

## CHAPTER NINE

After that I began to live, as one lives; and for forty-nine weeks. I know it was forty-nine, because I got fifty-two atmospheres in all; Callan's and Churchill's, and those forty-nine and the last one that finished the job and the year of it. It was amusing work in its way; people mostly preferred to have their atmospheres taken at their country houses--it showed that they had them, I suppose. Thus I spent a couple of days out of every week in agreeable resorts, and people were very nice to me--it was part of the game.

So I had a pretty good time for a year and enjoyed it, probably because I had had a pretty bad one for several years. I filled in the rest of my weeks by helping Fox and collaborating with Mr. Churchill and adoring Mrs. Hartly at odd moments. I used to hang about the office of the Hour on the chance of snapping up a blank three lines fit for a subtle puff of her. Sometimes they were too hurried to be subtle, and then Mrs. Hartly was really pleased.

I never understood her in the least, and I very much doubt whether she ever understood a word I said. I imagine that I must have talked to her about her art or her mission--things obviously as strange to her as to the excellent Hartly himself. I suppose she hadn't any art; I am certain she hadn't any mission, except to be adored. She walked about the stage and one adored her, just as she sat about her flat and was adored, and there the matter ended.

As for Fox, I seemed to suit him--I don't in the least know why. No doubt he knew me better than I knew myself. He used to get hold of me whilst I was hanging about the office on the chance of engaging space for Mrs. Hartly, and he used to utilise me for the ignoblest things. I saw men for him, scribbled notes for him, abused people through the telephone, and wrote articles. Of course, there were the pickings.

I never understood Fox--not in the least, not more than I understood Mrs. Hartly. He had the mannerisms of the most incredible vulgarian and had, apparently, the point of view of a pig. But there was something else that obscured all that, that forced one to call him a wonderful man. Everyone called him that. He used to say that he knew what he wanted and that he got it, and that was true, too. I didn't in the least want to do his odd jobs, even for the ensuing pickings, and I didn't want to be hail-fellow with him. But I did them and I was, without even realising that it was distasteful to me. It was probably the same with everybody else.

I used to have an idea that I was going to reform him; that one day I should make

him convert the Hour into an asylum for writers of merit. He used to let me have my own way sometimes--just often enough to keep my conscience from inconveniencing me. He let me present Lea with an occasional column and a half; and once he promised me that one day he would allow me to get the atmosphere of Arthur Edwards, the novelist.

Then there was Churchill and the Life of Cromwell that progressed slowly. The experiment succeeded well enough, as I grew less domineering and he less embarrassed. Toward the end I seemed to have become a familiar inmate of his house. I used to go down with him on Saturday afternoons and we talked things over in the train. It was, to an idler like myself, wonderful the way that essential idler's days were cut out and fitted in like the squares of a child's puzzle; little passages of work of one kind fitting into quite unrelated passages of something else. He did it well, too, without the remotest semblance of hurry.

I suppose that actually the motive power was his aunt. People used to say so, but it did not appear on the surface to anyone in close contact with the man; or it appeared only in very small things. We used to work in a tall, dark, pleasant room, book-lined, and giving on to a lawn that was always an asylum for furtive thrushes. Miss Churchill, as a rule, sat half forgotten near the window, with the light falling over her shoulder. She was always very absorbed in papers; seemed to be spending laborious days in answering letters, in evolving reports. Occasionally she addressed a question to her nephew, occasionally received guests that came informally but could not be refused admittance. Once it was a semi-royal personage, once the Duc de Mersch, my reputed employer.

The latter, I remember, was announced when Churchill and I were finally finishing our account of the tremendous passing of the Protector. In that silent room I had a vivid sense of the vast noise of the storm in that twilight of the crowning mercy. I seemed to see the candles a-flicker in the eddies of air forced into the gloomy room; the great bed and the portentous uncouth form that struggled in the shadows of the hangings. Miss Churchill looked up from the card that had been placed in her hands.

"Edward," she said, "the Duc de Mersch."

Churchill rose irritably from his low seat. "Confound him," he said, "I won't see him."

"You can't help it, I think," his aunt said, reflectively; "you will have to settle it sooner or later."

I know pretty well what it was they had to settle--the Greenland affair that had

hung in the air so long. I knew it from hearsay, from Fox, vaguely enough. Mr. Gurnard was said to recommend it for financial reasons, the Duc to be eager, Churchill to hang back unaccountably. I never had much head for details of this sort, but people used to explain them to me--to explain the reasons for de Mersch's eagerness. They were rather shabby, rather incredible reasons, that sounded too reasonable to be true. He wanted the money for his railways--wanted it very badly. He was vastly in want of money, he was this, that, and the other in certain international-philanthropic concerns, and had a finger in this, that, and the other pie. There was an "All Round the World Cable Company" that united hearts and hands, and a "Pan-European Railway, Exploration, and Civilisation Company" that let in light in dark places, and an "International Housing of the Poor Company," as well as a number of others. Somewhere at the bottom of these seemingly bottomless concerns, the Duc de Mersch was said to be moving, and the Hour certainly contained periodically complimentary allusions to their higher philanthropy and dividend-earning prospects. But that was as much as I knew. The same people--people one met in smoking-rooms--said that the Trans-Greenland Railway was the last card of de Mersch. British investors wouldn't trust the Duc without some sort of guarantee from the British Government, and no other investor would trust him on any terms. England was to guarantee something or other--the interest for a number of years, I suppose. I didn't believe them, of course--one makes it a practice to believe nothing of the sort. But I recognised that the evening was momentous to somebody--that Mr. Gurnard and the Duc de Mersch and Churchill were to discuss something and that I was remotely interested because the Hour employed me.

Churchill continued to pace up and down.

"Gurnard dines here to-night," his aunt said.

"Oh, I see." His hands played with some coins in his trouser-pockets. "I see," he said again, "they've ..."

The occasion impressed me. I remember very well the manner of both nephew and aunt. They seemed to be suddenly called to come to a decision that was no easy one, that they had wished to relegate to an indefinite future.

She left Churchill pacing nervously up and down.

"I could go on with something else, if you like," I said.

"But I don't like," he said, energetically; "I'd much rather not see the man. You know the sort of person he is."

"Why, no," I answered, "I never studied the Almanac de Gotha."

"Oh, I forgot," he said. He seemed vexed with himself.

Churchill's dinners were frequently rather trying to me. Personages of enormous importance used to drop in--and reveal themselves as rather asinine. At the best of times they sat dimly opposite to me, discomposed me, and disappeared. Sometimes they stared me down. That night there were two of them.

Gurnard I had heard of. One can't help hearing of a Chancellor of the Exchequer. The books of reference said that he was the son of one William Gurnard, Esq., of Grimsby; but I remember that once in my club a man who professed to know everything, assured me that W. Gurnard, Esq. (whom he had described as a fish salesman), was only an adoptive father. His rapid rise seemed to me inexplicable till the same man accounted for it with a shrug: "When a man of such ability believes in nothing, and sticks at nothing, there's no saying how far he may go. He has kicked away every ladder. He doesn't mean to come down."

This, no doubt, explained much; but not everything in his fabulous career. His adherents called him an inspired statesman; his enemies set him down a mere politician. He was a man of forty-five, thin, slightly bald, and with an icy assurance of manner. He was indifferent to attacks upon his character, but crushed mercilessly every one who menaced his position. He stood alone, and a little mysterious; his own party was afraid of him.

Gurnard was quite hidden from me by table ornaments; the Duc de Mersch glowed with light and talked voluminously, as if he had for years and years been starved of human society. He glowed all over, it seemed to me. He had a glorious beard, that let one see very little of his florid face and took the edge away from an almost non-existent forehead and depressingly wrinkled eyelids. He spoke excellent English, rather slowly, as if he were forever replying to toasts to his health. It struck me that he seemed to treat Churchill in nuances as an inferior, whilst for the invisible Gurnard, he reserved an attitude of nervous self-assertion. He had apparently come to dilate on the *Système Groënlandais*, and he dilated. Some mistaken persons had insinuated that the *Système* was neither more nor less than a corporate exploitation of unhappy Esquimaux. De Mersch emphatically declared that those mistaken people were mistaken, declared it with official finality. The Esquimaux were not unhappy. I paid attention to my dinner, and let the discourse on the affairs of the Hyperborean Protectorate lapse into an unheeded murmur. I tried to be the simple amanuensis at the feast.

Suddenly, however, it struck me that de Mersch was talking at me; that he had by the merest shade raised his intonation. He was dilating upon the immense

international value of the proposed Trans-Greenland Railway. Its importance to British trade was indisputable; even the opposition had no serious arguments to offer. It was the obvious duty of the British Government to give the financial guarantee. He would not insist upon the moral aspect of the work--it was unnecessary. Progress, improvement, civilisation, a little less evil in the world--more light! It was our duty not to count the cost of humanising a lower race. Besides, the thing would pay like another Suez Canal. Its terminus and the British coaling station would be on the west coast of the island.... I knew the man was talking at me--I wondered why.

Suddenly he turned his glowing countenance full upon me.

"I think I must have met a member of your family," he said. The solution occurred to me. I was a journalist, he a person interested in a railway that he wished the Government to back in some way or another. His attempts to capture my suffrage no longer astonished me. I murmured:

"Indeed!"

"In Paris--Mrs. Etchingam Granger," he said.

I said, "Oh, yes."

Miss Churchill came to the rescue.

"The Duc de Mersch means our friend, your aunt," she explained. I had an unpleasant sensation. Through fronds of asparagus fern I caught the eyes of Gurnard fixed upon me as though something had drawn his attention. I returned his glance, tried to make his face out. It had nothing distinctive in its half-hidden pallid oval; nothing that one could seize upon. But it gave the impression of never having seen the light of day, of never having had the sun upon it. But the conviction that I had aroused his attention disturbed me. What could the man know about me? I seemed to feel his glance bore through the irises of my eyes into the back of my skull. The feeling was almost physical; it was as if some incredibly concentrant reflector had been turned upon me. Then the eyelids dropped over the metallic rings beneath them. Miss Churchill continued to explain.

"She has started a sort of Salon des Causes Perdues in the Faubourg Saint Germain." She was recording the vagaries of my aunt. The Duc laughed.

"Ah, yes," he said, "what a menagerie--Carlists, and Orleanists, and Papal Blacks. I wonder she has not held a bazaar in favour of your White Rose League."

"Ah, yes," I echoed, "I have heard that she was mad about the divine right of kings."

Miss Churchill rose, as ladies rise at the end of a dinner. I followed her out of the room, in obedience to some minute signal.

We were on the best of terms--we two. She mothered me, as she mothered everybody not beneath contempt or above a certain age. I liked her immensely--the masterful, absorbed, brown lady. As she walked up the stairs, she said, in half apology for withdrawing me.

"They've got things to talk about."

"Why, yes," I answered; "I suppose the railway matter has to be settled." She looked at me fixedly.

"You--you mustn't talk," she warned.

"Oh," I answered, "I'm not indiscreet--not essentially."

The other three were somewhat tardy in making their drawing-room appearance. I had a sense of them, leaning their heads together over the edges of the table. In the interim a rather fierce political dowager convoyed two well-controlled, blond daughters into the room. There was a continual coming and going of such people in the house; they did with Miss Churchill social business of some kind, arranged electoral rarée-shows, and what not; troubled me very little. On this occasion the blond daughters were types of the sixties' survivals--the type that unemotionally inspected albums. I was convoying them through a volume of views of Switzerland, the dowager was saying to Miss Churchill:

"You think, then, it will be enough if we have...." When the door opened behind my back. I looked round negligently and hastily returned to the consideration of a shining photograph of the Dent du Midi. A very gracious figure of a girl was embracing the grim Miss Churchill, as a gracious girl should virginally salute a grim veteran.

"Ah, my dear Miss Churchill!" a fluting voice filled the large room, "we were very nearly going back to Paris without once coming to see you. We are only over for two days--for the Tenants' Ball, and so my aunt ... but surely that is Arthur...."

I turned eagerly. It was the Dimensionist girl. She continued talking to Miss Churchill. "We meet so seldom, and we are never upon terms," she said lightly. "I

assure you we are like cat and dog." She came toward me and the blond maidens disappeared, everybody, everything disappeared. I had not seen her for nearly a year. I had vaguely gathered from Miss Churchill that she was regarded as a sister of mine, that she had, with wealth inherited from a semi-fabulous Australian uncle, revived the glories of my aunt's house. I had never denied it, because I did not want to interfere with my aunt's attempts to regain some of the family's prosperity. It even had my sympathy to a small extent, for, after all, the family was my family too.

As a memory my pseudo-sister had been something bright and clear-cut and rather small; seen now, she was something that one could not look at for glow. She moved toward me, smiling and radiant, as a ship moves beneath towers of shining canvas. I was simply overwhelmed. I don't know what she said, what I said, what she did or I. I have an idea that we conversed for some minutes. I remember that she said, at some point,

"Go away now; I want to talk to Mr. Gurnard."

As a matter of fact, Gurnard was making toward her--a deliberate, slow progress. She greeted him with nonchalance, as, beneath eyes, a woman greets a man she knows intimately. I found myself hating him, thinking that he was not the sort of man she ought to know.

"It's settled?" she asked him, as he came within range. He looked at me inquiringly--insolently. She said, "My brother," and he answered:

"Oh, yes," as I moved away. I hated the man and I could not keep my eyes off him and her. I went and stood against the mantel-piece. The Duc de Mersch bore down upon them, and I welcomed his interruption until I saw that he, too, was intimate with her, intimate with a pomposity of flourishes as irritating as Gurnard's nonchalance.

I stood there and glowered at them. I noted her excessive beauty; her almost perilous self-possession while she stood talking to those two men. Of me there was nothing left but the eyes. I had no mind, no thoughts. I saw the three figures go through the attitudes of conversation--she very animated, de Mersch grotesquely empessé, Gurnard undisguisedly saturnine. He repelled me exactly as grossly vulgar men had the power of doing, but he, himself, was not that--there was something ... something. I could not quite make out his face, I never could. I never did, any more than I could ever quite visualise hers. I wondered vaguely how Churchill could work in harness with such a man, how he could bring himself to be closeted, as he had just been, with him and with a fool like de Mersch--I should have been afraid.

As for de Mersch, standing between those two, he seemed like a country lout between confederate sharpers. It struck me that she let me see, made me see, that she and Gurnard had an understanding, made manifest to me by glances that passed when the Duc had his unobservant eyes turned elsewhere.

I saw Churchill, in turn, move desultorily toward them, drawn in, like a straw toward a little whirlpool. I turned my back in a fury of jealousy.