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.