

"I joke very seldom," Blunt protested earnestly. "That's why I haven't mentioned His Majesty—w God preserve. That would have been an exaggeration. . . . However, the end is not yet. We're talking about the beginning. I have heard that some dealers in fine objects, quite mercenary people of course (my mother has an experience in that world), show sometimes an astonishing reluctance to part with some specimens, even at a good price. It must be very funny. It is just possible that the uncle and the aunt have been rolling in tears on the floor, amongst their oranges, or beating their heads against the walls from rage and despair. But I doubt it. And in any case Allègre is not the sort of person that gets into any vulgar trouble. And it's just possible that those people stood open-mouthed at all their magnificence. They weren't poor, you know; therefore it wasn't incumbent on them to be honest. They are still there in the old respectable warehouse, I understand. They have kept their position in their *quartier*, I believe. But they didn't keep their niece. It might have been an act of sacrifice! For I seem to remember hearing that after attending for a while some school round the corner the child had been set to keep the books of that orange business. However it might have been, the first fact in Rita's and Allègre's common history is a journey to Italy, and then to Corsica. You know Allègre had a house in Corsica somewhere. She has it now as she has everything he ever had; and that Corsican palace is the portion that will stick the longest to Doña Rita, I imagine. Who would want to buy a place like that? I suppose nobody would take it for a gift. The fellow was having houses built all over the place. This very house where we are sitting belonged to him. Doña Rita has given it to her sister, I understand. Or at any rate the sister runs it. She is my landlady . . ."