CHAPTER SEVEN

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."

"Etchingham 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 Etchingham, who had taken to literature.

"I met your aunt yesterday," Miss Churchill continued. She had met everybody yesterday.

"Yes," I said, non-committally. I wondered what had happened at that meeting. My aunt and I had never been upon terms. She was a great personage in her part of the world, a great dowager land-owner, as poor as a mouse, and as respectable as a hen. She was, moreover, a keen politician on the side of Miss Churchill. I, who am neither land-owner, nor respectable, nor politician, had never been acknowledged--but I knew that, for the sake of the race, she would have refrained from enlarging on my shortcomings.

"Has she found a companion to suit her yet?" I said, absent-mindedly. I was thinking of an old legend of my mother's. Miss Churchill looked me in between the eyes again. She was preparing to relabel me, I think. I had become a spiteful humourist. Possibly I might be useful for platform malice.

"Why, yes," she said, the faintest of twinkles in her eyes, "she has adopted a niece."

The legend went that, at a hotly contested election in which my aunt had played a prominent part, a rainbow poster had beset the walls. "Who starved her governess?" it had inquired.

My accidental reference to such electioneering details placed me upon an excellent footing with Miss Churchill. I seemed quite unawares to have asserted myself a social equal, a person not to be treated as a casual journalist. I became, in fact, not the representative of the Hour--but an Etchingham Granger that competitive forces had compelled to accept a journalistic plum. I began to see the line I was to take throughout my interviewing campaign. On the one hand, I was "one of us," who had temporarily strayed beyond the pale; on the other, I was to be a sort of great author's bottle-holder.

A side door, behind Miss Churchill, opened gently. There was something very characteristic in the tentative manner of its coming ajar. It seemed to say: "Why any noisy vigour?" It seemed to be propelled by a contemplative person with many things on his mind. A tall, grey man in the doorway leaned the greater part of his weight on the arm that was stretched down to the handle. He was looking thoughtfully at a letter that he held in his other hand. A face familiar enough in caricatures suddenly grew real to me--more real than the face of one's nearest friends, yet older than one had any wish to expect. It was as if I had gazed more intently than usual at the face of a man I saw daily, and had found him older and greyer than he had ever seemed before--as if I had begun to realise that the world had moved on.

He said, languidly--almost protestingly, "What am I to do about the Duc de Mersch?"

Miss Churchill turned swiftly, almost apprehensively, toward him. She uttered my name and he gave the slightest of starts of annoyance--a start that meant, "Why wasn't I warned before?" This irritated me; I knew well enough what were his relations with de Mersch, and the man took me for a little eavesdropper, I suppose. His attitudes were rather grotesque, of the sort that would pass in a person of his eminence. He stuck his eye-glasses on the end of his nose, looked at me short-sightedly, took them off and looked again. He had the air of looking down from an immense height--of needing a telescope.

"Oh, ah ... Mrs. Granger's son, I presume.... I wasn't aware...." The hesitation of his manner made me feel as if we never should get anywhere--not for years and

years.

"No," I said, rather brusquely, "I'm only from the Hour."

He thought me one of Fox's messengers then, said that Fox might have written: "Have saved you the trouble, I mean ... or...."

He had the air of wishing to be amiable, of wishing, even, to please me by proving that he was aware of my identity.

"Oh," I said, a little loftily, "I haven't any message, I've only come to interview you." An expression of dismay sharpened the lines of his face.

"To...." he began, "but I've never allowed--" He recovered himself sharply, and set the glasses vigorously on his nose; at last he had found the right track. "Oh, I remember now," he said, "I hadn't looked at it in that way."

The whole thing grated on my self-love and I became, in a contained way, furiously angry. I was impressed with the idea that the man was only a puppet in the hands of Fox and de Mersch, and that lot. And he gave himself these airs of enormous distance. I, at any rate, was clean-handed in the matter; I hadn't any axe to grind.

"Ah, yes," he said, hastily, "you are to draw my portrait--as Fox put it. He sent me your Jenkins sketch. I read it--it struck a very nice note. And so--." He sat himself down on a preposterously low chair, his knees on a level with his chin. I muttered that I feared he would find the process a bore.

"Not more for me than for you," he answered, seriously--"one has to do these things."

"Why, yes," I echoed, "one has to do these things." It struck me that he regretted it--regretted it intensely; that he attached a bitter meaning to the words.

"And ... what is the procedure?" he asked, after a pause. "I am new to the sort of thing." He had the air, I thought, of talking to some respectable tradesman that one calls in only when one is in extremis--to a distinguished pawnbroker, a man quite at the top of a tree of inferior timber.

"Oh, for the matter of that, so am I," I answered. "I'm supposed to get your atmosphere, as Callan put it."

"Indeed," he answered, absently, and then, after a pause, "You know Callan?" I

was afraid I should fall in his estimation.

"One has to do these things," I said; "I've just been getting his atmosphere."

He looked again at the letter in his hand, smoothed his necktie and was silent. I realised that I was in the way, but I was still so disturbed that I forgot how to phrase an excuse for a momentary absence.

"Perhaps, ..." I began.

He looked at me attentively.

"I mean, I think I'm in the way," I blurted out.

"Well," he answered, "it's quite a small matter. But, if you are to get my atmosphere, we may as well begin out of doors." He hesitated, pleased with his witticism; "Unless you're tired," he added.

"I will go and get ready," I said, as if I were a lady with bonnet-strings to tie. I was conducted to my room, where I kicked my heels for a decent interval. When I descended, Mr. Churchill was lounging about the room with his hands in his trouser-pockets and his head hanging limply over his chest. He said, "Ah!" on seeing me, as if he had forgotten my existence. He paused for a long moment, looked meditatively at himself in the glass over the fireplace, and then grew brisk. "Come along," he said.

We took a longish walk through a lush home-country meadow land. We talked about a number of things, he opening the ball with that infernal Jenkins sketch. I was in the stage at which one is sick of the thing, tired of the bare idea of it--and Mr. Churchill's laboriously kind phrases made the matter no better.

"You know who Jenkins stands for?" I asked. I wanted to get away on the side issues.

"Oh, I guessed it was----" he answered. They said that Mr. Churchill was an enthusiast for the school of painting of which Jenkins was the last exponent. He began to ask questions about him. Did he still paint? Was he even alive?

"I once saw several of his pictures," he reflected. "His work certainly appealed to me ... yes, it appealed to me. I meant at the time ... but one forgets; there are so many things." It seemed to me that the man wished by these detached sentences to convey that he had the weight of a kingdom--of several kingdoms--on his mind; that he could spare no more than a fragment of his thoughts for everyday use.

"You must take me to see him," he said, suddenly. "I ought to have something." I thought of poor white-haired Jenkins, and of his long struggle with adversity. It seemed a little cruel that Churchill should talk in that way without meaning a word of it--as if the words were a polite formality.

"Nothing would delight me more," I answered, and added, "nothing in the world."

He asked me if I had seen such and such a picture, talked of artists, and praised this and that man very fittingly, but with a certain timidity--a timidity that lured me back to my normally overbearing frame of mind. In such matters I was used to hearing my own voice. I could talk a man down, and, with a feeling of the unfitness of things, I talked Churchill down. The position, even then, struck me as gently humorous. It was as if some infinitely small animal were bullying some colossus among the beasts. I was of no account in the world, he had his say among the Olympians. And I talked recklessly, like any little school-master, and he swallowed it.

We reached the broad market-place of a little, red and grey, home county town; a place of but one street dominated by a great inn-signboard a-top of an enormous white post. The effigy of So-and-So of gracious memory swung lazily, creaking, overhead.

"This is Etchingham," Churchill said.

It was a pleasant commentary on the course of time, this entry into the home of my ancestors. I had been without the pale for so long, that I had never seen the haunt of ancient peace. They had done very little, the Grangers of Etchingham--never anything but live at Etchingham and quarrel at Etchingham and die at Etchingham and be the monstrous important Grangers of Etchingham. My father had had the undesirable touch, not of the genius, but of the Bohemian. The Grangers of Etchingham had cut him adrift and he had swum to sink in other seas. Now I was the last of the Grangers and, as things went, was quite the best known of all of them. They had grown poor in their generation; they bade fair to sink, even as, it seemed, I bade fair to rise, and I had come back to the old places on the arm of one of the great ones of the earth. I wondered what the portentous old woman who ruled alone in Etchingham thought of these times--the portentous old woman who ruled, so they said, the place with a rod of iron; who made herself unbearable to her companions and had to fall back upon an unfortunate niece. I wondered idly who the niece could be; certainly not a Granger of Etchingham, for I was the only one of the breed. One of her own nieces, most probably. Churchill had gone into the post-office, leaving me standing at the foot of the sign-post. It was a pleasant summer day, the air very

clear, the place very slumbrous. I looked up the street at a pair of great stone gate-posts, august, in their way, standing distinctly aloof from the common houses, a little weather-stained, staidly lichened. At the top of each column sat a sculptured wolf--as far as I knew, my own crest. It struck me pleasantly that this must be the entrance of the Manor house.

The tall iron gates swung inward, and I saw a girl on a bicycle curve out, at the top of the sunny street. She glided, very clear, small, and defined, against the glowing wall, leaned aslant for the turn, and came shining down toward me. My heart leapt; she brought the whole thing into composition--the whole of that slumbrous, sunny street. The bright sky fell back into place, the red roofs, the blue shadows, the red and blue of the sign-board, the blue of the pigeons walking round my feet, the bright red of a postman's cart. She was gliding toward me, growing and growing into the central figure. She descended and stood close to me.

"You?" I said. "What blessed chance brought you here?"

"Oh, I am your aunt's companion," she answered, "her niece, you know."

"Then you must be a cousin," I said.

"No; sister," she corrected, "I assure you it's sister. Ask anyone--ask your aunt." I was braced into a state of puzzled buoyancy.

"But really, you know," I said. She was smiling, standing up squarely to me, leaning a little back, swaying her machine with the motion of her body.

"It's a little ridiculous, isn't it?" she said.

"Very," I answered, "but even at that, I don't see--. And I'm not phenomenally dense."

"Not phenomenally," she answered.

"Considering that I'm not a--not a Dimensionist," I bantered. "But you have really palmed yourself off on my aunt?"

"Really," she answered, "she doesn't know any better. She believes in me immensely. I am such a real Granger, there never was a more typical one. And we shake our heads together over you." My bewilderment was infinite, but it stopped short of being unpleasant.

"Might I call on my aunt?" I asked. "It wouldn't interfere--"

"Oh, it wouldn't interfere," she said, "but we leave for Paris to-morrow. We are very busy. We--that is, my aunt; I am too young and too, too discreet--have a little salon where we hatch plots against half the régimes in Europe. You have no idea how Legitimate we are."

"I don't understand in the least," I said; "not in the least."

"Oh, you must take me literally if you want to understand," she answered, "and you won't do that. I tell you plainly that I find my account in unsettled states, and that I am unsettling them. Everywhere. You will see."

She spoke with her monstrous dispassionateness, and I felt a shiver pass down my spine, very distinctly. I was thinking what she might do if ever she became in earnest, and if ever I chanced to stand in her way--as her husband, for example.

"I wish you would talk sense--for one blessed minute," I said; "I want to get things a little settled in my mind."

"Oh, I'll talk sense," she said, "by the hour, but you won't listen. Take your friend, Churchill, now. He's the man that we're going to bring down. I mentioned it to you, and so...."

"But this is sheer madness," I answered.

"Oh, no, it's a bald statement of fact," she went on.

"I don't see how," I said, involuntarily.

"Your article in the Hour will help. Every trifle will help," she said. "Things that you understand and others that you cannot.... He is identifying himself with the Duc de Mersch. That looks nothing, but it's fatal. There will be friendships ... and desertions."

"Ah!" I said. I had had an inkling of this, and it made me respect her insight into home politics. She must have been alluding to Gurnard, whom everybody--perhaps from fear--pretended to trust. She looked at me and smiled again. It was still the same smile; she was not radiant to-day and pensive to-morrow. "Do you know I don't like to hear that?" I began.

"Oh, there's irony in it, and pathos, and that sort of thing," she said, with the remotest chill of mockery in her intonation. "He goes into it clean-handed enough

and he only half likes it. But he sees that it's his last chance. It's not that he's worn out--but he feels that his time has come--unless he does something. And so he's going to do something. You understand?"

"Not in the least," I said, light-heartedly.

"Oh, it's the System for the Regeneration of the Arctic Regions--the Greenland affair of my friend de Mersch. Churchill is going to make a grand coup with that--to keep himself from slipping down hill, and, of course, it would add immensely to your national prestige. And he only half sees what de Mersch is or isn't."

"This is all Greek to me," I muttered rebelliously.

"Oh, I know, I know," she said. "But one has to do these things, and I want you to understand. So Churchill doesn't like the whole business. But he's under the shadow. He's been thinking a good deal lately that his day is over--I'll prove it to you in a minute--and so--oh, he's going to make a desperate effort to get in touch with the spirit of the times that he doesn't like and doesn't understand. So he lets you get his atmosphere. That's all."

"Oh, that's all," I said, ironically.

"Of course he'd have liked to go on playing the stand-off to chaps like you and me," she mimicked the tone and words of Fox himself.

"This is witchcraft," I said. "How in the world do you know what Fox said to me?"

"Oh, I know," she said. It seemed to me that she was playing me with all this nonsense--as if she must have known that I had a tenderness for her and were fooling me to the top of her bent. I tried to get my hook in.

"Now look here," I said, "we must get things settled. You ..."

She carried the speech off from under my nose.

"Oh, you won't denounce me," she said, "not any more than you did before; there are so many reasons. There would be a scene, and you're afraid of scenes--and our aunt would back me up. She'd have to. My money has been reviving the glories of the Grangers. You can see, they've been regilding the gate."

I looked almost involuntarily at the tall iron gates through which she had passed into my view. It was true enough--some of the scroll work was radiant with new gold.

"Well," I said, "I will give you credit for not wishing to--to prey upon my aunt. But still ..." I was trying to make the thing out. It struck me that she was an American of the kind that subsidizes households like that of Etchingham Manor. Perhaps my aunt had even forced her to take the family name, to save appearances. The old woman was capable of anything, even of providing an obscure nephew with a brilliant sister. And I should not be thanked if I interfered. This skeleton of swift reasoning passed between word and word ... "You are no sister of mine!" I was continuing my sentence quite amiably.

Her face brightened to greet someone approaching behind me.

"Did you hear him?" she said. "Did you hear him, Mr. Churchill. He casts off--he disowns me. Isn't he a stern brother? And the quarrel is about nothing." The impudence--or the presence of mind of it--overwhelmed me.

Churchill smiled pleasantly.

"Oh--one always quarrels about nothing," Churchill answered. He spoke a few words to her; about my aunt; about the way her machine ran--that sort of thing. He behaved toward her as if she were an indulged child, impertinent with licence and welcome enough. He himself looked rather like the short-sighted, but indulgent and very meagre lion that peers at the unicorn across a plum-cake.

"So you are going back to Paris," he said. "Miss Churchill will be sorry. And you are going to continue to--to break up the universe?"

"Oh, yes," she answered, "we are going on with that, my aunt would never give it up. She couldn't, you know."

"You'll get into trouble," Churchill said, as if he were talking to a child intent on stealing apples. "And when is our turn coming? You're going to restore the Stuarts, aren't you?" It was his idea of badinage, amiable without consequence.

"Oh, not quite that," she answered, "not quite that." It was curious to watch her talking to another man--to a man, not a bagman like Callan. She put aside the face she always showed me and became at once what Churchill took her for--a spoiled child. At times she suggested a certain kind of American, and had that indefinable air of glib acquaintance with the names, and none of the spirit of tradition. One half expected her to utter rhapsodies about donjon-keeps.

"Oh, you know," she said, with a fine affectation of aloofness, "we shall have to be rather hard upon you; we shall crumple you up like--" Churchill had been moving

his stick absent-mindedly in the dust of the road, he had produced a big "C H U." She had erased it with the point of her foot--"like that," she concluded.

He laid his head back and laughed almost heartily.

"Dear me," he said, "I had no idea that I was so much in the way of--of yourself and Mrs. Granger."

"Oh, it's not only that," she said, with a little smile and a cast of the eye to me. "But you've got to make way for the future."

Churchill's face changed suddenly. He looked rather old, and grey, and wintry, even a little frail. I understood what she was proving to me, and I rather disliked her for it. It seemed wantonly cruel to remind a man of what he was trying to forget.

"Ah, yes," he said, with the gentle sadness of quite an old man, "I dare say there is more in that than you think. Even you will have to learn."

"But not for a long time," she interrupted audaciously.

"I hope not," he answered, "I hope not." She nodded and glided away.

We resumed the road in silence. Mr. Churchill smiled at his own thoughts once or twice.

"A most amusing ..." he said at last. "She does me a great deal of good, a great deal."

I think he meant that she distracted his thoughts.

"Does she always talk like that?" I asked. He had hardly spoken to me, and I felt as if I were interrupting a reverie--but I wanted to know.

"I should say she did," he answered; "I should say so. But Miss Churchill says that she has a real genius for organization. She used to see a good deal of them, before they went to Paris, you know."

"What are they doing there?" It was as if I were extracting secrets from a sleep-walker.

"Oh, they have a kind of a meeting place, for all kinds of Legitimist pretenders--French and Spanish, and that sort of thing. I believe Mrs. Granger takes it very

seriously." He looked at me suddenly. "But you ought to know more about it than I do," he said.

"Oh, we see very little of each other," I answered, "you could hardly call us brother and sister."

"Oh, I see," he answered. I don't know what he saw. For myself, I saw nothing.