

## CHAPTER SIX

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 negatived. "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.