CHAPTER TEN

I had a pretty bad night after that, and was not much in the mood for Fox on the morrow. The sight of her had dwarfed everything; the thought of her disgusted me with everything, made me out of conceit with the world--with that part of the world that had become my world. I wanted to get up into hers--and I could not see any way. The room in which Fox sat seemed to be hopelessly off the road--to be hopelessly off any road to any place; to be the end of a blind alley. One day I might hope to occupy such a room--in my shirt-sleeves, like Fox. But that was not the end of my career--not the end that I desired. She had upset me.

"You've just missed Polehampton," Fox said; "wanted to get hold of your 'Atmospheres.'"

"Oh, damn Polehampton," I said, "and particularly damn the 'Atmospheres.'"

"Willingly," Fox said, "but I told Mr. P. that you were willing if...."

"I don't want to know," I repeated. "I tell you I'm sick of the things."

"What a change," he asserted, sympathetically, "I thought you would."

It struck me as disgusting that a person like Fox should think about me at all. "Oh, I'll see it through," I said. "Who's the next?"

"We've got to have the Duc de Mersch now," he answered, "De Mersch as State Founder--written as large as you can--all across the page. The moment's come and we've got to rope it in, that's all. I've been middling good to you.... You understand...."

He began to explain in his dark sentences. The time had come for an energetically engineered boom in de Mersch--a boom all along the line. And I was to commence the campaign. Fox had been good to me and I was to repay him. I listened in a sort of apathetic indifference.

"Oh, very well," I said. I was subconsciously aware that, as far as I was concerned, the determining factor of the situation was the announcement that de Mersch was to be in Paris. If he had been in his own particular grand duchy I wouldn't have gone after him. For a moment I thought of the interview as taking place in London. But Fox--ostensibly, at least--wasn't even aware of de Mersch's visit; spoke of him as being in Paris--in a flat in which he was accustomed to

interview the continental financiers who took up so much of his time.

I realised that I wanted to go to Paris because she was there. She had said that she was going to Paris on the morrow of yesterday. The name was pleasant to me, and it turned the scale.

Fox's eyes remained upon my face.

"Do you good, eh?" he dimly interpreted my thoughts. "A run over. I thought you'd like it and, look here, Polehampton's taken over the Bi-Monthly; wants to get new blood into it, see? He'd take something. I've been talking to him--a short series.... 'Aspects.' That sort of thing." I tried to work myself into some sort of enthusiasm of gratitude. I knew that Fox had spoken well of me to Polehampton--as a sort of set off.

"You go and see Mr. P.," he confirmed; "it's really all arranged. And then get off to Paris as fast as you can and have a good time."

"Have I been unusually cranky lately?" I asked.

"Oh, you've been a little off the hooks, I thought, for the last week or so."

He took up a large bottle of white mucilage, and I accepted it as a sign of dismissal. I was touched by his solicitude for my health. It always did touch me, and I found myself unusually broad-minded in thought as I went down the terra-cotta front steps into the streets. For all his frank vulgarity, for all his shirt-sleeves--I somehow regarded that habit of his as the final mark of the Beast--and the Louis Quinze accessories, I felt a warm good-feeling for the little man.

I made haste to see Polehampton, to beard him in a sort of den that contained a number of shelves of books selected for their glittering back decoration. They gave the impression that Mr. Polehampton wished to suggest to his visitors the fitness and propriety of clothing their walls with the same gilt cloth. They gave that idea, but I think that, actually, Mr. Polehampton took an aesthetic delight in the gilding. He was not a publisher by nature. He had drifted into the trade and success, but beneath a polish of acquaintance retained a fine awe for a book as such. In early life he had had such shining things on a shiny table in a parlour. He had a similar awe for his daughter, who had been born after his entry into the trade, and who had the literary flavour--a flavour so pronounced that he dragged her by the heels into any conversation with us who hewed his raw material, expecting, I suppose, to cow us. For the greater good of this young lady he had bought the Bi-Monthly--one of the portentous political organs. He had, they said, ideas of forcing a seat out of the party as a recompense.

It didn't matter much what was the nature of my series of articles. I was to get the atmosphere of cities as I had got those of the various individuals. I seemed to pay on those lines, and Miss Polehampton commended me.

"My daughter likes ... eh ... your touch, you know, and...." His terms were decent--for the man, and were offered with a flourish that indicated special benevolence and a reference to the hundred pounds. I was at a loss to account for his manner until he began to stammer out an indication. Its lines were that I knew Fox, and I knew Churchill and the Duc de Mersch, and the Hour. "And those financial articles ... in the Hour ... were they now?... Were they ... was the Trans - Greenland railway actually ... did I think it would be worth one's while ... in fact...." and so on.

I never was any good in a situation of that sort, never any good at all. I ought to have assumed blank ignorance, but the man's eyes pleaded; it seemed a tremendous matter to him. I tried to be non-committal, and said: "Of course I haven't any right." But I had a vague, stupid sense that loyalty to Churchill demanded that I should back up a man he was backing. As a matter of fact, nothing so direct was a-gate, it couldn't have been. It was something about shares in one of de Mersch's other enterprises. Polehampton was going to pick them up for nothing, and they were going to rise when the boom in de Mersch's began--something of the sort. And the boom would begin as soon as the news of the agreement about the railway got abroad.

I let him get it out of me in a way that makes the thought of that bare place with its gilt book-backs and its three uncomfortable office-chairs and the ground-glass windows through which one read the inversion of the legend "Polehampton," all its gloom and its rigid lines and its pallid light, a memory of confusion. And Polehampton was properly grateful, and invited me to dine with him and his phantasmal daughter--who wanted to make my acquaintance. It was like a command to a state banquet given by a palace official, and Lea would be invited to meet me. Miss Polehampton did not like Lea, but he had to be asked once a year--to encourage good feeling, I suppose. The interview dribbled out on those lines. I asked if it was one of Lea's days at the office. It was not. I tried to put in a good word for Lea, but it was not very effective. Polehampton was too subject to his assistant's thorns to be responsive to praise of him.

So I hurried out of the place. I wanted to be out of this medium in which my ineffectiveness threatened to proclaim itself to me. It was not a very difficult matter. I had, in those days, rooms in one of the political journalists' clubs--a vast mausoleum of white tiles. But a man used to pack my portmanteau very efficiently and at short notice. At the station one of those coincidences that are

not coincidences made me run against the great Callan. He was rather unhappy--found it impossible to make an already distracted porter listen to the end of one of his sentences with two-second waits between each word. For that reason he brightened to see me--was delighted to find a through-journey companion who would take him on terms of greatness. In the railway carriage, divested of troublesome bags that imparted anxiety to his small face and a stagger to his walk, he swelled to his normal dimensions.

"So you're--going to--Paris," he meditated, "for the Hour."

"I'm going to Paris for the Hour," I agreed.

"Ah!" he went on, "you're going to interview the Elective Grand Duke...."

"We call him the Duc de Mersch," I interrupted, flippantly. It was a matter of nuances. The Elective Grand Duke was a philanthropist and a State Founder, the Duc de Mersch was the hero as financier.

"Of Holstein-Launewitz," Callan ignored. The titles slipped over his tongue like the last drops of some inestimable oily vintage.

"I might have saved you the trouble. I'm going to see him myself."

"You," I italicised. It struck me as phenomenal and rather absurd that everybody that I came across should, in some way or other, be mixed up with this portentous philanthropist. It was as if a fisherman were drawing in a ground line baited with hundreds of hooks. He had a little offended air.

"He, or, I should say, a number of people interested in a philanthropic society, have asked me to go to Greenland."

"Do they want to get rid of you?" I asked, flippantly. I was made to know my place.

"My dear fellow," Callan said, in his most deliberate, most Olympian tone. "I believe you're entirely mistaken, I believe ... I've been informed that the Système Groënlandais is one of the healthiest places in the Polar regions. There are interested persons who...."

"So I've heard," I interrupted, "but I can assure you I've heard nothing but good of the Système and the ... and its philanthropists. I meant nothing against them. I was only astonished that you should go to such a place."

"I have been asked to go upon a mission," he explained, seriously, "to ascertain what the truth about the Système really is. It is a new country with, I am assured, a great future in store. A great deal of English money has been invested in its securities, and naturally great interest is taken in its affairs."

"So it seems," I said, "I seem to run upon it at every hour of the day and night."

"Ah, yes," Callan rhapsodised, "it has a great future in store, a great future. The Duke is a true philanthropist. He has taken infinite pains--infinite pains. He wished to build up a model state, the model protectorate of the world, a place where perfect equality shall obtain for all races, all creeds, and all colours. You would scarcely believe how he has worked to ensure the happiness of the native races. He founded the great society to protect the Esquimaux, the Society for the Regeneration of the Arctic Regions--the S.R.A.R.--as you called it, and now he is only waiting to accomplish his greatest project--the Trans-Greenland railway. When that is done, he will hand over the Système to his own people. That is the act of a great man."

"Ah, yes," I said.

"Well," Callan began again, but suddenly paused. "By-the-bye, this must go no farther," he said, anxiously, "I will let you have full particulars when the time is ripe."

"My dear Callan," I said, touchily, "I can hold my tongue."

He went off at tangent.

"I don't want you to take my word--I haven't seen it yet. But I feel assured about it myself. The most distinguished people have spoken to me in its favour. The celebrated traveller, Aston, spoke of it with tears in his eyes. He was the first governor-general, you know. Of course I should not take any interest in it, if I were not satisfied as to that. It is percisely because I feel that the thing is one of the finest monuments of a grand century that I am going to lend it the weight of my pen."

"I quite understand," I assured him; then, solicitously, "I hope they don't expect you to do it for nothing."

"Oh, dear, no," Callan answered.

"Ah, well, I wish you luck," I said. "They couldn't have got a better man to win over the National conscience. I suppose it comes to that."

Callan nodded.

"I fancy I have the ear of the public," he said. He seemed to get satisfaction from the thought.

The train entered Folkestone Harbour. The smell of the sea and the easy send of the boat put a little heart into me, but my spirits were on the down grade. Callan was a trying companion. The sight of him stirred uneasy emotions, the sound of his voice jarred.

"Are you coming to the Grand?" he said, as we passed St. Denis.

"My God, no," I answered, hotly, "I'm going across the river."

"Ah," he murmured, "the Quartier Latin. I wish I could come with you. But I've my reputation to think of. You'd be surprised how people get to hear of my movements. Besides, I'm a family man."

I was agitatedly silent. The train steamed into the glare of the electric lights, and, getting into a fiacre, I breathed again. I seemed to be at the entrance of a new life, a better sort of paradise, during that drive across the night city. In London one is always a passenger, in Paris one has reached a goal. The crowds on the pavements, under the plane-trees, in the black shadows, in the white glare of the open spaces, are at leisure--they go nowhere, seek nothing beyond.

We crossed the river, the unwinking towers of Notre Dame towering pallidly against the dark sky behind us; rattled into the new light of the resuming boulevard; turned up a dark street, and came to a halt before a half-familiar shut door. You know how one wakes the sleepy concierge, how one takes one's candle, climbs up hundreds and hundreds of smooth stairs, following the slipshod footfalls of a half-awakened guide upward through Rembrandt's own shadows, and how one's final sleep is sweetened by the little inconveniences of a strange bare room and of a strange hard bed.