

JOSEPH CONRAD, FORD FORD
MADOX

THE
INHERITORS

Ford Ford
Joseph Conrad
The Inheritors

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The Inheritors:

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CHAPTER ONE

"Ideas," she said. "Oh, as for ideas – "

"Well?" I hazarded, "as for ideas – ?"

We went through the old gateway and I cast a glance over my shoulder. The noon sun was shining over the masonry, over the little saints' effigies, over the little fretted canopies, the grime and the white streaks of bird-dropping.

"There," I said, pointing toward it, "doesn't that suggest something to you?"

She made a motion with her head – half negative, half contemptuous.

"But," I stuttered, "the associations – the ideas – the historical ideas – "

She said nothing.

"You Americans," I began, but her smile stopped me. It was as if she were amused at the utterances of an old lady shocked by the habits of the daughters of the day. It was the smile of a person who is confident of superseding one fatally.

In conversations of any length one of the parties assumes the superiority – superiority of rank, intellectual or social. In this

conversation she, if she did not attain to tacitly acknowledged temperamental superiority, seemed at least to claim it, to have no doubt as to its ultimate according. I was unused to this. I was a talker, proud of my conversational powers.

I had looked at her before; now I cast a sideways, critical glance at her. I came out of my moodiness to wonder what type this was. She had good hair, good eyes, and some charm. Yes. And something besides – a something – a something that was not an attribute of her beauty. The modelling of her face was so perfect and so delicate as to produce an effect of transparency, yet there was no suggestion of frailness; her glance had an extraordinary strength of life. Her hair was fair and gleaming, her cheeks coloured as if a warm light had fallen on them from somewhere. She was familiar till it occurred to you that she was strange.

"Which way are you going?" she asked.

"I am going to walk to Dover," I answered.

"And I may come with you?"

I looked at her – intent on divining her in that one glance. It was of course impossible. "There will be time for analysis," I thought.

"The roads are free to all," I said. "You are not an American?"

She shook her head. No. She was not an Australian either, she came from none of the British colonies.

"You are not English," I affirmed. "You speak too well." I was piqued. She did not answer. She smiled again and I grew angry.

In the cathedral she had smiled at the verger's commendation of particularly abominable restorations, and that smile had drawn me toward her, had emboldened me to offer deferential and condemnatory remarks as to the plaster-of-Paris mouldings. You know how one addresses a young lady who is obviously capable of taking care of herself. That was how I had come across her. She had smiled at the gabble of the cathedral guide as he showed the obsessed troop, of which we had formed units, the place of martyrdom of Blessed Thomas, and her smile had had just that quality of superseder's contempt. It had pleased me then; but, now that she smiled thus past me – it was not quite at me – in the crooked highways of the town, I was irritated. After all, I was somebody; I was not a cathedral verger. I had a fancy for myself in those days – a fancy that solitude and brooding had crystallised into a habit of mind. I was a writer with high – with the highest – ideals. I had withdrawn myself from the world, lived isolated, hidden in the countryside, lived as hermits do, on the hope of one day doing something – of putting greatness on paper. She suddenly fathomed my thoughts: "You write," she affirmed. I asked how she knew, wondered what she had read of mine – there was so little.

"Are you a popular author?" she asked.

"Alas, no!" I answered. "You must know that."

"You would like to be?"

"We should all of us like," I answered; "though it is true some of us protest that we aim for higher things."

"I see," she said, musingly. As far as I could tell she was coming to some decision. With an instinctive dislike to any such proceeding as regarded myself, I tried to cut across her unknown thoughts.

"But, really – " I said, "I am quite a commonplace topic. Let us talk about yourself. Where do you come from?"

It occurred to me again that I was intensely unacquainted with her type.

Here was the same smile – as far as I could see, exactly the same smile.

There are fine shades in smiles as in laughs, as in tones of voice. I

seemed unable to hold my tongue.

"Where do you come from?" I asked. "You must belong to one of the new nations. You are a foreigner, I'll swear, because you have such a fine contempt for us. You irritate me so that you might almost be a Prussian. But it is obvious that you are of a new nation that is beginning to find itself."

"Oh, we are to inherit the earth, if that is what you mean," she said.

"The phrase is comprehensive," I said. I was determined not to give myself away. "Where in the world do you come from?" I repeated. The question, I was quite conscious, would have sufficed, but in the hope, I suppose, of establishing my intellectual superiority, I continued:

"You know, fair play's a jewel. Now I'm quite willing to

give you information as to myself. I have already told you the essentials – you ought to tell me something. It would only be fair play."

"Why should there be any fair play?" she asked.

"What have you to say against that?" I said. "Do you not number it among your national characteristics?"

"You really wish to know where I come from?"

I expressed light-hearted acquiescence.

"Listen," she said, and uttered some sounds. I felt a kind of unholy emotion. It had come like a sudden, suddenly hushed, intense gust of wind through a breathless day. "What – what!" I cried.

"I said I inhabit the Fourth Dimension."

I recovered my equanimity with the thought that I had been visited by some stroke of an obscure and unimportant physical kind.

"I think we must have been climbing the hill too fast for me," I said, "I have not been very well. I missed what you said." I was certainly out of breath.

"I said I inhabit the Fourth Dimension," she repeated with admirable gravity.

"Oh, come," I expostulated, "this is playing it rather low down. You walk a convalescent out of breath and then propound riddles to him."

I was recovering my breath, and, with it, my inclination to expand. Instead, I looked at her. I was beginning to understand.

It was obvious enough that she was a foreigner in a strange land, in a land that brought out her national characteristics. She must be of some race, perhaps Semitic, perhaps Slav – of some incomprehensible race. I had never seen a Circassian, and there used to be a tradition that Circassian women were beautiful, were fair-skinned, and so on. What was repelling in her was accounted for by this difference in national point of view. One is, after all, not so very remote from the horse. What one does not understand one shies at – finds sinister, in fact. And she struck me as sinister.

"You won't tell me who you are?" I said.

"I have done so," she answered.

"If you expect me to believe that you inhabit a mathematical monstrosity, you are mistaken. You are, really."

She turned round and pointed at the city.

"Look!" she said.

We had climbed the western hill. Below our feet, beneath a sky that the wind had swept clean of clouds, was the valley; a broad bowl, shallow, filled with the purple of smoke-wreaths. And above the mass of red roofs there soared the golden stonework of the cathedral tower. It was a vision, the last word of a great art. I looked at her. I was moved, and I knew that the glory of it must have moved her.

She was smiling. "Look!" she repeated. I looked.

There was the purple and the red, and the golden tower, the vision, the last word. She said something – uttered some sound.

What had happened? I don't know. It all looked contemptible.

One seemed to see something beyond, something vaster – vaster than cathedrals, vaster than the conception of the gods to whom cathedrals were raised. The tower reeled out of the perpendicular. One saw beyond it, not roofs, or smoke, or hills, but an unrealised, an unrealisable infinity of space.

It was merely momentary. The tower filled its place again and I looked at her.

"What the devil," I said, hysterically – "what the devil do you play these tricks upon me for?"

"You see," she answered, "the rudiments of the sense are there."

"You must excuse me if I fail to understand," I said, grasping after fragments of dropped dignity. "I am subject to fits of giddiness." I felt a need for covering a species of nakedness. "Pardon my swearing," I added; a proof of recovered equanimity.

We resumed the road in silence. I was physically and mentally shaken; and I tried to deceive myself as to the cause. After some time I said:

"You insist then in preserving your – your incognito."

"Oh, I make no mystery of myself," she answered.

"You have told me that you come from the Fourth Dimension," I remarked, ironically.

"I come from the Fourth Dimension," she said, patiently. She had the air of one in a position of difficulty; of one aware of it and ready to brave it. She had the listlessness of an enlightened person who has to explain, over and over again, to stupid children

some rudimentary point of the multiplication table.

She seemed to divine my thoughts, to be aware of their very wording. She even said "yes" at the opening of her next speech.

"Yes," she said. "It is as if I were to try to explain the new ideas of any age to a person of the age that has gone before." She paused, seeking a concrete illustration that would touch me. "As if I were explaining to Dr. Johnson the methods and the ultimate vogue of the cockney school of poetry."

"I understand," I said, "that you wish me to consider myself as relatively a Choctaw. But what I do not understand is; what bearing that has upon – upon the Fourth Dimension, I think you said?"

"I will explain," she replied.

"But you must explain as if you were explaining to a Choctaw," I said, pleasantly, "you must be concise and convincing."

She answered: "I will."

She made a long speech of it; I condense. I can't remember her exact words – there were so many; but she spoke like a book. There was something exquisitely piquant in her choice of words, in her expressionless voice. I seemed to be listening to a phonograph reciting a technical work. There was a touch of the incongruous, of the mad, that appealed to me – the commonplace rolling-down landscape, the straight, white, undulating road that, from the tops of rises, one saw running for miles and miles, straight, straight, and so white. Filtering down through the great

blue of the sky came the thrilling of innumerable skylarks. And I was listening to a parody of a scientific work recited by a phonograph.

I heard the nature of the Fourth Dimension – heard that it was an inhabited plane – invisible to our eyes, but omnipresent, heard that I had seen it when Bell Harry had reeled before my eyes. I heard the Dimensionists described: a race clear-sighted, eminently practical, incredible; with no ideals, prejudices, or remorse; with no feeling for art and no reverence for life; free from any ethical tradition; callous to pain, weakness, suffering and death, as if they had been invulnerable and immortal. She did not say that they were immortal, however. "You would – you will – hate us," she concluded. And I seemed only then to come to myself. The power of her imagination was so great that I fancied myself face to face with the truth. I supposed she had been amusing herself; that she should have tried to frighten me was inadmissible. I don't pretend that I was completely at my ease, but I said, amiably: "You certainly have succeeded in making these beings hateful."

"I have made nothing," she said with a faint smile, and went on amusing herself. She would explain origins, now.

"Your" – she used the word as signifying, I suppose, the inhabitants of the country, or the populations of the earth – "your ancestors were mine, but long ago you were crowded out of the Dimension as we are to-day, you overran the earth as we shall do to-morrow. But you contracted diseases, as we shall contract

them, – beliefs, traditions; fears; ideas of pity ... of love. You grew luxurious in the worship of your ideals, and sorrowful; you solaced yourselves with creeds, with arts – you have forgotten!"

She spoke with calm conviction; with an overwhelming and dispassionate assurance. She was stating facts; not professing a faith. We approached a little roadside inn. On a bench before the door a dun-clad country fellow was asleep, his head on the table.

"Put your fingers in your ears," my companion commanded.

I humoured her.

I saw her lips move. The countryman started, shuddered, and by a clumsy, convulsive motion of his arms, upset his quart. He rubbed his eyes. Before he had voiced his emotions we had passed on.

"I have seen a horse-coper do as much for a stallion," I commented. "I know there are words that have certain effects. But you shouldn't play pranks like the low-comedy devil in Faustus."

"It isn't good form, I suppose?" she sneered.

"It's a matter of feeling," I said, hotly, "the poor fellow has lost his beer."

"What's that to me?" she commented, with the air of one affording a concrete illustration.

"It's a good deal to him," I answered.

"But what to me?"

I said nothing. She ceased her exposition immediately afterward, growing silent as suddenly as she had become

discursive. It was rather as if she had learnt a speech by heart and had come to the end of it. I was quite at a loss as to what she was driving at. There was a newness, a strangeness about her; sometimes she struck me as mad, sometimes as frightfully sane. We had a meal somewhere – a meal that broke the current of her speech – and then, in the late afternoon, took a by-road and wandered in secluded valleys. I had been ill; trouble of the nerves, brooding, the monotony of life in the shadow of unsuccess. I had an errand in this part of the world and had been approaching it deviously, seeking the normal in its quiet hollows, trying to get back to my old self. I did not wish to think of how I should get through the year – of the thousand little things that matter. So I talked and she – she listened very well.

But topics exhaust themselves and, at the last, I myself brought the talk round to the Fourth Dimension. We were sauntering along the forgotten valley that lies between Hardves and Stelling Minnis; we had been silent for several minutes. For me, at least, the silence was pregnant with the undefinable emotions that, at times, run in currents between man and woman. The sun was getting low and it was shadowy in those shrouded hollows. I laughed at some thought, I forget what, and then began to badger her with questions. I tried to exhaust the possibilities of the Dimensionist idea, made grotesque suggestions. I said: "And when a great many of you have been crowded out of the Dimension and invaded the earth you will do so and so – " something preposterous and ironical. She coldly dissented,

and at once the irony appeared as gross as the jocularity of a commercial traveller. Sometimes she signified: "Yes, that is what we shall do;" signified it without speaking – by some gesture perhaps, I hardly know what. There was something impressive – something almost regal – in this manner of hers; it was rather frightening in those lonely places, which were so forgotten, so gray, so closed in. There was something of the past world about the hanging woods, the little veils of unmoving mist – as if time did not exist in those furrows of the great world; and one was so absolutely alone; anything might have happened. I grew weary of the sound of my tongue. But when I wanted to cease, I found she had on me the effect of some incredible stimulant.

We came to the end of the valley where the road begins to climb the southern hill, out into the open air. I managed to maintain an uneasy silence. From her grimly dispassionate reiterations I had attained to a clear idea, even to a visualisation, of her fantastic conception – allegory, madness, or whatever it was. She certainly forced it home. The Dimensionists were to come in swarms, to materialise, to devour like locusts, to be all the more irresistible because indistinguishable. They were to come like snow in the night: in the morning one would look out and find the world white; they were to come as the gray hairs come, to sap the strength of us as the years sap the strength of the muscles. As to methods, we should be treated as we ourselves treat the inferior races. There would be no fighting, no killing; we – our whole social system – would break as a beam snaps,

because we were worm-eaten with altruism and ethics. We, at our worst, had a certain limit, a certain stage where we exclaimed: "No, this is playing it too low down," because we had scruples that acted like handicapping weights. She uttered, I think, only two sentences of connected words: "We shall race with you and we shall not be weighted," and, "We shall merely sink you lower by our weight." All the rest went like this:

"But then," I would say ... "we shall not be able to trust anyone. Anyone may be one of you..." She would answer: "Anyone." She prophesied a reign of terror for us. As one passed one's neighbour in the street one would cast sudden, piercing glances at him.

I was silent. The birds were singing the sun down. It was very dark among the branches, and from minute to minute the colours of the world deepened and grew sombre.

"But – " I said. A feeling of unrest was creeping over me. "But why do you tell me all this?" I asked. "Do you think I will enlist with you?"

"You will have to in the end," she said, "and I do not wish to waste my strength. If you had to work unwittingly you would resist and resist and resist. I should have to waste my power on you. As it is, you will resist only at first, then you will begin to understand. You will see how we will bring a man down – a man, you understand, with a great name, standing for probity and honour. You will see the nets drawing closer and closer, and you will begin to understand. Then you will cease resisting, that

is all."

I was silent. A June nightingale began to sing, a trifle hoarsely. We seemed to be waiting for some signal. The things of the night came and went, rustled through the grass, rustled through the leafage. At last I could not even see the white gleam of her face...

I stretched out my hand and it touched hers. I seized it without an instant of hesitation. "How could I resist you?" I said, and heard my own whisper with a kind of amazement at its emotion. I raised her hand. It was very cold and she seemed to have no thought of resistance; but before it touched my lips something like a panic of prudence had overcome me. I did not know what it would lead to – and I remembered that I did not even know who she was. From the beginning she had struck me as sinister and now, in the obscurity, her silence and her coldness seemed to be a passive threatening of unknown entanglement. I let her hand fall.

"We must be getting on," I said.

The road was shrouded and overhung by branches. There was a kind of translucent light, enough to see her face, but I kept my eyes on the ground. I was vexed. Now that it was past the episode appeared to be a lost opportunity. We were to part in a moment, and her rare mental gifts and her unfamiliar, but very vivid, beauty made the idea of parting intensely disagreeable. She had filled me with a curiosity that she had done nothing whatever to satisfy, and with a fascination that was very nearly a fear. We mounted the hill and came out on a stretch of soft common

sward. Then the sound of our footsteps ceased and the world grew more silent than ever. There were little enclosed fields all round us. The moon threw a wan light, and gleaming mist hung in the ragged hedges. Broad, soft roads ran away into space on every side.

"And now ..." I asked, at last, "shall we ever meet again?" My voice came huskily, as if I had not spoken for years and years.

"Oh, very often," she answered.

"Very often?" I repeated. I hardly knew whether I was pleased or dismayed. Through the gate-gap in a hedge, I caught a glimmer of a white house front. It seemed to belong to another world; to another order of things.

"Ah ... here is Callan's," I said. "This is where I was going..."

"I know," she answered; "we part here."

"To meet again?" I asked.

"Oh ... to meet again; why, yes, to meet again."

CHAPTER TWO

Her figure faded into the darkness, as pale things waver down into deep water, and as soon as she disappeared my sense of humour returned. The episode appeared more clearly, as a flirtation with an enigmatic, but decidedly charming, chance travelling companion. The girl was a riddle, and a riddle once guessed is a very trivial thing. She, too, would be a very trivial thing when I had found a solution. It occurred to me that she wished me to regard her as a symbol, perhaps, of the future – as a type of those who are to inherit the earth, in fact. She had been playing the fool with me, in her insolent modernity. She had wished me to understand that I was old-fashioned; that the frame of mind of which I and my fellows were the inheritors was over and done with. We were to be compulsorily retired; to stand aside superannuated. It was obvious that she was better equipped for the swiftness of life. She had a something – not only quickness of wit, not only ruthless determination, but a something quite different and quite indefinably more impressive. Perhaps it was only the confidence of the superseder, the essential quality that makes for the empire of the Occidental. But I was not a negro – not even relatively a Hindoo. I was somebody, confound it, I was somebody.

As an author, I had been so uniformly unsuccessful, so absolutely unrecognised, that I had got into the way of regarding

myself as ahead of my time, as a worker for posterity. It was a habit of mind – the only revenge that I could take upon spiteful Fate. This girl came to confound me with the common herd – she declared herself to be that very posterity for which I worked.

She was probably a member of some clique that called themselves Fourth Dimensionists – just as there had been pre-Raphaelites. It was a matter of cant allegory. I began to wonder how it was that I had never heard of them. And how on earth had they come to hear of me!

"She must have read something of mine," I found myself musing: "the Jenkins story perhaps. It must have been the Jenkins story; they gave it a good place in their rotten magazine. She must have seen that it was the real thing, and..." When one is an author one looks at things in that way, you know.

By that time I was ready to knock at the door of the great Callan. I seemed to be jerked into the commonplace medium of a great, great – oh, an infinitely great – novelist's home life. I was led into a well-lit drawing-room, welcomed by the great man's wife, gently propelled into a bedroom, made myself tidy, descended and was introduced into the sanctum, before my eyes had grown accustomed to the lamp-light. Callan was seated upon his sofa surrounded by an admiring crowd of very local personages. I forget what they looked like. I think there was a man whose reddish beard did not become him and another whose face might have been improved by the addition of a reddish beard; there was also an extremely moody dark man and I vaguely

recollect a person who lisped.

They did not talk much; indeed there was very little conversation. What there was Callan supplied. He – spoke – very – slowly – and – very – authoritatively, like a great actor whose aim is to hold the stage as long as possible. The raising of his heavy eyelids at the opening door conveyed the impression of a dark, mental weariness; and seemed somehow to give additional length to his white nose. His short, brown beard was getting very grey, I thought. With his lofty forehead and with his superior, yet propitiatory smile, I was of course familiar. Indeed one saw them on posters in the street. The notables did not want to talk. They wanted to be spell-bound – and they were. Callan sat there in an appropriate attitude – the one in which he was always photographed. One hand supported his head, the other toyed with his watch-chain. His face was uniformly solemn, but his eyes were disconcertingly furtive. He cross-questioned me as to my walk from Canterbury; remarked that the cathedral was a – magnificent – Gothic – Monument and set me right as to the lie of the roads. He seemed pleased to find that I remembered very little of what I ought to have noticed on the way. It gave him an opportunity for the display of his local erudition.

"A – remarkable woman – used – to – live – in – the – cottage – next – the – mill – at – Stelling," he said; "she was the original of Kate Wingfield."

"In your 'Boldero?'" the chorus chorussed.

Remembrance of the common at Stelling – of the glimmering

white faces of the shadowy cottages – was like a cold waft of mist to me. I forgot to say "Indeed!"

"She was – a very – remarkable – woman – She – "

I found myself wondering which was real; the common with its misty hedges and the blurred moon; or this room with its ranks of uniformly bound books and its bust of the great man that threw a portentous shadow upward from its pedestal behind the lamp.

Before I had entirely recovered myself, the notables were departing to catch the last train. I was left alone with Callan.

He did not trouble to resume his attitude for me, and when he did speak, spoke faster.

"Interesting man, Mr. Jinks?" he said; "you recognised him?"

"No," I said; "I don't think I ever met him."

Callan looked annoyed.

"I thought I'd got him pretty well. He's Hector Steele. In my 'Blanfield,'" he added.

"Indeed!" I said. I had never been able to read "Blanfield."

"Indeed, ah, yes – of course."

There was an awkward pause.

"The whiskey will be here in a minute," he said, suddenly. "I don't have it in when Whatnot's here. He's the Rector, you know; a great temperance man. When we've had a – a modest quencher – we'll get to business."

"Oh," I said, "your letters really meant – "

"Of course," he answered. "Oh, here's the whiskey. Well now, Fox was down here the other night. You know Fox, of course?"

"Didn't he start the rag called – ?"

"Yes, yes," Callan answered, hastily, "he's been very successful in launching papers. Now he's trying his hand with a new one. He's any amount of backers – big names, you know. He's to run my next as a *feuilleton*. This – this venture is to be rather more serious in tone than any that he's done hitherto. You understand?"

"Why, yes," I said; "but I don't see where I come in."

Callan took a meditative sip of whiskey, added a little more water, a little more whiskey, and then found the mixture to his liking.

"You see," he said, "Fox got a letter here to say that Wilkinson had died suddenly – some affection of the heart. Wilkinson was to have written a series of personal articles on prominent people. Well, Fox was nonplussed and I put in a word for you."

"I'm sure I'm much – " I began.

"Not at all, not at all," Callan interrupted, blandly. "I've known you and you've known me for a number of years."

A sudden picture danced before my eyes – the portrait of the Callan of the old days – the fawning, shady individual, with the seedy clothes, the furtive eyes and the obliging manners.

"Why, yes," I said; "but I don't see that that gives me any claim."

Callan cleared his throat.

"The lapse of time," he said in his grand manner, "rivets what we may call the bands of association."

He paused to inscribe this sentence on the tablets of his memory. It would be dragged in – to form a purple patch – in his new serial.

"You see," he went on, "I've written a good deal of autobiographical matter and it would verge upon self-advertisement to do more. You know how much I dislike *that*. So I showed Fox your sketch in the *Kensington*."

"The Jenkins story?" I said. "How did you come to see it?"

"Then send me the *Kensington*," he answered. There was a touch of sourness in his tone, and I remembered that the *Kensington* I had seen had been ballasted with seven goodly pages by Callan himself – seven unreadable packed pages of a serial.

"As I was saying," Callan began again, "you ought to know me very well, and I suppose you are acquainted with my books. As for the rest, I will give you what material you want."

"But, my dear Callan," I said, "I've never tried my hand at that sort of thing."

Callan silenced me with a wave of his hand.

"It struck both Fox and myself that your – your 'Jenkins' was just what was wanted," he said; "of course, that was a study of a kind of broken-down painter. But it was well done."

I bowed my head. Praise from Callan was best acknowledged in silence.

"You see, what we want, or rather what Fox wants," he explained, "is a kind of series of studies of celebrities *chez eux*. Of course, they are not broken down. But if you can treat them

as you treated Jenkins – get them in their studies, surrounded by what in their case stands for the broken lay figures and the faded serge curtains – it will be exactly the thing. It will be a new line, or rather – what is a great deal better, mind you – an old line treated in a slightly, very slightly different way. That's what the public wants."

"Ah, yes," I said, "that's what the public wants. But all the same, it's been done time out of mind before. Why, I've seen photographs of you and your arm-chair and your pen-wiper and so on, half a score of times in the sixpenny magazines."

Callan again indicated bland superiority with a wave of his hand.

"You undervalue yourself," he said.

I murmured – "Thanks."

"This is to be – not a mere pandering to curiosity – but an attempt to get at the inside of things – to get the atmosphere, so to speak; not merely to catalogue furniture."

He was quoting from the prospectus of the new paper, and then cleared his throat for the utterance of a tremendous truth.

"Photography – is not – Art," he remarked.

The fantastic side of our colloquy began to strike me.

"After all," I thought to myself, "why shouldn't that girl have played at being a denizen of another sphere? She did it ever so much better than Callan. She did it too well, I suppose."

"The price is very decent," Callan chimed in. "I don't know how much per thousand, ...but..."

I found myself reckoning, against my will as it were.

"You'll do it, I suppose?" he said.

I thought of my debts . . . "Why, yes, I suppose so," I answered.

"But who are the others that I am to provide with atmospheres?"

Callan shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, all sorts of prominent people – soldiers, statesmen, Mr. Churchill, the Foreign Minister, artists, preachers – all sorts of people."

"All sorts of glory," occurred to me.

"The paper will stand expenses up to a reasonable figure," Callan reassured me.

"It'll be a good joke for a time," I said. "I'm infinitely obliged to you."

He warded off my thanks with both hands.

"I'll just send a wire to Fox to say that you accept," he said, rising. He seated himself at his desk in the appropriate attitude. He had an appropriate attitude for every vicissitude of his life. These he had struck before so many people that even in the small hours of the morning he was ready for the kodak wielder. Beside him he had every form of labour-saver; every kind of literary knick-knack. There were book-holders that swung into positions suitable to appropriate attitudes; there were piles of little green boxes with red capital letters of the alphabet upon them, and big red boxes with black small letters. There was a writing-lamp that cast an æsthetic glow upon another appropriate attitude – and there was one typewriter with note-paper upon it, and another

with MS. paper already in position.

"My God!" I thought – "to these heights the Muse soars."

As I looked at the gleaming pillars of the typewriters, the image of my own desk appeared to me; chipped, ink-stained, gloriously dusty. I thought that when again I lit my battered old tin lamp I should see ashes and match-ends; a tobacco-jar, an old gnawed penny penholder, bits of pink blotting-paper, match-boxes, old letters, and dust everywhere. And I knew that my attitude – when I sat at it – would be inappropriate.

Callan was ticking off the telegram upon his machine. "It will go in the morning at eight," he said.

CHAPTER THREE

To encourage me, I suppose, Callan gave me the proof-sheets of his next to read in bed. The thing was so bad that it nearly sickened me of him and his jobs. I tried to read the stuff; to read it conscientiously, to read myself to sleep with it. I was under obligations to old Cal and I wanted to do him justice, but the thing was impossible. I fathomed a sort of a plot. It dealt in fratricide with a touch of adultery; a Great Moral Purpose loomed in the background. It would have been a dully readable novel but for that; as it was, it was intolerable. It was amazing that Cal himself could put out such stuff; that he should have the impudence. He was not a fool, not by any means a fool. It revolted me more than a little.

I came to it out of a different plane of thought. I may not have been able to write then – or I may; but I did know enough to recognise the flagrantly, the indecently bad, and, upon my soul, the idea that I, too, must cynically offer this sort of stuff if I was ever to sell my tens of thousands very nearly sent me back to my solitude. Callan had begun very much as I was beginning now; he had even, I believe, had ideals in his youth and had starved a little. It was rather trying to think that perhaps I was really no more than another Callan, that, when at last I came to review my life, I should have much such a record to look back upon. It disgusted me a little, and when I put out the light the horrors

settled down upon me.

I woke in a shivering frame of mind, ashamed to meet Callan's eye. It was as if he must be aware of my over-night thoughts, as if he must think me a fool who quarrelled with my victuals. He gave no signs of any such knowledge – was dignified, cordial, discussed his breakfast with gusto, opened his letters, and so on. An anæmic amanuensis was taking notes for appropriate replies. How could I tell him that I would not do the work, that I was too proud and all the rest of it? He would have thought me a fool, would have stiffened into hostility, I should have lost my last chance. And, in the broad light of day, I was loath to do that.

He began to talk about indifferent things; we glided out on to a current of mediocre conversation. The psychological moment, if there were any such, disappeared.

Someone bearing my name had written to express an intention of offering personal worship that afternoon. The prospect seemed to please the great Cal. He was used to such things; he found them pay, I suppose. We began desultorily to discuss the possibility of the writer's being a relation of mine; I doubted. I had no relations that I knew of; there was a phenomenal old aunt who had inherited the acres and respectability of the Etchingham Grangers, but she was not the kind of person to worship a novelist. I, the poor last of the family, was without the pale, simply because I, too, was a novelist. I explained these things to Callan and he commented on them, found it strange how small or how large, I forget which, the world was. Since his own

apotheosis shoals of Callans had claimed relationship.

I ate my breakfast. Afterward, we set about the hatching of that article – the thought of it sickens me even now. You will find it in the volume along with the others; you may see how I lugged in Callan's surroundings, his writing-room, his dining-room, the romantic arbour in which he found it easy to write love-scenes, the clipped trees like peacocks and the trees clipped like bears, and all the rest of the background for appropriate attitudes. He was satisfied with any arrangements of words that suggested a gentle awe on the part of the writer.

"Yes, yes," he said once or twice, "that's just the touch, just the touch – very nice. But don't you think..." We lunched after some time.

I was so happy. Quite pathetically happy. It had come so easy to me. I had doubted my ability to do the sort of thing; but it had written itself, as money spends itself, and I was going to earn money like that. The whole of my past seemed a mistake – a childishness. I had kept out of this sort of thing because I had thought it below me; I had kept out of it and had starved my body and warped my mind. Perhaps I had even damaged my work by this isolation. To understand life one must live – and I had only brooded. But, by Jove, I would try to live now.

Callan had retired for his accustomed siesta and I was smoking pipe after pipe over a confoundedly bad French novel that I had found in the book-shelves. I must have been dozing. A voice from behind my back announced:

"Miss Etchingam Granger!" and added – "Mr. Callan will be down directly." I laid down my pipe, wondered whether I ought to have been smoking when Cal expected visitors, and rose to my feet.

"You!" I said, sharply. She answered, "You see." She was smiling. She had been so much in my thoughts that I was hardly surprised – the thing had even an air of pleasant inevitability about it.

"You must be a cousin of mine," I said, "the name – "

"Oh, call it sister," she answered.

I was feeling inclined for farce, if blessed chance would throw it in my way. You see, I was going to live at last, and life for me meant irresponsibility.

"Ah!" I said, ironically, "you are going to be a sister to me, as they say." She might have come the bogy over me last night in the moonlight, but now ... There was a spice of danger about it, too, just a touch lurking somewhere. Besides, she was good-looking and well set up, and I couldn't see what could touch me. Even if it did, even if I got into a mess, I had no relatives, not even a friend, to be worried about me. I stood quite alone, and I half relished the idea of getting into a mess – it would be part of life, too. I was going to have a little money, and she excited my curiosity. I was tingling to know what she was really at.

"And one might ask," I said, "what you are doing in this – in this..." I was at a loss for a word to describe the room – the smugness parading as professional Bohemianism.

"Oh, I am about my own business," she said, "I told you last night – have you forgotten?"

"Last night you were to inherit the earth," I reminded her, "and one doesn't start in a place like this. Now I should have gone – well – I should have gone to some politician's house – a cabinet minister's – say to Gurnard's. He's the coming man, isn't he?"

"Why, yes," she answered, "he's the coming man."

You will remember that, in those days, Gurnard was only the dark horse of the ministry. I knew little enough of these things, despised politics generally; they simply didn't interest me. Gurnard I disliked platonically; perhaps because his face was a little enigmatic – a little repulsive. The country, then, was in the position of having no Opposition and a Cabinet with two distinct strains in it – the Churchill and the Gurnard – and Gurnard was the dark horse.

"Oh, you should join your flats," I said, pleasantly. "If he's the coming man, where do you come in?.. Unless he, too, is a Dimensionist."

"Oh, both – both," she answered. I admired the tranquillity with which she converted my points into her own. And I was very happy – it struck me as a pleasant sort of fooling...

"I suppose you will let me know some day who you are?" I said.

"I have told you several times," she answered.

"Oh, you won't frighten me to-day," I asserted, "not here, you know, and anyhow, why should you want to?"

"I have told you," she said again.

"You've told me you were my sister," I said; "but my sister died years and years ago. Still, if it suits you, if you want to be somebody's sister ..."

"It suits me," she answered – "I want to be placed, you see."

I knew that my name was good enough to place anyone. We had been the Grangers of Etchingam since – oh, since the flood. And if the girl wanted to be my sister and a Granger, why the devil shouldn't she, so long as she would let me continue on this footing? I hadn't talked to a woman – not to a well set-up one – for ages and ages. It was as if I had come back from one of the places to which younger sons exile themselves, and for all I knew it might be the correct thing for girls to elect brothers nowadays in one set or another.

"Oh, tell me some more," I said, "one likes to know about one's sister. You and the Right Honourable Charles Gurnard are Dimensionists, and who are the others of your set?"

"There is only one," she answered. And would you believe it! – it seems he was Fox, the editor of my new paper.

"You select your characters with charming indiscriminateness," I said.

"Fox is only a sort of toad, you know – he won't get far."

"Oh, he'll go far," she answered, "but he won't get there. Fox is fighting against us."

"Oh, so you don't dwell in amity?" I said. "You fight for your own hands."

"We fight for our own hands," she answered, "I shall throw Gurnard over when he's pulled the chestnuts out of the fire."

I was beginning to get a little tired of this. You see, for me, the scene was a veiled flirtation and I wanted to get on. But I had to listen to her fantastic scheme of things. It was really a duel between Fox, the Journal-founder, and Gurnard, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Fox, with Churchill, the Foreign Minister, and his supporters, for pieces, played what he called "the Old Morality business" against Gurnard, who passed for a cynically immoral politician.

I grew more impatient. I wanted to get out of this stage into something more personal. I thought she invented this sort of stuff to keep me from getting at her errand at Callan's. But I didn't want to know her errand; I wanted to make love to her. As for Fox and Gurnard and Churchill, the Foreign Minister, who really was a sympathetic character and did stand for political probity, she might be uttering allegorical truths, but I was not interested in them. I wanted to start some topic that would lead away from this Dimensionist farce.

"My dear sister," I began... Callan always moved about like a confounded eavesdropper, wore carpet slippers, and stepped round the corners of screens. I expect he got copy like that.

"So, she's your sister?" he said suddenly, from behind me. "Strange that you shouldn't recognise the handwriting..."

"Oh, we don't correspond," I said light-heartedly, "we are *so* different." I wanted to take a rise out of the creeping animal that

he was. He confronted her blandly.

"You must be the little girl that I remember," he said. He had known my parents ages ago. That, indeed, was how I came to know him; I wouldn't have chosen him for a friend. "I thought Granger said you were dead ... but one gets confused..."

"Oh, we see very little of each other," she answered. "Arthur might have said I was dead – he's capable of anything, you know." She spoke with an assumption of sisterly indifference that was absolutely striking. I began to think she must be an actress of genius, she did it so well. She *was* the sister who had remained within the pale; I, the rascalion of a brother whose vagaries were trying to his relations. That was the note she struck, and she maintained it. I didn't know what the deuce she was driving at, and I didn't care. These scenes with a touch of madness appealed to me. I was going to live, and here, apparently, was a woman ready to my hand. Besides, she was making a fool of Callan, and that pleased me. His patronising manners had irritated me.

I assisted rather silently. They began to talk of mutual acquaintances – as one talks. They both seemed to know everyone in this world. She gave herself the airs of being quite in the inner ring; alleged familiarity with quite impossible persons, with my portentous aunt, with Cabinet Ministers – that sort of people. They talked about them – she, as if she lived among them; he, as if he tried very hard to live up to them.

She affected reverence for his person, plied him with compliments that he swallowed raw – horribly raw. It made me

shudder a little; it was tragic to see the little great man confronted with that woman. It shocked me to think that, really, I must appear much like him – must have looked like that yesterday. He was a little uneasy, I thought, made little confidences as if in spite of himself; little confidences about the *Hour*, the new paper for which I was engaged. It seemed to be run by a small gang with quite a number of assorted axes to grind. There was some foreign financier – a person of position whom she knew (a noble man in the *best* sense, Callan said); there was some politician (she knew him too, and he was equally excellent, so Callan said), Mr. Churchill himself, an artist or so, an actor or so – and Callan. They all wanted a little backing, so it seemed. Callan, of course, put it in another way. The Great – Moral – Purpose turned up, I don't know why. He could not think he was taking me in and she obviously knew more about the people concerned than he did. But there it was, looming large, and quite as farcical as all the rest of it. The foreign financier – they called him the Duc de Mersch – was by way of being a philanthropist on megalomaniac lines. For some international reason he had been allowed to possess himself of the pleasant land of Greenland. There was gold in it and train-oil in it and other things that paid – but the Duc de Mersch was not thinking of that. He was first and foremost a State Founder, or at least he was that after being titular ruler of some little spot of a Teutonic grand-duchy. No one of the great powers would let any other of the great powers possess the country, so it had been handed over to the Duc de Mersch, who had at heart, said

Cal, the glorious vision of founding a model state —*the* model state, in which washed and broadclothed Esquimaux would live, side by side, regenerated lives, enfranchised equals of choicely selected younger sons of whatever occidental race. It was that sort of thing. I was even a little overpowered, in spite of the fact that Callan was its trumpeter; there was something fine about the conception and Churchill's acquiescence seemed to guarantee an honesty in its execution.

The Duc de Mersch wanted money, and he wanted to run a railway across Greenland. His idea was that the British public should supply the money and the British Government back the railway, as they did in the case of a less philanthropic Suez Canal. In return he offered an eligible harbour and a strip of coast at one end of the line; the British public was to be repaid in casks of train-oil and gold and with the consciousness of having aided in letting the light in upon a dark spot of the earth. So the Duc de Mersch started the *Hour*. The *Hour* was to extol the Duc de Mersch's moral purpose; to pat the Government's back; influence public opinion; and generally advance the cause of the System for the Regeneration of the Arctic Regions.

I tell the story rather flippantly, because I heard it from Callan, and because it was impossible to take him seriously. Besides, I was not very much interested in the thing itself. But it did interest me to see how deftly she pumped him – squeezed him dry.

I was even a little alarmed for poor old Cal. After all, the man had done me a service; had got me a job. As for her, she struck

me as a potentially dangerous person. One couldn't tell, she might be some adventuress, or if not that, a speculator who would damage Cal's little schemes. I put it to her plainly afterward; and quarrelled with her as well as I could. I drove her down to the station. Callan must have been distinctly impressed or he would never have had out his trap for her.

"You know," I said to her, "I won't have you play tricks with Callan – not while you're using my name. It's very much at your service as far as I'm concerned – but, confound it, if you're going to injure him

I shall have to show you up – to tell him."

"You couldn't, you know," she said, perfectly calmly, "you've let yourself in for it. He wouldn't feel pleased with you for letting it go as far as it has. You'd lose your job, and you're going to live, you know – you're going to live..."

I was taken aback by this veiled threat in the midst of the pleasantries. It wasn't fair play – not at all fair play. I recovered some of my old alarm, remembered that she really was a dangerous person; that ...

"But I sha'n't hurt Callan," she said, suddenly, "you may make your mind easy."

"You really won't?" I asked.

"Really not," she answered. It relieved me to believe her. I did not want to quarrel with her. You see, she fascinated me, she seemed to act as a stimulant, to set me tingling somehow – and to baffle me... And there was truth in what she said. I had let

myself in for it, and I didn't want to lose Callan's job by telling him I had made a fool of him.

"I don't care about anything else," I said. She smiled.

CHAPTER FOUR

I went up to town bearing the Callan article, and a letter of warm commendation from Callan to Fox. I had been very docile; had accepted emendations; had lavished praise, had been unctuous and yet had contrived to retain the dignified savour of the editorial "we." Callan himself asked no more.

I was directed to seek Fox out – to find him immediately. The matter was growing urgent. Fox was not at the office – the brand new office that I afterward saw pass through the succeeding stages of business-like comfort and dusty neglect. I was directed to ask for him at the stage door of the Buckingham.

I waited in the doorkeeper's glass box at the Buckingham. I was eyed by the suspicious commissionaire with the contempt reserved for resting actors. Resting actors are hungry suppliants as a rule. Call-boys sought Mr. Fox. "Anybody seen Mr. Fox? He's gone to lunch."

"Mr. Fox is out," said the commissionaire.

I explained that the matter was urgent. More call-boys disappeared through the folding doors. Unenticing personages passed the glass box, casting hostile glances askance at me on my high stool. A message came back.

"If it's Mr. Etchingham Granger, he's to follow Mr. Fox to Mrs. Hartly's at once."

I followed Mr. Fox to Mrs. Hartly's – to a little flat in a

neighbourhood that I need not specify. The eminent journalist was lunching with the eminent actress. A husband was in attendance – a nonentity with a heavy yellow moustache, who hummed and hawed over his watch.

Mr. Fox was full-faced, with a persuasive, peremptory manner. Mrs. Hartly was – well, she was just Mrs. Hartly. You remember how we all fell in love with her figure and her manner, and her voice, and the way she used her hands. She broke her bread with those very hands; spoke to her husband with that very voice, and rose from table with that same graceful management of her limp skirts. She made eyes at me; at her husband; at little Fox, at the man who handed the asparagus – great round grey eyes. She was just the same. The curtain never fell on that eternal dress rehearsal. I don't wonder the husband was forever looking at his watch.

Mr. Fox was a friend of the house. He dispensed with ceremony, read my manuscript over his Roquefort, and seemed to find it add to the savour.

"You are going to do me for Mr. Fox," Mrs. Hartly said, turning her large grey eyes upon me. They were very soft. They seemed to send out waves of intense sympatheticism. I thought of those others that had shot out a razor-edged ray.

"Why," I answered, "there was some talk of my doing somebody for the *Hour*."

Fox put my manuscript under his empty tumbler.

"Yes," he said, sharply. "He will do, I think. H'm, yes. Why,

yes."

"You're a friend of Mr. Callan's, aren't you?" Mrs. Hartly asked, "What a dear, nice man he is! You should see him at rehearsals. You know I'm doing his 'Boldero'; he's given me a perfectly lovely part – perfectly lovely. And the trouble he takes. He tries every chair on the stage."

"H'm; yes," Fox interjected, "he likes to have his own way."

"We *all* like that," the great actress said. She was quoting from her first great part. I thought – but, perhaps, I was mistaken – that all her utterances were quotations from her first great part. Her husband looked at his watch.

"Are you coming to this confounded flower show?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, turning her mysterious eyes upon him, "I'll go and get ready."

She disappeared through an inner door. I expected to hear the pistol-shot and the heavy fall from the next room. I forgot that it was not the end of the fifth act.

Fox put my manuscript into his breast pocket.

"Come along, Granger," he said to me, "I want to speak to you. You'll have plenty of opportunity for seeing Mrs. Hartly, I expect. She's tenth on your list. Good-day, Hartly."

Hartly's hand was wavering between his moustache and his watch pocket.

"Good-day," he said sulkily.

"You must come and see me again, Mr. Granger," Mrs. Hartly said from the door. "Come to the Buckingham and see how we're

getting on with your friend's play. We must have a good long talk if you're to get my local colour, as Mr. Fox calls it."

"To gild refined gold; to paint the lily,
To throw a perfume on the violet – "

I quoted banally.

"That's it," she said, with a tender smile. She was fastening a button in her glove. I doubt her recognition of the quotation.

When we were in our hansom, Fox began:

"I'm relieved by what I've seen of your copy. One didn't expect this sort of thing from you. You think it a bit below you, don't you? Oh, I know, I know. You literary people are usually so impracticable; you know what I mean. Callan said you were the man. Callan has his uses; but one has something else to do with one's paper. I've got interests of my own. But you'll do; it's all *right*. You don't mind my being candid, do you, now?" I muttered that I rather liked it.

"Well then," he went on, "now I see my way."

"I'm glad you do," I murmured. "I wish I did."

"Oh, that will be all right," Fox comforted. "I dare say Callan has rather sickened you of the job; particularly if you ain't used to it. But you won't find the others as trying. There's Churchill now, he's your next. You'll have to mind him. You'll find him a decent chap. Not a bit of side on him."

"What Churchill?" I asked.

"The Foreign Minister."

"The devil," I said.

"Oh, you'll find him all right," Fox reassured; "you're to go down to his place to-morrow. It's all arranged. Here we are. Hop out." He suited his own action to his words and ran nimbly up the new terra-cotta steps of the *Hour's* home. He left me to pay the cabman.

When I rejoined him he was giving directions to an invisible somebody through folding doors.

"Come along," he said, breathlessly. "Can't see him," he added to a little boy, who held a card in his hands. "Tell him to go to Mr. Evans. One's life isn't one's own here," he went on, when he had reached his own room.

It was a palatial apartment furnished in white and gold – Louis Quinze, or something of the sort – with very new decorations after Watteau covering the walls. The process of disfiguration, however, had already begun. A roll desk of the least possible Louis Quinze order stood in one of the tall windows; the carpet was marked by muddy footprints, and a matchboard screen had been run across one end of the room.

"Hullo, Evans," Fox shouted across it, "just see that man from Grant's, will you? Heard from the Central News yet?"

He was looking through the papers on the desk.

"Not yet, I've just rung them up for the fifth time," the answer came.

"Keep on at it," Fox exhorted.

"Here's Churchill's letter," he said to me. "Have an arm-chair; those blasted things are too uncomfortable for anything. Make yourself comfortable. I'll be back in a minute."

I took an arm-chair and addressed myself to the Foreign Minister's letter. It expressed bored tolerance of a potential interviewer, but it seemed to please Fox. He ran into the room, snatched up a paper from his desk, and ran out again.

"Read Churchill's letter?" he asked, in passing. "I'll tell you all about it in a minute." I don't know what he expected me to do with it – kiss the postage stamp, perhaps.

At the same time, it was pleasant to sit there idle in the midst of the hurry, the breathlessness. I seemed to be at last in contact with real life, with the life that matters. I was somebody, too. Fox treated me with a kind of deference – as if I were a great unknown. His "you literary men" was pleasing. It was the homage that the pretender pays to the legitimate prince; the recognition due to the real thing from the machine-made imitation; the homage of the builder to the architect.

"Ah, yes," it seemed to say, "we jobbing men run up our rows and rows of houses; build whole towns and fill the papers for years. But when we want something special – something monumental – we have to come to you."

Fox came in again.

"Very sorry, my dear fellow, find I can't possibly get a moment for a chat with you. Look here, come and dine with me at the Paragraph round the corner – to-night at six sharp. You'll go to

Churchill's to-morrow."

The Paragraph Club, where I was to meet Fox, was one of those sporadic establishments that spring up in the neighbourhood of the Strand. It is one of their qualities that they are always just round the corner; another, that their stewards are too familiar; another, that they – in the opinion of the other members – are run too much for the convenience of one in particular.

In this case it was Fox who kept the dinner waiting. I sat in the little smoking-room and, from behind a belated morning paper, listened to the conversation of the three or four journalists who represented the members. I felt as a new boy in a new school feels on his first introduction to his fellows.

There was a fossil dramatic critic sleeping in an arm-chair before the fire. At dinner-time he woke up, remarked:

"You should have seen Fanny Ellsler," and went to sleep again.

Sprawling on a red velvet couch was a *beau jeune homme*, with the necktie of a Parisian-American student. On a chair beside him sat a personage whom, perhaps because of his plentiful lack of h's, I took for a distinguished foreigner.

They were talking about a splendid subject for a music-hall dramatic sketch of some sort – afforded by a bus driver, I fancy.

I heard afterward that my Frenchman had been a costermonger and was now half journalist, half financier, and that my art student was an employee of one of the older magazines.

"Dinner's on the table, gents," the steward said from the door. He went toward the sleeper by the fire. "I expect Mr. Cunningham will wear that arm-chair out before he's done," he said over his shoulder.

"Poor old chap; he's got nowhere else to go to," the magazine employee said.

"Why doesn't he go to the work'ouse," the journalist financier retorted. "Make a good sketch that, eh?" he continued, reverting to his bus-driver.

"Jolly!" the magazine employee said, indifferently.

"Now, then, Mr. Cunningham," the steward said, touching the sleeper on the shoulder, "dinner's on the table."

"God bless my soul," the dramatic critic said, with a start. The steward left the room. The dramatic critic furtively took a set of false teeth out of his waistcoat pocket; wiped them with a bandanna handkerchief, and inserted them in his mouth.

He tottered out of the room.

I got up and began to inspect the pen-and-ink sketches on the walls.

The faded paltry caricatures of faded paltry lesser lights that confronted me from fly-blown frames on the purple walls almost made me shiver.

"There you are, Granger," said a cheerful voice behind me. "Come and have some dinner."

I went and had some dinner. It was seasoned by small jokes and little personalities. A Teutonic journalist, a musical critic, I

suppose, inquired as to the origin of the meagre pheasant. Fox replied that it had been preserved in the back-yard. The dramatic critic mumbled unheard that some piece or other was off the bills of the Adelphi. I grinned vacantly. Afterward, under his breath, Fox put me up to a thing or two regarding the inner meaning of the new daily. Put by him, without any glamour of a moral purpose, the case seemed rather mean. The dingy smoking-room depressed me and the whole thing was, what I had, for so many years, striven to keep out of. Fox hung over my ear, whispering. There were shades of intonation in his sibillating. Some of those "in it," the voice implied, were not above-board; others were, and the tone became deferential, implied that I was to take my tone from itself.

"Of course, a man like the Right Honourable C. does it on the straight, ... quite on the straight, ... has to have some sort of semi-official backer... In this case, it's me, ... the *Hour*. They're a bit splitty, the Ministry, I mean... They say Gurnard isn't playing square ... they *say* so." His broad, red face glowed as he bent down to my ear, his little sea-blue eyes twinkled with moisture. He enlightened me cautiously, circumspectly. There was something unpleasant in the business – not exactly in Fox himself, but the kind of thing. I wish he would cease his explanations – I didn't want to hear them. I have never wanted to know how things are worked; preferring to take the world at its face value. Callan's revelations had been bearable, because of the farcical pompousness of his manner. But this was different,

it had the stamp of truth, perhaps because it was a little dirty. I didn't want to hear that the Foreign Minister was ever so remotely mixed up in this business. He was only a symbol to me, but he stood for the stability of statesmanship and for the decencies that it is troublesome to have touched.

"Of course," he was proceeding, "the Churchill gang would like to go on playing the stand-off to us. But it won't do, they've got to come in or see themselves left. Gurnard has pretty well nobbled their old party press, so they've got to begin all over again."

That was it – that was precisely it. Churchill ought to have played the stand-off to people like us – to have gone on playing it at whatever cost. That was what I demanded of the world as I conceived it. It was so much less troublesome in that way. On the other hand, this was life – I was living now and the cost of living is disillusionment; it was the price I had to pay. Obviously, a Foreign Minister had to have a semi-official organ, or I supposed so... "Mind you," Fox whispered on, "I think myself, that it's a pity he is supporting the Greenland business. The thing's not *altogether* straight. But it's going to be made to pay like hell, and there's the national interest to be considered. If this Government didn't take it up, some other would – and that would give Gurnard and a lot of others a peg against Churchill and his. We can't afford to lose any more coaling stations in Greenland or anywhere else. And, mind you, Mr. C. can look after the interests of the niggers a good deal better if he's a hand in the pie. You see the position,

eh?"

I wasn't actually listening to him, but I nodded at proper intervals. I knew that he wanted me to take that line in confidential conversations with fellows seeking copy. I was quite resigned to that. Incidentally, I was overcome by the conviction – perhaps it was no more than a sensation – that that girl was mixed up in this thing, that her shadow was somewhere among the others flickering upon the sheet. I wanted to ask Fox if he knew her. But, then, in that absurd business, I did not even know her name, and the whole story would have sounded a little mad. Just now, it suited me that Fox should have a moderate idea of my sanity. Besides, the thing was out of tone, I idealised her then. One wouldn't talk about her in a smoking-room full of men telling stories, and one wouldn't talk about her at all to Fox.

The musical critic had been prowling about the room with Fox's eyes upon him. He edged suddenly nearer, pushed a chair aside, and came toward us.

"Hullo," he said, in an ostentatiously genial, after-dinner voice, "what are you two chaps a-talking about?"

"Private matters," Fox answered, without moving a hair.

"Then I suppose I'm in the way?" the other muttered. Fox did not answer.

"Wants a job," he said, watching the discomfited Teuton's retreat, "but, as I was saying – oh, it pays both ways." He paused and fixed his eyes on me. He had been explaining the financial details of the matter, in which the Duc de Mersch and Callan

and Mrs. Hartly and all these people clubbed together and started a paper which they hired Fox to run, which was to bring their money back again, which was to scratch their backs, which... It was like the house that Jack built; I wondered who Jack was. That was it, who was Jack? It all hinged upon that.

"Why, yes," I said. "It seems rather neat."

"Of course," Fox wandered on, "you are wondering why the deuce I tell you all this. Fact is, you'd hear it all if I didn't, and a good deal more that isn't true besides. But I believe you're the sort of chap to respect a confidence."

I didn't rise to the sentiment. I knew as well as he did that he was bamboozling me, that he was, as he said, only telling me – not the truth, but just what I should hear everywhere. I did not bear him any ill-will; it was part of the game, that. But the question was, who was Jack? It might be Fox himself... There might, after all, be some meaning in the farrago of nonsense that that fantastic girl had let off upon me. Fox really and in a figure of speech such as she allowed herself, might be running a team consisting of the Duc de Mersch and Mr. Churchill.

CHAPTER FOUR

He might really be backing a foreign, philanthropic ruler and State-founder, and a British Foreign Minister, against the rather sinister Chancellor of the Exchequer that Mr. Gurnard undoubtedly was. It might suit him; perhaps he had shares in something or other that depended on the success of the Duc de Mersch's Greenland Protectorate. I knew well enough, you must remember, that Fox was a big man – one of those big men that remain permanently behind the curtain, perhaps because they have a certain lack of comeliness of one sort or another and don't look well on the stage itself. And I understood now that if he had abandoned – as he had done – half a dozen enterprises of his own for the sake of the *Hour*, it must be because it was very well worth his while. It was not merely a question of the editorship of a paper; there was something very much bigger in the background. My Dimensionist young lady, again, might have other shares that depended on the Chancellor of the Exchequer's blocking the way. In that way she might very well talk allegorically of herself as in alliance with Gurnard against Fox and Churchill. I was at sea in that sort of thing – but I understood vaguely that something of the sort was remotely possible.

I didn't feel called upon to back out of it on that account, yet I very decidedly wished that the thing could have been otherwise. For myself, I came into the matter with clean hands – and I was

going to keep my hands clean; otherwise, I was at Fox's disposal.

"I understand," I said, the speech marking my decision, "I shall have dealings with a good many of the proprietors – I am the scratcher, in fact, and you don't want me to make a fool of myself."

"Well," he answered, gauging me with his blue, gimlet eyes, "it's just as well to know."

"It's just as well to know," I echoed. It *was* just as well to know.

CHAPTER FIVE

I had gone out into the blackness of the night with a firmer step, with a new assurance. I had had my interview, the thing was definitely settled; the first thing in my life that had ever been definitely settled; and I felt I must tell Lea before I slept. Lea had helped me a good deal in the old days – he had helped everybody, for that matter. You would probably find traces of Lea's influence in the beginnings of every writer of about my decade; of everybody who ever did anything decent, and of some who never got beyond the stage of burgeoning decently. He had given me the material help that a publisher's reader could give, until his professional reputation was endangered, and he had given me the more valuable help that so few can give. I had grown ashamed of this one-sided friendship. It was, indeed, partly because of that that I had taken to the wilds – to a hut near a wood, and all the rest of what now seemed youthful foolishness. I had desired to live alone, not to be helped any more, until I could make *some* return. As a natural result I had lost nearly all my friends and found myself standing there as naked as on the day I was born.

All around me stretched an immense town – an immense blackness. People – thousands of people hurried past me, had errands, had aims, had others to talk to, to trifle with. But I had nobody. This immense city, this immense blackness, had

no interiors for me. There were house fronts, staring windows, closed doors, but nothing within; no rooms, no hollow places. The houses meant nothing to me, nothing more than the solid earth. Lea remained the only one the thought of whom was not like the reconsideration of an ancient, a musty pair of gloves.

He lived just anywhere. Being a publisher's reader, he had to report upon the probable commercial value of the manuscripts that unknown authors sent to his employer, and I suppose he had a settled plan of life, of the sort that brought him within the radius of a given spot at apparently irregular, but probably ordered, intervals. It seemed to be no more than a piece of good luck that let me find him that night in a little room in one of the by-ways of Bloomsbury. He was sprawling angularly on a cane lounge, surrounded by whole rubbish heaps of manuscript, a grey scrawl in a foam of soiled paper. He peered up at me as I stood in the doorway.

"Hullo!" he said, "what's brought you here? Have a manuscript?" He waved an abstracted hand round him. "You'll find a chair somewhere." A claret bottle stood on the floor beside him. He took it by the neck and passed it to me.

He bent his head again and continued his reading. I displaced three bulky folio sheaves of typewritten matter from a chair and seated myself behind him. He continued to read.

"I hadn't seen these rooms before," I said, for want of something to say.

The room was not so much scantily as arbitrarily furnished.

It contained a big mahogany sideboard; a common deal table, an extraordinary kind of folding wash-hand-stand; a deal bookshelf, the cane lounge, and three unrelated chairs. There were three framed Dutch prints on the marble mantel-shelf; striped curtains before the windows. A square, cheap looking-glass, with a razor above it, hung between them. And on the floor, on the chairs, on the sideboard, on the unmade bed, the profusion of manuscripts.

He scribbled something on a blue paper and began to roll a cigarette. He took off his glasses, rubbed them, and closed his eyes tightly.

"Well, and how's Sussex?" he asked.

I felt a sudden attack of what, essentially, was nostalgia. The fact that I was really leaving an old course of life, was actually and finally breaking with it, became vividly apparent. Lea, you see, stood for what was best in the mode of thought that I was casting aside. He stood for the aspiration. The brooding, the moodiness; all the childish qualities, were my own importations. I was a little ashamed to tell him, that – that I was going to live, in fact. Some of the glory of it had gone, as if one of two candles I had been reading by had flickered out. But I told him, after a fashion, that I had got a job at last.

"Oh, I congratulate you," he said.

"You see," I began to combat the objections he had not had time to utter, "even for my work it will be a good thing – I wasn't seeing enough of life to be able to..."

"Oh, of course not," he answered – "it'll be a good thing. You

must have been having a pretty bad time."

It struck me as abominably unfair. I hadn't taken up with the *Hour* because I was tired of having a bad time, but for other reasons: because I had felt my soul being crushed within me.

"You're mistaken," I said. And I explained. He answered, "Yes, yes," but I fancied that he was adding to himself – "They all say that." I grew more angry. Lea's opinion formed, to some extent, the background of my life. For many years I had been writing quite as much to satisfy him as to satisfy myself, and his coldness chilled me. He thought that my heart was not in my work, and I did not want Lea to think that of me. I tried to explain as much to him – but it was difficult, and he gave me no help.

I knew there had been others that he had fostered, only to see them, in the end, drift into the back-wash. And now he thought I was going too...

"Here," he said, suddenly breaking away from the subject, "look at that."

He threw a heavy, ribbon-bound mass of matter into my lap, and recommenced writing his report upon its saleability as a book. He was of opinion that it was too delicately good to attract his employer's class of readers. I began to read it to get rid of my thoughts. The heavy black handwriting of the manuscript sticks in my mind's eye. It must have been good, but probably not so good as I then thought it – I have entirely forgotten all about it; otherwise, I remember that we argued afterward: I for its publication; he against. I was thinking of the wretched author

whose fate hung in the balance. He became a pathetic possibility, hidden in the heart of the white paper that bore pen-markings of a kind too good to be marketable. There was something appalling in Lea's careless – "Oh, it's too good!" He was used to it, but as for me, in arguing that man's case I suddenly became aware that I was pleading my own – pleading the case of my better work. Everything that Lea said of this work, of this man, applied to my work; and to myself. "There's no market for that sort of thing, no public; this book's been all round the trade. I've had it before. The man will never come to the front. He'll take to inn-keeping, and that will finish him off." That's what he said, and he seemed to be speaking of me. Some one was knocking at the door of the room – tentative knocks of rather flabby knuckles. It was one of those sounds that one does not notice immediately. The man might have been knocking for ten minutes. It happened to be Lea's employer, the publisher of my first book. He opened the door at last, and came in rather peremptorily. He had the air of having worked himself into a temper – of being intellectually rather afraid of Lea, but of being, for this occasion, determined to assert himself.

The introduction to myself – I had never met him – which took place after he had hastily brought out half a sentence or so, had the effect of putting him out of his stride, but, after having remotely acknowledged the possibility of my existence, he began again.

The matter was one of some delicacy. I myself should have

hesitated to broach it before a third party, even one so negligible as myself. But Mr. Polehampton apparently did not. He had to catch the last post.

Lea, it appeared, had advised him to publish a manuscript by a man called Howden – a moderately known writer...

"But I am disturbed to find, Mr. Lea, that is, my daughter tells me that the manuscript is not ... is not at all the thing... In fact, it's quite – and – eh ... I suppose it's too late to draw back?"

"Oh, it's altogether too late for *that*" Lea said, nonchalantly.

"Besides, Howden's theories always sell."

"Oh, yes, of course, of course," Mr. Polehampton interjected, hastily, "but don't you think now ... I mean, taking into consideration the damage it may do our reputation ... that we ought to ask Mr. Howden to accept, say fifty pounds less than..."

"I should think it's an excellent idea," Lea said. Mr. Polehampton glanced at him suspiciously, then turned to me.

"You see," he began to explain, "one has to be *so* careful about these things."

"Oh, I can quite understand," I answered. There was something so naïve in the man's point of view that I had felt my heart go out to him. And he had taught me at last how it is that the godly grow fat at the expense of the unrighteous. Mr. Polehampton, however, was not fat. He was even rather thin, and his peaked grey hair, though it was actually well brushed, looked as if it ought not to have been. He had even an anxious expression. People said he speculated in some stock or other, and I should

say they were right.

"I ... eh ... believe I published your first book ... I lost money by it, but I can assure you that I bear no grudge – almost a hundred pounds. I bear no grudge..."

The man was an original. He had no idea that I might feel insulted; indeed, he really wanted to be pleasant, and condescending, and forgiving. I didn't feel insulted. He was too big for his clothes, gave that impression at least, and he wore black kid gloves. Moreover, his eyes never left the cornice of the room. I saw him rather often after that night, but never without his gloves and never with his eyes lowered.

"And ... eh ..." he asked, "what are you doing now, Mr. Granger?"

Lea told him Fox had taken me up; that I was going to go. I suddenly remembered it was said of Fox that everyone he took up did "go." The fact was obviously patent to Mr. Polehampton. He unbent with remarkable suddenness; it reminded me of the abrupt closing of a stiff umbrella. He became distinctly and crudely cordial – hoped that we should work together again; once more reminded me that he had published my first book (the words had a different savour now), and was enchanted to discover that we were neighbours in Sussex. My cottage was within four miles of his villa, and we were members of the same golf club.

"We must have a game – several games," he said. He struck me as the sort of man to find a difficulty in getting anyone to play with him.

After that he went away. As I had said, I did not dislike him – he was pathetic; but his tone of mind, his sudden change of front, unnerved me. It proved so absolutely that I was "going to go," and I did not want to go – in that sense. The thing is a little difficult to explain, I wanted to take the job because I wanted to have money – for a little time, for a year or so, but if I once began to go, the temptation would be strong to keep on going, and I was by no means sure that I should be able to resist the temptation. So many others had failed. What if I wrote to Fox, and resigned?.. Lea was deep in a manuscript once more.

"Shall I throw it up?" I asked suddenly. I wanted the thing settled.

"Oh, go on with it, by all means go on with it," Lea answered.

"And ...?" I postulated.

"Take your chance of the rest," he supplied; "you've had a pretty bad time."

"I suppose," I reflected, "if I haven't got the strength of mind to get out of it in time, I'm not up to much."

"There's that, too," he commented, "the game may not be worth the candle." I was silent. "You must take your chance when you get it," he added.

He had resumed his reading, but he looked up again when I gave way, as I did after a moment's thought.

"Of course," he said, "it will probably be all right. You do your best.

It's a good thing ... might even do you good."

In that way the thing went through. As I was leaving the room, the idea occurred to me, "By the way, you don't know anything of a clique: the Dimensionists —*Fourth* Dimensionists?"

"Never heard of them," he negated. "What's their specialty?"

"They're going to inherit the earth," I answered.

"Oh, I wish them joy," he closed.

"You don't happen to be one yourself? I believe it's a sort of secret society." He wasn't listening. I went out quietly.

The night effects of that particular neighbourhood have always affected me dismally. That night they upset me, upset me in much the same way, acting on much the same nerves as the valley in which I had walked with that puzzling girl. I remembered that she had said she stood for the future, that she was a symbol of my own decay – the whole silly farrago, in fact. I reasoned with myself – that I was tired, out of trim, and so on, that I was in a fit state to be at the mercy of any nightmare. I plunged into Southampton Row. There was safety in the contact with the crowd, in jostling, in being jostled.

CHAPTER SIX

It was Saturday and, as was his custom during the session, the Foreign Secretary had gone for privacy and rest till Monday to a small country house he had within easy reach of town. I went down with a letter from Fox in my pocket, and early in the afternoon found myself talking without any kind of inward disturbance to the Minister's aunt, a lean, elderly lady, with a keen eye, and credited with a profound knowledge of European politics. She had a rather abrupt manner and a business-like, brown scheme of coloration. She looked people very straight in the face, bringing to bear all the penetration which, as rumour said, enabled her to take a hidden, but very real part in the shaping of our foreign policy. She seemed to catalogue me, label me, and lay me on the shelf, before I had given my first answer to her first question.

"You ought to know this part of the country well," she said. I think she was considering me as a possible canvasser – an infinitesimal thing, but of a kind possibly worth remembrance at the next General Election.

"No," I said, "I've never been here before."

"Etchingam is only three miles away."

It was new to me to be looked upon as worth consideration for my place-name. I realised that Miss Churchill accorded me toleration on its account, that I was regarded as one of the

Grangers of Etchingam, who had taken to literature.

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