce?

The last expression of Rose's distress rang again in my ears: "Madame has no friends. Not one!" and I saw Doña Rita's complete loneliness beset by all sorts of insincerities, surrounded by pitfalls; her greatest dangers within herself, in her generosity, in her fears, in her courage, too. What I had to do first of all was to stop that wretch at all costs. I became aware of a great mistrust of Therese. I didn't want her to find me in the hall, but I was reluctant to go upstairs to my rooms from an unreasonable feeling that there I would be too much out of the way; not sufficiently on the spot. There was the alternative of a live-long night of watching outside, before the dark front of the house. It was a most distasteful prospect. And then it occurred to me that Blunt's former room would be an

extremely good place to keep a watch from. I knew that room. When Henry Allègre gave the house to Rita in the early days (long before he made his will) he had planned a complete renovation and this room had been meant for the drawing-room. Furniture had been made for it specially, upholstered in beautiful ribbed stuff, made to order, of dull gold colour with a pale blue tracery of arabesques and oval medallions enclosing Rita's monogram, repeated on the backs of chairs and sofas, and on the heavy curtains reaching from ceiling to floor. To the same time belonged the ebony and bronze doors, the silver statuette at the foot of the stairs, the forged iron balustrade reproducing right up the marble staircase Rita's decorative monogram in its complicated design.

Afterwards the work was stopped and the house had fallen into disrepair. When Rita devoted it to the Carlist cause a bed was put into that drawing-room, just simply the bed. The room next to that yellow salon had been in Allègre's young days fitted as a fencing-room containing also a bath, and a complicated system of all sorts of shower and jet arrangements, then quite up to date. That room was very large, lighted from the top, and one wall of it was covered by trophies of arms of all sorts, a choice collection of cold steel disposed on a background of Indian mats and rugs: Blunt used it as a dressing-room. It communicated by a small door with the studio.

I had only to extend my hand and make one step to reach the magnificent bronze handle of the ebony door, and if I didn't want to be caught by Therese there was no time to lose. I made the step and extended the hand, thinking that it would be just like my luck to find the door locked. But the door came open to my push. In contrast to the dark hall the room was most unexpectedly dazzling to my eyes, as if illuminated a giorno for a reception. No voice came from it, but nothing could have stopped me now. As I turned round to shut the door behind me noiselessly I caught sight of a woman's dress on a chair, of other articles of apparel scattered about. The mahogany bed with a piece of light silk which Therese found somewhere and used for a counterpane was a magnificent combination of white and crimson between the gleaming surfaces of dark wood; and the whole room had an air of splendour with marble consoles, gilt carvings, long mirrors and a sumptuous Venetian lustre depending from the ceiling: a darkling mass of icy pendants catching a spark here and there from the candles of an eight-branched candelabra standing on a little table near the head of a sofa which had been dragged round to face the fireplace. The faintest possible whiff of a familiar perfume made my head swim with its suggestion.

I grabbed the back of the nearest piece of furniture and the splendour of marbles and mirrors, of cut crystals and carvings, swung before my eyes in the golden mist of walls and draperies round an extremely conspicuous pair of black stockings thrown over a music stool which remained motionless. The silence was profound. It was like being in an enchanted place. Suddenly a voice began to

speak, clear, detached, infinitely touching in its calm weariness.

“Haven’t you tormented me enough to-day?” it said. . . . My head was steady now but my heart began to beat violently. I listened to the end without moving, “Can’t you make up your mind to leave me alone for to-night?” It pleaded with an accent of charitable scorn.

The penetrating quality of these tones which I had not heard for so many, many days made my eyes run full of tears. I guessed easily that the appeal was addressed to the atrocious Therese. The speaker was concealed from me by the high back of the sofa, but her apprehension was perfectly justified. For was it not I who had turned back Therese the pious, the insatiable, coming downstairs in her nightgown to torment her sister some more? Mere surprise at Doña Rita’s presence in the house was enough to paralyze me; but I was also overcome by an enormous sense of relief, by the assurance of security for her and for myself. I didn’t even ask myself how she came there. It was enough for me that she was not in Tolosa. I could have smiled at the thought that all I had to do now was to hasten the departure of that abominable lunatic—for Tolosa: an easy task, almost no task at all. Yes, I would have smiled, had not I felt outraged by the presence of Señor Ortega under the same roof with Doña Rita. The mere fact was repugnant to me, morally revolting; so that I should have liked to rush at him and throw him out into the street. But that was not to be done for various reasons. One of them was pity. I was suddenly at peace with all mankind, with all nature. I felt as if I couldn’t hurt a fly. The intensity of my emotion sealed my lips. With a fearful joy tugging at my heart I moved round the head of the couch without a word.

In the wide fireplace on a pile of white ashes the logs had a deep crimson glow; and turned towards them Doña Rita reclined on her side enveloped in the skins of wild beasts like a charming and savage young chieftain before a camp fire. She never even raised her eyes, giving me the opportunity to contemplate mutely that adolescent, delicately masculine head, so mysteriously feminine in the power of instant seduction, so infinitely suave in its firm design, almost childlike in the freshness of detail: altogether ravishing in the inspired strength of the modelling. That precious head reposed in the palm of her hand; the face was slightly flushed (with anger perhaps). She kept her eyes obstinately fixed on the pages of a book which she was holding with her other hand. I had the time to lay my infinite adoration at her feet whose white insteps gleamed below the dark edge of the fur out of quilted blue silk bedroom slippers, embroidered with small pearls. I had never seen them before; I mean the slippers. The gleam of the insteps, too, for that matter. I lost myself in a feeling of deep content, something like a foretaste of a time of felicity which must be quiet or it couldn’t be eternal. I had never tasted such perfect quietness before. It was not of this earth. I had gone far

beyond. It was as if I had reached the ultimate wisdom beyond all dreams and all passions. She was That which is to be contemplated to all Infinity.

The perfect stillness and silence made her raise her eyes at last, reluctantly, with a hard, defensive expression which I had never seen in them before. And no wonder! The glance was meant for Therese and assumed in self-defence. For some time its character did not change and when it did it turned into a perfectly stony stare of a kind which I also had never seen before. She had never wished so much to be left in peace. She had never been so astonished in her life. She had arrived by the evening express only two hours before Señor Ortega, had driven to the house, and after having something to eat had become for the rest of the evening the helpless prey of her sister who had fawned and scolded and wheedled and threatened in a way that outraged all Rita's feelings. Seizing this unexpected occasion Therese had displayed a distracting versatility of sentiment: rapacity, virtue, piety, spite, and false tenderness—while, characteristically enough, she unpacked the dressing-bag, helped the sinner to get ready for bed, brushed her hair, and finally, as a climax, kissed her hands, partly by surprise and partly by violence. After that she had retired from the field of battle slowly, undefeated, still defiant, firing as a last shot the impudent question: "Tell me only, have you made your will, Rita?" To this poor Doña Rita with the spirit of opposition strung to the highest pitch answered: "No, and I don't mean to"—being under the impression that this was what her sister wanted her to do. There can be no doubt, however, that all Therese wanted was the information.

Rita, much too agitated to expect anything but a sleepless night, had not the courage to get into bed. She thought she would remain on the sofa before the fire and try to compose herself with a book. As she had no dressing-gown with her she put on her long fur coat over her night-gown, threw some logs on the fire, and lay down. She didn't hear the slightest noise of any sort till she heard me shut the door gently. Quietness of movement was one of Therese's accomplishments, and the harassed heiress of the Allègre millions naturally thought it was her sister coming again to renew the scene. Her heart sank within her. In the end she became a little frightened at the long silence, and raised her eyes. She didn't believe them for a long time. She concluded that I was a vision. In fact, the first word which I heard her utter was a low, awed "No," which, though I understood its meaning, chilled my blood like an evil omen.

It was then that I spoke. "Yes," I said, "it's me that you see," and made a step forward. She didn't start; only her other hand flew to the edges of the fur coat, gripping them together over her breast. Observing this gesture I sat down in the nearest chair. The book she had been reading slipped with a thump on the floor.

"How is it possible that you should be here?" she said, still in a doubting voice.

"I am really here," I said. "Would you like to touch my hand?"

She didn't move at all; her fingers still clutched the fur coat.

"What has happened?"

"It's a long story, but you may take it from me that all is over. The tie between us is broken. I don't know that it was ever very close. It was an external thing. The true misfortune is that I have ever seen you."

This last phrase was provoked by an exclamation of sympathy on her part. She raised herself on her elbow and looked at me intently. "All over," she murmured.

"Yes, we had to wreck the little vessel. It was awful. I feel like a murderer. But she had to be killed."

"Why?"

"Because I loved her too much. Don't you know that love and death go very close together?"

"I could feel almost happy that it is all over, if you hadn't had to lose your love. Oh, amigo George, it was a safe love for you."

"Yes," I said. "It was a faithful little vessel. She would have saved us all from any plain danger. But this was a betrayal. It was—never mind. All that's past. The question is what will the next one be."

"Why should it be that?"

"I don't know. Life seems but a series of betrayals. There are so many kinds of them. This was a betrayed plan, but one can betray confidence, and hope and—desire, and the most sacred . . ."

"But what are you doing here?" she interrupted.

"Oh, yes! The eternal why. Till a few hours ago I didn't know what I was here for. And what are you here for?" I asked point blank and with a bitterness she disregarded. She even answered my question quite readily with many words out of which I could make very little. I only learned that for at least five mixed reasons, none of which impressed me profoundly, Doña Rita had started at a moment's notice from Paris with nothing but a dressing-bag, and permitting Rose

to go and visit her aged parents for two days, and then follow her mistress. That girl of late had looked so perturbed and worried that the sensitive Rita, fearing that she was tired of her place, proposed to settle a sum of money on her which would have enabled her to devote herself entirely to her aged parents. And did I know what that extraordinary girl said? She had said: "Don't let Madame think that I would be too proud to accept anything whatever from her; but I can't even dream of leaving Madame. I believe Madame has no friends. Not one." So instead of a large sum of money Doña Rita gave the girl a kiss and as she had been worried by several people who wanted her to go to Tolosa she bolted down this way just to get clear of all those busybodies. "Hide from them," she went on with ardour. "Yes, I came here to hide," she repeated twice as if delighted at last to have hit on that reason among so many others. "How could I tell that you would be here?" Then with sudden fire which only added to the delight with which I had been watching the play of her physiognomy she added: "Why did you come into this room?"

She enchanted me. The ardent modulations of the sound, the slight play of the beautiful lips, the still, deep sapphire gleam in those long eyes inherited from the dawn of ages and that seemed always to watch unimaginable things, that underlying faint ripple of gaiety that played under all her moods as though it had been a gift from the high gods moved to pity for this lonely mortal, all this within the four walls and displayed for me alone gave me the sense of almost intolerable joy. The words didn't matter. They had to be answered, of course.

"I came in for several reasons. One of them is that I didn't know you were here."

"Therese didn't tell you?"

"No."

"Never talked to you about me?"

I hesitated only for a moment. "Never," I said. Then I asked in my turn, "Did she tell you I was here?"

"No," she said.

"It's very clear she did not mean us to come together again."

"Neither did I, my dear."

"What do you mean by speaking like this, in this tone, in these words? You seem to use them as if they were a sort of formula. Am I a dear to you? Or is anybody?"

. . . or everybody? . . .”

She had been for some time raised on her elbow, but then as if something had happened to her vitality she sank down till her head rested again on the sofa cushion.

“Why do you try to hurt my feelings?” she asked.

“For the same reason for which you call me dear at the end of a sentence like that: for want of something more amusing to do. You don’t pretend to make me believe that you do it for any sort of reason that a decent person would confess to.”

The colour had gone from her face; but a fit of wickedness was on me and I pursued, “What are the motives of your speeches? What prompts your actions? On your own showing your life seems to be a continuous running away. You have just run away from Paris. Where will you run to-morrow? What are you everlastingly running from—or is it that you are running after something? What is it? A man, a phantom—or some sensation that you don’t like to own to?”

Truth to say, I was abashed by the silence which was her only answer to this sally. I said to myself that I would not let my natural anger, my just fury be disarmed by any assumption of pathos or dignity. I suppose I was really out of my mind and what in the middle ages would have been called “possessed” by an evil spirit. I went on enjoying my own villainy.

“Why aren’t you in Tolosa? You ought to be in Tolosa. Isn’t Tolosa the proper field for your abilities, for your sympathies, for your profusions, for your generousities—the king without a crown, the man without a fortune! But here there is nothing worthy of your talents. No, there is no longer anything worth any sort of trouble here. There isn’t even that ridiculous Monsieur George. I understand that the talk of the coast from here to Cette is that Monsieur George is drowned. Upon my word I believe he is. And serve him right, too. There’s Therese, but I don’t suppose that your love for your sister . . .”

“For goodness’ sake don’t let her come in and find you here.”

Those words recalled me to myself, exorcised the evil spirit by the mere enchanting power of the voice. They were also impressive by their suggestion of something practical, utilitarian, and remote from sentiment. The evil spirit left me and I remained taken aback slightly.

“Well,” I said, “if you mean that you want me to leave the room I will confess to

you that I can't very well do it yet. But I could lock both doors if you don't mind that."

"Do what you like as long as you keep her out. You two together would be too much for me to-night. Why don't you go and lock those doors? I have a feeling she is on the prowl."

I got up at once saying, "I imagine she has gone to bed by this time." I felt absolutely calm and responsible. I turned the keys one after another so gently that I couldn't hear the click of the locks myself. This done I recrossed the room with measured steps, with downcast eyes, and approaching the couch without raising them from the carpet I sank down on my knees and leaned my forehead on its edge. That penitential attitude had but little remorse in it. I detected no movement and heard no sound from her. In one place a bit of the fur coat touched my cheek softly, but no forgiving hand came to rest on my bowed head. I only breathed deeply the faint scent of violets, her own particular fragrance enveloping my body, penetrating my very heart with an inconceivable intimacy, bringing me closer to her than the closest embrace, and yet so subtle that I sensed her existence in me only as a great, glowing, indeterminate tenderness, something like the evening light disclosing after the white passion of the day infinite depths in the colours of the sky and an unsuspected soul of peace in the protean forms of life. I had not known such quietness for months; and I detected in myself an immense fatigue, a longing to remain where I was without changing my position to the end of time. Indeed to remain seemed to me a complete solution for all the problems that life presents—even as to the very death itself.

Only the unwelcome reflection that this was impossible made me get up at last with a sigh of deep grief at the end of the dream. But I got up without despair. She didn't murmur, she didn't stir. There was something august in the stillness of the room. It was a strange peace which she shared with me in this unexpected shelter full of disorder in its neglected splendour. What troubled me was the sudden, as it were material, consciousness of time passing as water flows. It seemed to me that it was only the tenacity of my sentiment that held that woman's body, extended and tranquil above the flood. But when I ventured at last to look at her face I saw her flushed, her teeth clenched—it was visible—her nostrils dilated, and in her narrow, level-glancing eyes a look of inward and frightened ecstasy. The edges of the fur coat had fallen open and I was moved to turn away. I had the same impression as on the evening we parted that something had happened which I did not understand; only this time I had not touched her at all. I really didn't understand. At the slightest whisper I would now have gone out without a murmur, as though that emotion had given her the right to be obeyed. But there was no whisper; and for a long time I stood leaning on my arm, looking into the fire and feeling distinctly between the four walls of

that locked room the unchecked time flow past our two stranded personalities.

And suddenly she spoke. She spoke in that voice that was so profoundly moving without ever being sad, a little wistful perhaps and always the supreme expression of her grace. She asked as if nothing had happened:

“What are you thinking of, amigo?”

I turned about. She was lying on her side, tranquil above the smooth flow of time, again closely wrapped up in her fur, her head resting on the old-gold sofa cushion bearing like everything else in that room the decoratively enlaced letters of her monogram; her face a little pale now, with the crimson lobe of her ear under the tawny mist of her loose hair, the lips a little parted, and her glance of melted sapphire level and motionless, darkened by fatigue.

“Can I think of anything but you?” I murmured, taking a seat near the foot of the couch. “Or rather it isn’t thinking, it is more like the consciousness of you always being present in me, complete to the last hair, to the faintest shade of expression, and that not only when we are apart but when we are together, alone, as close as this. I see you now lying on this couch but that is only the insensible phantom of the real you that is in me. And it is the easier for me to feel this because that image which others see and call by your name—how am I to know that it is anything else but an enchanting mist? You have always eluded me except in one or two moments which seem still more dream-like than the rest. Since I came into this room you have done nothing to destroy my conviction of your unreality apart from myself. You haven’t offered me your hand to touch. Is it because you suspect that apart from me you are but a mere phantom, and that you fear to put it to the test?”

One of her hands was under the fur and the other under her cheek. She made no sound. She didn’t offer to stir. She didn’t move her eyes, not even after I had added after waiting for a while,

“Just what I expected. You are a cold illusion.”

She smiled mysteriously, right away from me, straight at the fire, and that was all.