

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Before noon of the next day I was ascending the stairs of the new house in which the Duc had his hermitage. There was an air of secrecy in the broad publicity of the carpeted stairs that led to his flat; a hush in the atmosphere; in the street itself, a glorified cul de sac that ran into the bustling life of the Italiens. It had the sudden sluggishness of a back-water. One seemed to have grown suddenly deaf in the midst of the rattle.

There was an incredible suggestion of silence--the silence of a private detective--in the mien of the servant who ushered me into a room. He was the English servant of the theatre--the English servant that foreigners affect. The room had a splendour of its own, not a cheaply vulgar splendour, but the vulgarity of the most lavish plush and purple kind. The air was heavy, killed by the scent of exotic flowers, darkened by curtains that suggested the voluminous velvet backgrounds of certain old portraits. The Duc de Mersch had carried with him into this place of retirement the taste of the New Palace, that show-place of his that was the stupefaction of swarms of honest tourists.

I remembered soon enough that the man was a philanthropist, that he might be an excellent man of heart and indifferent of taste. He must be. But I was prone to be influenced by things of this sort, and felt depressed at the thought that so much of royal excellence should weigh so heavily in the wrong scale of the balance of the applied arts. I turned my back on the room and gazed at the blazing white decorations of the opposite house-fronts.

A door behind me must have opened, for I heard the sounds of a concluding tirade in a high-pitched voice.

"Et quant à un duc de farce, je ne m'en fiche pas mal, moi," it said in an accent curiously compounded of the foreign and the coulisse. A muttered male remonstrance ensued, and then, with disconcerting clearness:

"Gr-r-rangeur--Eschingan--eh bien--il entend. Et moi, j'entends, moi aussi. Tu veux me jouer contre elle. La Grangeur--pah! Consoles-toi avec elle, mon vieux. Je ne veux plus de toi. Tu m'as donné de tes sales rentes Groenlandoises, et je n'ai pas pu les vendre. Ah, vieux farceur, tu vas voir ce que j'en vais faire."

A glorious creature--a really glorious creature--came out of an adjoining room. She was as frail, as swaying as a garden lily. Her great blue eyes turned irefully upon me, her bowed lips parted, her nostrils quivered.

"Et quant à vous, M. Grangeur Eschingan," she began, "je vais vous donner mon idée à moi ..."

I did not understand the situation in the least, but I appreciated the awkwardness of it. The world seemed to be standing on its head. I was overcome; but I felt for the person in the next room. I did not know what to do. Suddenly I found myself saying:

"I am extremely sorry, madam, but I don't understand French." An expression of more intense vexation passed into her face--her beautiful face. I fancy she wished--wished intensely--to give me the benefit of her "idée à elle." She made a quick, violent gesture of disgusted contempt, and turned toward the half-open door from which she had come. She began again to dilate upon the little weaknesses of the person behind, when silently and swiftly it closed. We heard the lock click. With extraordinary quickness she had her mouth at the keyhole: "Peeg, peeg," she enunciated. Then she stood to her full height, her face became calm, her manner stately. She glided half way across the room, paused, looked at me, and pointed toward the unmoving door.

"Peeg, peeg," she explained, mysteriously. I think she was warning me against the wiles of the person behind the door. I gazed into her great eyes. "I understand," I said, gravely. She glided from the room. For me the incident supplied a welcome touch of comedy. I had leisure for thought. The door remained closed. It made the Duc a more real person for me. I had regarded him as a rather tiresome person in whom a pompous philanthropism took the place of human feelings. It amused me to be called Le Grangeur. It amused me, and I stood in need of amusement. Without it I might never have written the article on the Duc. I had started out that morning in a state of nervous irritation. I had wanted more than ever to have done with the thing, with the Hour, with journalism, with everything. But this little new experience buoyed me up, set my mind working in less morbid lines. I began to wonder whether de Mersch would funk, or whether he would take my non-comprehension of the woman's tirades as a thing assured.

The door at which I had entered, by which she had left, opened.

He must have impressed me in some way or other that evening at the Churchills. He seemed a very stereotyped image in my memory. He spoke just as he had spoken, moved his hands just as I expected him to move them. He called for no modification of my views of his person. As a rule one classes a man so-and-so at first meeting, modifies the classification at each subsequent one, and so on. He seemed to be all affability, of an adipose turn. He had the air of the man of the world among men of the world; but none of the unconscious reserve of manner

that one expects to find in the temporarily great. He had in its place a kind of sub-sulkiness, as if he regretted the pedestal from which he had descended.

In his slow commercial English he apologised for having kept me waiting; he had been taking the air of this fine morning, he said. He mumbled the words with his eyes on my waistcoat, with an air that accorded rather ill with the semblance of portentous probity that his beard conferred on him. But he set an eye-glass in his left eye immediately afterward, and looked straight at me as if in challenge. With a smiling "Don't mention," I tried to demonstrate that I met him half way.

"You want to interview me," he said, blandly. "I am only too pleased. I suppose it is about my Arctic schemes that you wish to know. I will do what I can to inform you. You perhaps remember what I said when I had the pleasure of meeting you at the house of the Right Honourable Mr. Churchill. It has been the dream of my life to leave behind me a happy and contented State--as much as laws and organisation can make one. This is what I should most like the English to know of me." He was a dull talker. I supposed that philanthropists and state founders kept their best faculties for their higher pursuits. I imagined the low, receding forehead and the pink-nailed, fleshy hands to belong to a new Solon, a latter-day Æneas. I tried to work myself into the properly enthusiastic frame of mind. After all, it was a great work that he had undertaken. I was too much given to dwell upon intellectual gifts. These the Duc seemed to lack. I credited him with having let them be merged in his one noble idea.

He furnished me with statistics. They had laid down so many miles of railways, used so many engines of British construction. They had taught the natives to use and to value sewing-machines and European costumes. So many hundred of English younger sons had gone to make their fortunes and, incidentally, to enlighten the Esquimaux--so many hundreds of French, of Germans, Greeks, Russians. All these lived and moved in harmony, employed, happy, free labourers, protected by the most rigid laws. Man-eating, fetich-worship, slavery had been abolished, stamped out. The great international society for the preservation of Polar freedom watched over all, suggested new laws, modified the old. The country was unhealthy, but not to men of clean lives--*hominibus bonæ voluntatis*. It asked for no others.

"I have had to endure much misrepresentation. I have been called names," the Duc said.

The figure of the lady danced before my eyes, lithe, supple--a statue endued with the motion of a serpent. I seemed to see her sculptured white hand pointing to the closed door.

"Ah, yes," I said, "but one knows the people that call you names."

"Well, then," he answered, "it is your task to make them know the truth. Your nation has so much power. If it will only realise."

"I will do my best," I said.

I saw the apotheosis of the Press--a Press that makes a State Founder suppliant to a man like myself. For he had the tone of a deprecating petitioner. I stood between himself and a people, the arbiter of the peoples, of the kings of the future. I was nothing, nobody; yet here I stood in communion with one of those who change the face of continents. He had need of me, of the power that was behind me. It was strange to be alone in that room with that man--to be there just as I might be in my own little room alone with any other man.

I was not unduly elated, you must understand. It was nothing to me. I was just a person elected by some suffrage of accidents. Even in my own eyes I was merely a symbol--the sign visible of incomprehensible power.

"I will do my best," I said.

"Ah, yes, do," he said, "Mr. Churchill told me how nicely you can do such things."

I said that it was very kind of Mr. Churchill. The tension of the conversation was relaxed. The Duc asked if I had yet seen my aunt.

"I had forgotten her," I said.

"Oh, you must see her," he said; "she is a most remarkable lady. She is one of my relaxations. All Paris talks about her, I can assure you."

"I had no idea," I said.

"Oh, cultivate her," he said; "you will be amused."

"I will," I said, as I took my leave.

I went straight home to my little room above the roofs. I began at once to write my article, working at high pressure, almost hysterically. I remember that place and that time so well. In moments of emotion one gazes fixedly at things, hardly conscious of them. Afterward one remembers.

I can still see the narrow room, the bare, brown, discoloured walls, the

incongruous marble clock on the mantel-piece, the single rickety chair that swayed beneath me. I could almost draw the tortuous pattern of the faded cloth that hid the round table at which I sat. The ink was thick, pale, and sticky; the pen spluttered. I wrote furiously, anxious to be done with it. Once I went and leaned over the balcony, trying to hit on a word that would not come. Miles down below, little people crawled over the cobbled street, little carts rattled, little workmen let down casks into a cellar. It was all very grey, small, and clear.

Through the open window of an opposite garret I could see a sculptor working at a colossal clay model. In his white blouse he seemed big, out of all proportion to the rest of the world. Level with my eyes there were flat lead roofs and chimneys. On one of these was scrawled, in big, irregular, blue-painted letters: "A bas Coignet."

Great clouds began to loom into view over the house-tops, rounded, toppling masses of grey, lit up with sullen orange against the pale limpid blue of the sky. I stood and looked at all these objects. I had come out here to think--thoughts had deserted me. I could only look.

The clouds moved imperceptibly, fatefully onward, a streak of lightning tore them apart. They whirled like tortured smoke and grew suddenly black. Large spots of rain with jagged edges began to fall on the lead floor of my balcony.

I turned into the twilight of my room and began to write. I can still feel the tearing of my pen-point on the coarse paper. It was a hindrance to thought, but my flow of words ignored it, gained impetus from it, as a stream does at the breaking of a dam.

I was writing a pæan to a great coloniser. That sort of thing was in the air then. I was drawn into it, carried away by my subject. Perhaps I let it do so because it was so little familiar to my lines of thought. It was fresh ground and I revelled in it. I committed myself to that kind of emotional, lyrical outburst that one dislikes so much on re-reading. I was half conscious of the fact, but I ignored it.

The thunderstorm was over, and there was a moist sparkling freshness in the air when I hurried with my copy to the Hour office in the Avenue de l'Opéra. I wished to be rid of it, to render impossible all chance of revision on the morrow.

I wanted, too, to feel elated; I expected it. It was a right. At the office I found the foreign correspondent, a little cosmopolitan Jew whose eyebrows began their growth on the bridge of his nose. He was effusive and familiar, as the rest of his kind.

"Hullo, Granger," was his greeting. I was used to regarding myself as fallen from a high estate, but I was not yet so humble in spirit as to relish being called Granger by a stranger of his stamp. I tried to freeze him politely.

"Read your stuff in the Hour," was his rejoinder; "jolly good I call it. Been doing old Red-Beard? Let's have a look. Yes, yes. That's the way--that's the real thing--I call it. Must have bored you to death ... old de Mersch I mean. I ought to have had the job, you know. My business, interviewing people in Paris. But I don't mind. Much rather you did it than I. You do it a heap better."

I murmured thanks. There was a pathos about the sleek little man--a pathos that is always present in the type. He seemed to be trying to assume a deprecating equality.

"Where are you going to-night?" he asked, with sudden effusiveness. I was taken aback. One is not used to being asked these questions after five minutes' acquaintance. I said that I had no plans.

"Look here," he said, brightening up, "come and have dinner with me at Breguet's, and look in at the Opera afterward. We'll have a real nice chat."

I was too tired to frame an adequate excuse. Besides, the little man was as eager as a child for a new toy. We went to Breguet's and had a really excellent dinner.

"Always come here," he said; "one meets a lot of swells. It runs away with a deal of money--but I don't care to do things on the cheap, not for the Hour, you know. You can always be certain when I say that I have a thing from a senator that he is a senator, and not an old woman in a paper kiosque. Most of them do that sort of thing, you know."

"I always wondered," I said, mildly.

"That's de Sourdam I nodded to as we came in, and that old chap there is Pluyvis--the Affaire man, you know. I must have a word with him in a minute, if you'll excuse me."

He began to ask affectionately after the health of the excellent Fox, asked if I saw him often, and so on and so on. I divined with amusement that was pleasurable that the little man had his own little axe to grind, and thought I might take a turn at the grindstone if he managed me well. So he nodded to de Sourdam of the Austrian embassy and had his word with Pluyvis, and rejoiced to have impressed me--I could see him bubble with happiness and purr. He proposed that we should stroll as far as the paper kiosque that he patronised habitually--it was kept by a

fellow-Israelite--a snuffy little old woman.

I understood that in the joy of his heart he was for expanding, for wasting a few minutes on a stroll.

"Haven't stretched my legs for months," he explained.

We strolled there through the summer twilight. It was so pleasant to saunter through the young summer night. There were so many little things to catch the eyes, so many of the little things down near the earth; expressions on faces of the passers, the set of a collar, the quaint foreign tightness of waist of a good bourgeoisie who walked arm in arm with her perspiring spouse. The gilding on the statue of Joan of Arc had a pleasant littleness of Philistinism, the arcades of the Rue de Rivoli broke up the grey light pleasantly too. I remembered a little shop--a little Greek affair with a windowful of pinch-beck--where I had been given a false five-franc piece years and years ago. The same villainous old Levantine stood in the doorway, perhaps the fez that he wore was the same fez. The little old woman that we strolled to was bent nearly double. Her nose touched her wares as often as not, her mittened hands sought quiveringly the papers that the correspondent asked for. I liked him the better for his solicitude for this forlorn piece of flotsam of his own race.

"Always come here," he exclaimed; "one gets into habits. Very honest woman, too, you can be certain of getting your change. If you're a stranger you can't be sure that they won't give you Italian silver, you know."

"Oh, I know," I answered. I knew, too, that he wished me to purchase something. I followed the course of her groping hands, caught sight of the Revue Rouge, and remembered that it contained something about Greenland. I helped myself to it, paid for it, and received my just change. I felt that I had satisfied the little man, and felt satisfied with myself.

"I want to see Radet's article on Greenland," I said.

"Oh, yes," he explained, once more exhibiting himself in the capacity of the man who knows, "Radet gives it to them. Rather a lark, I call it, though you mustn't let old de Mersch know you read him. Radet got sick of Cochin, and tried Greenland. He's getting touched by the Whites you know. They say that the priests don't like the way the Système's playing into the hands of the Protestants and the English Government. So they set Radet on to write it down. He's going in for mysticism and all that sort of thing--just like all these French jokers are doing. Got deuced thick with that lot in the F. St. Germain--some relation of yours, ain't they? Rather a lark that lot, quite the thing just now, everyone goes there; old de

Mersch too. Have frightful rows sometimes, such a mixed lot, you see." The good little man rattled amiably along beside me.

"Seems quite funny to be buying books," he said. "I haven't read a thing I've bought, not for years."

We reached the Opera in time for the end of the first act--it was Aïda, I think. My little friend had a free pass all over the house. I had not been in it for years. In the old days I had always seen the stage from a great height, craning over people's heads in a sultry twilight; now I saw it on a level, seated at my ease. I had only the power of the Press to thank for the change.

"Come here as often as I can," my companion said; "can't do without music when it's to be had." Indeed he had the love of his race for it. It seemed to soften him, to change his nature, as he sat silent by my side.

But the closing notes of each scene found him out in the cool of the corridors, talking, and being talked to by anyone that would vouchsafe him a word.

"Pick up a lot here," he explained.

After the finale we leaned over one of the side balconies to watch the crowd streaming down the marble staircases. It is a scene that I never tire of. There is something so fantastically tawdry in the coloured marble of the architecture. It is for all the world like a triumph of ornamental soap work; one expects to smell the odours. And the torrent of humanity pouring liquidly aslant through the mirror-like light, and the spaciousness.... Yes, it is fantastic, somehow; ironical, too.

I was watching the devious passage of a rather drunken, gigantic, florid Englishman, wondering, I think, how he would reach his bed.

"That must be a relation of yours," the correspondent said, pointing. My glance followed the line indicated by his pale finger. I made out the glorious beard of the Duc de Mersch, on his arm was an old lady to whom he seemed to pay deferential attention. His head was bent on one side; he was smiling frankly. A little behind them, on the stairway, there was a space. Perhaps I was mistaken; perhaps there was no space--I don't know. I was only conscious of a figure, an indescribably clear-cut woman's figure, gliding down the way. It had a coldness, a self-possession, a motion of its own. In that clear, transparent, shimmering light, every little fold of the dress, every little shadow of the white arms, the white shoulders, came up to me. The face turned up to meet mine. I remember so well the light shining down on the face, not a shadow anywhere, not a shadow beneath the eyebrows, the nostrils, the waves of hair. It was a vision of light,

threatening, sinister.

She smiled, her lips parted.

"You come to me to-morrow," she said. Did I hear the words, did her lips merely form them? She was far, far down below me; the air was alive with the rustling of feet, of garments, of laughter, full of sounds that made themselves heard, full of sounds that would not be caught.

"You come to me ... to-morrow."

The old lady on the Duc de Mersch's arm was obviously my aunt. I did not see why I should not go to them to-morrow. It struck me suddenly and rather pleasantly that this was, after all, my family. This old lady actually was a connection more close than anyone else in the world. As for the girl, to all intents and, in everyone else's eyes, she was my sister. I cannot say I disliked having her for my sister, either. I stood looking down upon them and felt less alone than I had done for many years.

A minute scuffle of the shortest duration was taking place beside me. There were a couple of men at my elbow. I don't in the least know what they were--perhaps marquises, perhaps railway employees--one never can tell over there. One of them was tall and blond, with a heavy, bow-shaped red moustache--Irish in type; the other of no particular height, excellently groomed, dark, and exemplary. I knew he was exemplary from some detail of costume that I can't remember--his gloves or a strip of silk down the sides of his trousers--something of the sort. The blond was saying something that I did not catch. I heard the words "de Mersch" and "Anglaise," and saw the dark man turn his attention to the little group below. Then I caught my own name mispronounced and somewhat of a stumbling-block to a high-pitched contemptuous intonation. The little correspondent, who was on my other arm, started visibly and moved swiftly behind my back.

"Messieurs," he said in an urgent whisper, and drew them to a little distance. I saw him say something, saw them pivot to look at me, shrug their shoulders and walk away. I didn't in the least grasp the significance of the scene--not then.

"What's the matter?" I asked my returning friend; "were they talking about me?" He answered nervously.

"Oh, it was about your aunt's Salon, you know. They might have been going to say something awkward ... one never knows."

"They really do talk about it then?" I said. "I've a good mind to attend one of their

exhibitions."

"Why, of course," he said, "you ought. I really think you ought."

"I'll go to-morrow," I answered.