

"There is," remarked Mills calmly, "but I don't remember any aunt or uncle in that connection."

"And there are also certain stories of the discovery and acquisition of some unique objects of art. The sly approaches, the astute negotiations, the lying and the circumventing . . . for the love of beauty, you know."

With his dark face and with the perpetual smiles playing about his grimness, Mr. Blunt appeared to me positively satanic. Mills' hand was toying absently with an empty glass. Again they had forgotten my existence altogether.

"I don't know how an object of art would feel," went on Blunt, in an unexpectedly grating voice, which, however, recovered its tone immediately. "I don't know. But I do know that Rita herself was not a Danae, never, not at any time of her life. She didn't mind the holes in her stockings. She wouldn't mind holes in her stockings now. . . . That is if she manages to keep any stockings at all," he added, with a sort of suppressed fury so funnily unexpected that I would have burst into a laugh if I hadn't been lost in astonishment of the simplest kind.

"No—really!?" There was a flash of interest from the quiet Mills.

"Yes, really," Blunt nodded and knitted his brows very devilishly indeed. "She may yet be left without a single pair of stockings."

"The world's a thief," declared Mills, with the utmost composure. "It wouldn't mind robbing a lonely traveller."

"He is so subtle." Blunt remembered my existence for the purpose of that remark and as usual it made me very uncomfortable. "Perfectly true. A lonely traveller. They are all in the scramble from the lowest to the highest. Heavens! What a gang! There was even an Archbishop in it."

"*Vous plaisantez*," said Mills, but without any marked show of incredulity.