

kept on straying towards that corner. Blunt noticed this and remarked that I seemed to be attracted by the Empress.

"It's disagreeable," I said. "It seems to lurk there like a shy skeleton at the feast. But why do you give the name of Empress to that dummy?"

"Because it sat for days and days in the robes of a Byzantine Empress to a painter. . . . I wonder where he discovered these priceless stuffs. . . . You knew him, I believe?"

Mills lowered his head slowly, then tossed down his throat some wine out of a Venetian goblet.

"This house is full of costly objects. So are all his other houses, so is his place in Paris—that mysterious Pavilion hidden away in Passy somewhere."

Mills knew the Pavilion. The wine had, I suppose, loosened his tongue. Blunt, too, lost something of his reserve. From their talk I gathered the notion of an eccentric personality, a man of great wealth, not so much solitary as difficult of access, a collector of fine things, a painter known only to very few people and not at all to the public market. But as meantime I had been emptying my Venetian goblet with a certain regularity (the amount of heat given out by that iron stove was amazing; it parched one's throat, and the straw-coloured wine didn't seem much stronger than so much pleasantly flavoured water) the voices and the impressions they conveyed acquired something fantastic to my mind. Suddenly I perceived that Mills was sitting in his shirt-sleeves. I had not noticed him taking off his coat. Blunt had unbuttoned his shabby jacket, exposing a lot of starched shirt-front with the white tie under his dark shaved chin. He had a strange air of insolence—or so it seemed to me. I addressed him much lower than I intended really.

"Did you know that extraordinary man?"