

"And yet Henry Allègre is the only person to ask about her, after all this uninterrupted companionship of years, ever since he discovered her; all the time, every breathing moment of it, till, literally, his very last breath. I don't mean to say she nursed him. He had his confidential man for that. He couldn't bear women about his person. But then apparently he couldn't bear this one out of his sight. She's the only woman who ever sat to him, for he would never suffer a model inside his house. That's why the 'Girl in the Hat' and the 'Byzantine Empress' have that family air, though neither of them is really a likeness of Doña Rita. . . . You know my mother? "

Mills inclined his body slightly and a fugitive smile vanished from his lips. Blunt's eyes were fastened on the very centre of his empty plate.

"Then perhaps you know my mother's artistic and literary associations," Blunt went on in a subtly changed tone. "My mother has been writing verse since she was a girl of fifteen. She's still writing verse. She's still fifteen—a spoiled girl of genius. So she requested one of her poet friends—no less than Versoy himself—to arrange for a visit to Henry Allègre's house. At first he thought he hadn't heard aright. You must know that for my mother a man that doesn't jump out of his skin for any woman's caprice is not chivalrous. But perhaps you do know? . . ."

Mills shook his head with an amused air. Blunt, who had raised his eyes from his plate to look at him, started afresh with great deliberation.

"She gives no peace to herself or her friends. My mother's exquisitely absurd. You understand that all these painters, poets, art collectors (and dealers in bric-à-brac, he interjected through his teeth) of my mother are not in my way; but Versoy lives more like a man of