

## 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.