

## CHAPTER VI

I had a momentary suspicion that I had said something stupid. Her smile amongst many other things seemed to have meant that, too. And I answered it with a certain resignation:

“Well, I don’t know that you are so much mist. I remember once hanging on to you like a drowning man . . . But perhaps I had better not speak of this. It wasn’t so very long ago, and you may . . .”

“I don’t mind. Well . . .”

“Well, I have kept an impression of great solidity. I’ll admit that. A woman of granite.”

“A doctor once told me that I was made to last for ever,” she said.

“But essentially it’s the same thing,” I went on. “Granite, too, is insensible.”

I watched her profile against the pillow and there came on her face an expression I knew well when with an indignation full of suppressed laughter she used to throw at me the word “Imbecile.” I expected it to come, but it didn’t come. I must say, though, that I was swimmy in my head and now and then had a noise as of the sea in my ears, so I might not have heard it. The woman of granite, built to last for ever, continued to look at the glowing logs which made a sort of fiery ruin on the white pile of ashes. “I will tell you how it is,” I said. “When I have you before my eyes there is such a projection of my whole being towards you that I fail to see you distinctly. It was like that from the beginning. I may say that I never saw you distinctly till after we had parted and I thought you had gone from my sight for ever. It was then that you took body in my imagination and that my mind seized on a definite form of you for all its adorations—for its profanations, too. Don’t imagine me grovelling in spiritual abasement before a mere image. I got a grip on you that nothing can shake now.”

“Don’t speak like this,” she said. “It’s too much for me. And there is a whole long night before us.”

“You don’t think that I dealt with you sentimentally enough perhaps? But the sentiment was there; as clear a flame as ever burned on earth from the most remote ages before that eternal thing which is in you, which is your heirloom. And is it my fault that what I had to give was real flame, and not a mystic’s

incense? It is neither your fault nor mine. And now whatever we say to each other at night or in daylight, that sentiment must be taken for granted. It will be there on the day I die—when you won't be there."

She continued to look fixedly at the red embers; and from her lips that hardly moved came the quietest possible whisper: "Nothing would be easier than to die for you."

"Really," I cried. "And you expect me perhaps after this to kiss your feet in a transport of gratitude while I hug the pride of your words to my breast. But as it happens there is nothing in me but contempt for this sublime declaration. How dare you offer me this charlatanism of passion? What has it got to do between you and me who are the only two beings in the world that may safely say that we have no need of shams between ourselves? Is it possible that you are a charlatan at heart? Not from egoism, I admit, but from some sort of fear. Yet, should you be sincere, then—listen well to me—I would never forgive you. I would visit your grave every day to curse you for an evil thing."

"Evil thing," she echoed softly.

"Would you prefer to be a sham—that one could forget?"

"You will never forget me," she said in the same tone at the glowing embers. "Evil or good. But, my dear, I feel neither an evil nor a sham. I have got to be what I am, and that, amigo, is not so easy; because I may be simple, but like all those on whom there is no peace I am not One. No, I am not One!"

"You are all the women in the world," I whispered bending over her. She didn't seem to be aware of anything and only spoke—always to the glow.

"If I were that I would say: God help them then. But that would be more appropriate for Therese. For me, I can only give them my infinite compassion. I have too much reverence in me to invoke the name of a God of whom clever men have robbed me a long time ago. How could I help it? For the talk was clever and—and I had a mind. And I am also, as Therese says, naturally sinful. Yes, my dear, I may be naturally wicked but I am not evil and I could die for you."

"You!" I said. "You are afraid to die."

"Yes. But not for you."

The whole structure of glowing logs fell down, raising a small turmoil of white ashes and sparks. The tiny crash seemed to wake her up thoroughly. She turned

her head upon the cushion to look at me.

“It’s a very extraordinary thing, we two coming together like this,” she said with conviction. “You coming in without knowing I was here and then telling me that you can’t very well go out of the room. That sounds funny. I wouldn’t have been angry if you had said that you wouldn’t. It would have hurt me. But nobody ever paid much attention to my feelings. Why do you smile like this?”

“At a thought. Without any charlatanism of passion I am able to tell you of something to match your devotion. I was not afraid for your sake to come within a hair’s breadth of what to all the world would have been a squalid crime. Note that you and I are persons of honour. And there might have been a criminal trial at the end of it for me. Perhaps the scaffold.”

“Do you say these horrors to make me tremble?”

“Oh, you needn’t tremble. There shall be no crime. I need not risk the scaffold, since now you are safe. But I entered this room meditating resolutely on the ways of murder, calculating possibilities and chances without the slightest compunction. It’s all over now. It was all over directly I saw you here, but it had been so near that I shudder yet.”

She must have been very startled because for a time she couldn’t speak. Then in a faint voice:

“For me! For me!” she faltered out twice.

“For you—or for myself? Yet it couldn’t have been selfish. What would it have been to me that you remained in the world? I never expected to see you again. I even composed a most beautiful letter of farewell. Such a letter as no woman had ever received.”

Instantly she shot out a hand towards me. The edges of the fur cloak fell apart. A wave of the faintest possible scent floated into my nostrils.

“Let me have it,” she said imperiously.

“You can’t have it. It’s all in my head. No woman will read it. I suspect it was something that could never have been written. But what a farewell! And now I suppose we shall say good-bye without even a handshake. But you are safe! Only I must ask you not to come out of this room till I tell you you may.”

I was extremely anxious that Señor Ortega should never even catch a glimpse of

Doña Rita, never guess how near he had been to her. I was extremely anxious the fellow should depart for Tolosa and get shot in a ravine; or go to the Devil in his own way, as long as he lost the track of Doña Rita completely. He then, probably, would get mad and get shut up, or else get cured, forget all about it, and devote himself to his vocation, whatever it was—keep a shop and grow fat. All this flashed through my mind in an instant and while I was still dazzled by those comforting images, the voice of Doña Rita pulled me up with a jerk.

“You mean not out of the house?”

“No, I mean not out of this room,” I said with some embarrassment.

“What do you mean? Is there something in the house then? This is most extraordinary! Stay in this room? And you, too, it seems? Are you also afraid for yourself?”

“I can’t even give you an idea how afraid I was. I am not so much now. But you know very well, Doña Rita, that I never carry any sort of weapon in my pocket.”

“Why don’t you, then?” she asked in a flash of scorn which bewitched me so completely for an instant that I couldn’t even smile at it.

“Because if I am unconventionalized I am an old European,” I murmured gently. “No, Excellentissima, I shall go through life without as much as a switch in my hand. It’s no use you being angry. Adapting to this great moment some words you’ve heard before: I am like that. Such is my character!”

Doña Rita frankly stared at me—a most unusual expression for her to have. Suddenly she sat up.

“Don George,” she said with lovely animation, “I insist upon knowing who is in my house.”

“You insist! . . . But Therese says it is her house.”

Had there been anything handy, such as a cigarette box, for instance, it would have gone sailing through the air spouting cigarettes as it went. Rosy all over, cheeks, neck, shoulders, she seemed lighted up softly from inside like a beautiful transparency. But she didn’t raise her voice.

“You and Therese have sworn my ruin. If you don’t tell me what you mean I will go outside and shout up the stairs to make her come down. I know there is no one but the three of us in the house.”

“Yes, three; but not counting my Jacobin. There is a Jacobin in the house.”

“A Jac . . . ! Oh, George, is this the time to jest?” she began in persuasive tones when a faint but peculiar noise stilled her lips as though they had been suddenly frozen. She became quiet all over instantly. I, on the contrary, made an involuntary movement before I, too, became as still as death. We strained our ears; but that peculiar metallic rattle had been so slight and the silence now was so perfect that it was very difficult to believe one’s senses. Doña Rita looked inquisitively at me. I gave her a slight nod. We remained looking into each other’s eyes while we listened and listened till the silence became unbearable. Doña Rita whispered composedly: “Did you hear?”

“I am asking myself . . . I almost think I didn’t.”

“Don’t shuffle with me. It was a scraping noise.”

“Something fell.”

“Something! What thing? What are the things that fall by themselves? Who is that man of whom you spoke? Is there a man?”

“No doubt about it whatever. I brought him here myself.”

“What for?”

“Why shouldn’t I have a Jacobin of my own? Haven’t you one, too? But mine is a different problem from that white-haired humbug of yours. He is a genuine article. There must be plenty like him about. He has scores to settle with half a dozen people, he says, and he clamours for revolutions to give him a chance.”

“But why did you bring him here?”

“I don’t know—from sudden affection . . . ”

All this passed in such low tones that we seemed to make out the words more by watching each other’s lips than through our sense of hearing. Man is a strange animal. I didn’t care what I said. All I wanted was to keep her in her pose, excited and still, sitting up with her hair loose, softly glowing, the dark brown fur making a wonderful contrast with the white lace on her breast. All I was thinking of was that she was adorable and too lovely for words! I cared for nothing but that sublimely aesthetic impression. It summed up all life, all joy, all poetry! It had a divine strain. I am certain that I was not in my right mind. I suppose I

was not quite sane. I am convinced that at that moment of the four people in the house it was Doña Rita who upon the whole was the most sane. She observed my face and I am sure she read there something of my inward exaltation. She knew what to do. In the softest possible tone and hardly above her breath she commanded: "George, come to yourself."

Her gentleness had the effect of evening light. I was soothed. Her confidence in her own power touched me profoundly. I suppose my love was too great for madness to get hold of me. I can't say that I passed to a complete calm, but I became slightly ashamed of myself. I whispered:

"No, it was not from affection, it was for the love of you that I brought him here. That imbecile H. was going to send him to Tolosa."

"That Jacobin!" Doña Rita was immensely surprised, as she might well have been. Then resigned to the incomprehensible: "Yes," she breathed out, "what did you do with him?"

"I put him to bed in the studio."

How lovely she was with the effort of close attention depicted in the turn of her head and in her whole face honestly trying to approve. "And then?" she inquired.

"Then I came in here to face calmly the necessity of doing away with a human life. I didn't shirk it for a moment. That's what a short twelvemonth has brought me to. Don't think I am reproaching you, O blind force! You are justified because you are. Whatever had to happen you would not even have heard of it."

Horror darkened her marvellous radiance. Then her face became utterly blank with the tremendous effort to understand. Absolute silence reigned in the house. It seemed to me that everything had been said now that mattered in the world; and that the world itself had reached its ultimate stage, had reached its appointed end of an eternal, phantom-like silence. Suddenly Doña Rita raised a warning finger. I had heard nothing and shook my head; but she nodded hers and murmured excitedly,

"Yes, yes, in the fencing-room, as before."

In the same way I answered her: "Impossible! The door is locked and Therese has the key." She asked then in the most cautious manner,

"Have you seen Therese to-night?"

“Yes,” I confessed without misgiving. “I left her making up the fellow’s bed when I came in here.”

“The bed of the Jacobin?” she said in a peculiar tone as if she were humouring a lunatic.

“I think I had better tell you he is a Spaniard—that he seems to know you from early days. . . .” I glanced at her face, it was extremely tense, apprehensive. For myself I had no longer any doubt as to the man and I hoped she would reach the correct conclusion herself. But I believe she was too distracted and worried to think consecutively. She only seemed to feel some terror in the air. In very pity I bent down and whispered carefully near her ear, “His name is Ortega.”

I expected some effect from that name but I never expected what happened. With the sudden, free, spontaneous agility of a young animal she leaped off the sofa, leaving her slippers behind, and in one bound reached almost the middle of the room. The vigour, the instinctive precision of that spring, were something amazing. I just escaped being knocked over. She landed lightly on her bare feet with a perfect balance, without the slightest suspicion of swaying in her instant immobility. It lasted less than a second, then she spun round distractedly and darted at the first door she could see. My own agility was just enough to enable me to grip the back of the fur coat and then catch her round the body before she could wriggle herself out of the sleeves. She was muttering all the time, “No, no, no.” She abandoned herself to me just for an instant during which I got her back to the middle of the room. There she attempted to free herself and I let her go at once. With her face very close to mine, but apparently not knowing what she was looking at she repeated again twice, “No—No,” with an intonation which might well have brought dampness to my eyes but which only made me regret that I didn’t kill the honest Ortega at sight. Suddenly Doña Rita swung round and seizing her loose hair with both hands started twisting it up before one of the sumptuous mirrors. The wide fur sleeves slipped down her white arms. In a brusque movement like a downward stab she transfixed the whole mass of tawny glints and sparks with the arrow of gold which she perceived lying there, before her, on the marble console. Then she sprang away from the glass muttering feverishly, “Out—out—out of this house,” and trying with an awful, senseless stare to dodge past me who had put myself in her way with open arms. At last I managed to seize her by the shoulders and in the extremity of my distress I shook her roughly. If she hadn’t quieted down then I believe my heart would have broken. I spluttered right into her face: “I won’t let you. Here you stay.” She seemed to recognize me at last, and suddenly still, perfectly firm on her white feet, she let her arms fall and, from an abyss of desolation, whispered, “O! George! No! No! Not Ortega.”

There was a passion of mature grief in this tone of appeal. And yet she remained as touching and helpless as a distressed child. It had all the simplicity and depth of a child's emotion. It tugged at one's heart-strings in the same direct way. But what could one do? How could one soothe her? It was impossible to pat her on the head, take her on the knee, give her a chocolate or show her a picture-book. I found myself absolutely without resource. Completely at a loss.

"Yes, Ortega. Well, what of it?" I whispered with immense assurance.