CHAPTER EIGHT

I succeeded in giving Fox what his journal wanted; I got the atmosphere of Churchill and his house, in a way that satisfied the people for whom it was meant. His house was a pleasant enough place, of the sort where they do you well, but not nauseously well. It stood in a tranquil countryside, and stood there modestly. Architecturally speaking, it was gently commonplace; one got used to it and liked it. And Churchill himself, when one had become accustomed to his manner, one liked very well--very well indeed. He had a dainty, dilettante mind, delicately balanced, with strong limitations, a fantastic temperament for a person in his walk of life--but sane, mind you, persistent. After a time, I amused myself with a theory that his heart was not in his work, that circumstance had driven him into the career of politics and ironical fate set him at its head. For myself, I had an intense contempt for the political mind, and it struck me that he had some of the same feeling. He had little personal quaintnesses, too, a deference, a modesty, an open-mindedness.

I was with him for the greater part of his weekend holiday; hung, perforce, about him whenever he had any leisure. I suppose he found me tiresome--but one has to do these things. He talked, and I talked; heavens, how we talked! He was almost always deferential, I almost always dogmatic; perhaps because the conversation kept on my own ground. Politics we never touched. I seemed to feel that if I broached them, I should be checked--politely, but very definitely. Perhaps he actually contrived to convey as much to me; perhaps I evolved the idea that if I were to say:

"What do you think about the 'Greenland System'"--he would answer:

"I try not to think about it," or whatever gently closuring phrase his mind conceived. But I never did so; there were so many other topics.

He was then writing his Life of Cromwell and his mind was very full of his subject. Once he opened his heart, after delicately sounding me for signs of boredom. It happened, by the merest chance--one of those blind chances that inevitably lead in the future--that I, too, was obsessed at that moment by the Lord Oliver. A great many years before, when I was a yearling of tremendous plans, I had set about one of those glorious novels that one plans--a splendid thing with Old Noll as the hero or the heavy father. I had haunted the bookstalls in search of local colour and had wonderfully well invested my half-crowns. Thus a company of seventeenth century tracts, dog-eared, coverless, but very glorious under their dust, accompany me through life. One parts last with those relics of a

golden age, and during my late convalescence I had reread many of them, the arbitrary half-remembered phrases suggesting all sorts of scenes--lamplight in squalid streets, trays full of weather-beaten books. So, even then, my mind was full of Mercurius Rusticus. Mr. Churchill on Cromwell amused me immensely and even excited me. It was life, this attending at a self-revelation of an impossible temperament. It did me good, as he had said of my pseudo-sister. It was fantastic--as fantastic as herself--and it came out more in his conversation than in the book itself. I had something to do with that, of course. But imagine the treatment accorded to Cromwell by this delicate, negative, obstinately judicial personality. It was the sort of thing one wants to get into a novel. It was a lesson to me--in temperament, in point of view; I went with his mood, tried even to outdo him, in the hope of spurring him to outdo himself. I only mention it because I did it so well that it led to extraordinary consequences.

We were walking up and down his lawn, in the twilight, after his Sunday supper. The pale light shone along the gleaming laurels and dwelt upon the soft clouds of orchard blossoms that shimmered above them. It dwelt, too, upon the silver streaks in his dark hair and made his face seem more pallid, and more old. It affected me like some intense piece of irony. It was like hearing a dying man talk of the year after next. I had the sense of the unreality of things strong upon me. Why should nightingale upon nightingale pour out volley upon volley of song for the delight of a politician whose heart was not in his task of keeping back the waters of the deluge, but who grew animated at the idea of damning one of the titans who had let loose the deluge?

About a week after--or it may have been a fortnight--Churchill wrote to me and asked me to take him to see the Jenkins of my Jenkins story. It was one of those ordeals that one goes through when one has tried to advance one's friends. Jenkins took the matter amiss, thought it was a display of insulting patronage on the part of officialism. He was reluctant to show his best work, the forgotten masterpieces, the things that had never sold, that hung about on the faded walls and rotted in cellars. He would not be his genial self; he would not talk. Churchill behaved very well--I think he understood.

Jenkins thawed before his gentle appreciations. I could see the change operating within him. He began to realise that this incredible visit from a man who ought to be hand and glove with Academicians was something other than a spy's encroachment. He was old, you must remember, and entirely unsuccessful. He had fought a hard fight and had been worsted. He took his revenge in these suspicions.

We younger men adored him. He had the ruddy face and the archaic silver hair of the King of Hearts; and a wonderful elaborate politeness that he had inherited

from his youth--from the days of Brummell. And, whilst all his belongings were rotting into dust, he retained an extraordinarily youthful and ingenuous habit of mind. It was that, or a little of it, that gave the charm to my Jenkins story.

It was a disagreeable experience. I wished so much that the perennial hopefulness of the man should at last escape deferring and I was afraid that Churchill would chill before Jenkins had time to thaw. But, as I have said, I think Churchill understood. He smiled his kindly, short-sighted smile over canvas after canvas, praised the right thing in each, remembered having seen this and that in such and such a year, and Jenkins thawed.

He happened to leave the room--to fetch some studies, to hurry up the tea or for some such reason. Bereft of his presence the place suddenly grew ghostly. It was as if the sun had died in the sky and left us in that nether world where dead, buried pasts live in a grey, shadowless light. Jenkins' palette glowed from above a medley of stained rags on his open colour table. The rush-bottom of his chair resembled a wind-torn thatch.

"One can draw morals from a life like that," I said suddenly. I was thinking rather of Jenkins than of the man I was talking to.

"Why, yes," he said, absently, "I suppose there are men who haven't the knack of getting on."

"It's more than a knack," I said, with unnecessary bitterness. "It's a temperament."

"I think it's a habit, too. It may be acquired, mayn't it?"

"No, no," I fulminated, "it's precisely because it can't be acquired that the best men--the men like ..." I stopped suddenly, impressed by the idea that the thing was out of tone. I had to assert myself more than I liked in talking to Churchill. Otherwise I should have disappeared. A word from him had the weight of three kingdoms and several colonies behind it, and I was forced to get that out of my head by making conversation a mere matter of temperament. In that I was the stronger. If I wanted to say a thing, I said it; but he was hampered by a judicial mind. It seemed, too, that he liked a dictatorial interlocutor, else he would hardly have brought himself into contact with me again. Perhaps it was new to him. My eye fell upon a couple of masks, hanging one on each side of the fireplace. The room was full of a profusion of little casts, thick with dust upon the shoulders, the hair, the eyelids, on every part that projected outward.

"By-the-bye," I said, "that's a death-mask of Cromwell."

"Ah!" he answered, "I knew there was...."

He moved very slowly toward it, rather as if he did not wish to bring it within his field of view. He stopped before reaching it and pivotted slowly to face me.

"About my book," he opened suddenly, "I have so little time." His briskness dropped into a half complaint, like a faintly suggested avowal of impotence. "I have been at it four years now. It struck me--you seemed to coincide so singularly with my ideas."

His speech came wavering to a close, but he recommenced it apologetically--as if he wished me to help him out.

"I went to see Smithson the publisher about it, and he said he had no objection...."

He looked appealingly at me. I kept silence.

"Of course, it's not your sort of work. But you might try.... You see...." He came to a sustained halt.

"I don't understand," I said, rather coldly, when the silence became embarrassing. "You want me to 'ghost' for you?"

"'Ghost,' good gracious no," he said, energetically; "dear me, no!"

"Then I really don't understand," I said.

"I thought you might see your ... I wanted you to collaborate with me. Quite publicly, of course, as far as the epithet applies."

"To collaborate," I said slowly. "You...."

I was looking at a miniature of the Farnese Hercules--I wondered what it meant, what club had struck the wheel of my fortune and whirled it into this astounding attitude.

"Of course you must think about it," he said.

"I don't know," I muttered; "the idea is so new. It's so little in my line. I don't know what I should make of it."

I talked at random. There were so many thoughts jostling in my head. It seemed to carry me so much farther from the kind of work I wanted to do. I did not really doubt my ability--one does not. I rather regarded it as work upon a lower plane. And it was a tremendous--an incredibly tremendous--opportunity.

"You know pretty well how much I've done," he continued. "I've got a good deal of material together and a good deal of the actual writing is done. But there is ever so much still to do. It's getting beyond me, as I said just now."

I looked at him again, rather incredulously. He stood before me, a thin parallelogram of black with a mosaic of white about the throat. The slight grotesqueness of the man made him almost impossibly real in his abstracted earnestness. He so much meant what he said that he ignored what his hands were doing, or his body or his head. He had taken a very small, very dusty book out of a little shelf beside him, and was absently turning over the rusty leaves, while he talked with his head bent over it. What was I to him, or he to me?

"I could give my Saturday afternoons to it," he was saying, "whenever you could come down."

"It's immensely kind of you," I began.

"Not at all, not at all," he waived. "I've set my heart on doing it and, unless you help me, I don't suppose I ever shall get it done."

"But there are hundreds of others," I said.

"There may be," he said, "there may be. But I have not come across them."

I was beset by a sudden emotion of blind candour.

"Oh, nonsense, nonsense," I said. "Don't you see that you are offering me the chance of a lifetime?"

Churchill laughed.

"After all, one cannot refuse to take what offers," he said. "Besides, your right man to do the work might not suit me as a collaborator."

"It's very tempting," I said.

"Why, then, succumb," he smiled.

I could not find arguments against him, and I succumbed as Jenkins re-entered the room.