

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 psychical 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 Etchingham 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.