

CHAPTER TWELVE

I couldn't get to sleep that night, but lay and tossed, lit my candle and read, and so on, for ever and ever--for an eternity. I was confoundedly excited; there were a hundred things to be thought about; clamouring to be thought about; out-clamouring the re-current chimes of some near clock. I began to read the article by Radet in the *Revue Rouge*--the one I had bought of the old woman in the kiosque. It upset me a good deal--that article. It gave away the whole Greenland show so completely that the ecstatic bosh I had just despatched to the *Hour* seemed impossible. I suppose the good Radet had his axe to grind--just as I had had to grind the State Founder's, but Radet's axe didn't show. I was reading about an inland valley, a broad, shadowy, grey thing; immensely broad, immensely shadowy, winding away between immense, half-invisible mountains into the silence of an unknown country. A little band of men, microscopic figures in that immensity, in those mists, crept slowly up it. A man among them was speaking; I seemed to hear his voice, low, monotonous, overpowered by the wan light and the silence and the vastness.

And how well it was done--how the man could write; how skilfully he made his points. There was no slosh about it, no sentiment. The touch was light, in places even gay. He saw so well the romance of that dun band that had cast remorse behind; that had no return, no future, that spread desolation desolately. This was merely a review article--a thing that in England would have been unreadable; the narrative of a nomad of some genius. I could never have written like that--I should have spoiled it somehow. It set me tingling with desire, with the desire that transcends the sexual; the desire for the fine phrase, for the right word--for all the other intangibles. And I had been wasting all this time; had been writing my inanities. I must go away; must get back, right back to the old road, must work. There was so little time. It was unpleasant, too, to have been mixed up in this affair, to have been trepanned into doing my best to help it on its foul way. God knows I had little of the humanitarian in me. If people must murder in the by-ways of an immense world they must do murder and pay the price. But that I should have been mixed up in such was not what I had wanted. I must have dine with it all; with all this sort of thing, must get back to my old self, must get back. I seemed to hear the slow words of the Duc de Mersch.

"We have increased exports by so much; the imports by so much. We have protected the natives, have kept their higher interests ever present in our minds. And through it all we have never forgotten the mission entrusted to us by Europe--to remove the evil of darkness from the earth--to root out barbarism with its nameless horrors, whose existence has been a blot on our consciences. Men of

good-will and self-sacrifice are doing it now--are laying down their priceless lives to root out ... to root our...."

Of course they were rooting them out.

It didn't matter to me. One supposes that that sort of native exists for that sort of thing--to be rooted out by men of good-will, with careers to make. The point was that that was what they were really doing out there--rooting out the barbarians as well as the barbarism, and proving themselves worthy of their hire. And I had been writing them up and was no better than the farcical governor of a department who would write on the morrow to protest that that was what they did not do. You see I had a sort of personal pride in those days; and preferred to think of myself as a decent person. I knew that people would say the same sort of thing about me that they said about all the rest of them. I couldn't very well protest. I had been scratching the backs of all sorts of creatures; out of friendship, out of love--for all sorts of reasons. This was only a sort of last straw--or perhaps it was the sight of her that had been the last straw. It seemed naïvely futile to have been wasting my time over Mrs. Hartly and those she stood for, when there was something so different in the world--something so like a current of east wind.

That vein of thought kept me awake, and a worse came to keep it company. The men from the next room came home--students, I suppose. They talked gaily enough, their remarks interspersed by the thuds of falling boots and the other incomprehensible noises of the night. Through the flimsy partition I caught half sentences in that sort of French intonation that is so impossible to attain. It reminded me of the voices of the two men at the Opera. I began to wonder what they had been saying--what they could have been saying that concerned me and affected the little correspondent to interfere. Suddenly the thing dawned upon me with the startling clearness of a figure in a complicated pattern--a clearness from which one cannot take one's eyes.

It threw everything--the whole world--into more unpleasant relations with me than even the Greenland affair. They had not been talking about my aunt and her Salon, but about my ... my sister. She was De Mersch's "Anglaise." I did not believe it, but probably all Paris--the whole world--said she was. And to the whole world I was her brother! Those two men who had looked at me over their shoulders had shrugged and said, "Oh, he's ..." And the whole world wherever I went would whisper in asides, "Don't you know Granger? He's the brother. De Mersch employs him."

I began to understand everything; the woman in de Mersch's room with her "Eschingan-Grangeur-r-r"; the deference of the little Jew--the man who knew. He

knew that I--that I, who patronised him, was a person to stand well with because of my--my sister's hold over de Mersch. I wasn't, of course, but you can't understand how the whole thing maddened me all the same. I hated the world--this world of people who whispered and were whispered to, of men who knew and men who wanted to know--the shadowy world of people who didn't matter, but whose eyes and voices were all round one and did somehow matter. I knew well enough how it had come about. It was de Mersch--the State Founder, with his shamed face and his pallid hands. She had been attracted by his air of greatness, by his elective grand-dukedom, by his protestations. Women are like that. She had been attracted and didn't know what she was doing, didn't know what the world was over here--how people talked. She had been excited by the whirl and flutter of it, and perhaps she didn't care. The thing must come to an end, however. She had said that I should go to her on the morrow. Well, I would go, and I would put a stop to this. I had suddenly discovered how very much I was a Granger of Etchingham, after all I had family traditions and graves behind me. And for the sake of all these people whose one achievement had been the making of a good name I had to intervene now. After all--"Bon sang ne" --does not get itself talked about in that way.

The early afternoon of the morrow found me in a great room--a faded, sombre salon of the house my aunt had taken in the Faubourg Saint Germain. Numbers of strong-featured people were talking in groups among the tables and chairs of a time before the Revolution. I rather forget how I had got there, and what had gone before. I must have arisen late and passed the intervening hours in a state of trepidation. I was going to see her, and I was like a cub in love, with a man's place to fill. It was a preposterous state of things that set the solid world in a whirl. Once there, my eyes suddenly took in things.

I had a sense of her standing by my side. She had just introduced me to my aunt--a heavy-featured, tired-eyed village tyrant. She was so obviously worn out, so obviously "not what she had been," that her face would have been pitiful but for its immovable expression of class pride. The Grangers of Etchingham, you see, were so absolutely at the top of their own particular kind of tree that it was impossible for them to meet anyone who was not an inferior. A man might be a cabinet minister, might even be a prince, but he couldn't be a Granger of Etchingham, couldn't have such an assortment of graves, each containing a Granger, behind his back. The expression didn't even lift for me who had. It couldn't, it was fixed there. One wondered what she was doing in this galère. It seemed impossible that she should interest herself in the restoration of the Bourbons--they were all very well, but they weren't even English, let alone a county family. I figured it out that she must have set her own village so much in order that there remained nothing but the setting in order of the rest of the world. Her bored eyes wandered sleepily over the assemblage. They seemed to have no

preferences for any of them. They rested on the vacuously Bonaparte prince, on the moribund German Jesuit to whom he was listening, on the darkly supple young Spanish priest, on the rosy-gilled English Passionist, on Radet, the writer of that article in the *Revue Rouge*, who was talking to a compatriot in one of the tall windows. She seemed to accept the saturnine-looking men, the political women, who all spoke a language not their own, with an accent and a fluency, and a dangerous far-away smile and a display of questionable teeth all their own. She seemed to class the political with the pious, the obvious adventurer with the seeming fanatic. It was amazing to me to see her there, standing with her county family self-possession in the midst of so much that was questionable. She offered me no explanation; I had to find one for myself.

We stood and talked in the centre of the room. It did not seem a place in which one could sit.

"Why have you never been to see me?" she asked languidly. "I might never have known of your existence if it had not been for your sister." My sister was standing at my side, you must remember. I don't suppose that I started, but I made my aunt no answer.

"Indeed," she went on, "I should never have known that you had a sister. Your father was so very peculiar. From the day he married, my husband never heard a word from him."

"They were so very different," I said, listlessly.

"Ah, yes," she answered, "brothers so often are." She sighed, apropos of nothing. She continued to utter disjointed sentences from which I gathered a skeleton history of my soi distant sister's introduction of herself and of her pretensions. She had, it seemed, casually introduced herself at some garden-party or function of the sort, had represented herself as a sister of my own to whom a maternal uncle had left a fabulous fortune. She herself had suggested her being sheltered under my aunt's roof as a singularly welcome "paying guest." She herself, too, had suggested the visit to Paris and had hired the house from a degenerate Duc de Luynes who preferred the delights of an appartement in the less lugubrious Avenue Marceau.

"We have tastes so much in common," my aunt explained, as she moved away to welcome a new arrival. I was left alone with the woman who called herself my sister.

We stood a little apart. Each little group of talkers in the vast room seemed to stand just without earshot of the next. I had my back to the door, my face to her.

"And so you have come," she said, maliciously it seemed to me.

It was impossible to speak in such a position; in such a place; impossible to hold a discussion on family affairs when a diminutive Irishwoman with too mobile eyebrows, and a couple of gigantic, raw-boned, lugubrious Spaniards, were in a position to hear anything that one uttered above a whisper. One might want to raise one's voice. Besides, she was so--so terrible; there was no knowing what she might not say. She so obviously did not care what the Irish or the Spaniards or the Jesuits heard or thought, that I was forced to the mortifying conclusion that I did.

"Oh, I've come," I answered. I felt as outrageously out of it as one does at a suburban hop where one does not know one animal of the menagerie. I did not know what to do or what to say, or what to do with my hands. I was pervaded by the unpleasant idea that all those furtive eyes were upon me; gauging me because I was the brother of a personality. I was concerned about the fit of my coat and my boots, and all the while I was in a furious temper; my errand was important.

She stood looking at me, a sinuous, brilliant thing, with a light in the eyes half challenging, half openly victorious.

"You have come," she said, "and ..."

I became singularly afraid of her; and wanted to stop her mouth. She might be going to say anything. She overpowered me so that I actually dwindled--into the gawkiness of extreme youth. I became a goggle-eyed, splay-footed boy again and made a boy's desperate effort after a recovery at one stroke of an ideal standard of dignity.

"I must have a word with you," I said, remembering. She made a little gesture with her hands, signifying "I am here." "But in private," I added.

"Oh, everything's in private here," she said. I was silent.

"I must," I added after a time.

"I can't retire with you," she said; "'it would look odd,' you'd say, wouldn't you?" I shrugged my shoulders in intense irritation. I didn't want to be burlesqued. A flood of fresh people came into the room. I heard a throaty "ahem" behind me. The Duc de Mersch was introducing himself to notice. It was as I had thought--the man was an habitue, with his well-cut clothes, his air of protestation, and his tremendous golden poll. He was the only sunlight that the gloomy place rejoiced

in. He bowed low over my oppressor's hand, smiled upon me, and began to utter platitudes in English.

"Oh, you may speak French," she said carelessly.

"But your brother...." he answered.

"I understand French very well," I said. I was in no mood to spare him embarrassments; wanted to show him that I had a hold over him, and knew he wasn't the proper person to talk to a young lady. He glared at me haughtily.

"But yesterday ..." he began in a tone that burlesqued august displeasure. I was wondering what he had looked like on the other side of the door--whilst that lady had been explaining his nature to me.

"Yesterday I wished to avoid embarrassments," I said; "I was to represent your views about Greenland. I might have misunderstood you in some important matter."

"I see, I see," he said conciliatorily. "Yesterday we spoke English for the benefit of the British public. When we speak French we are not in public, I hope." He had a semi-supplicating manner.

"Everything's rather too much in public here," I answered. My part as I imagined it was that of a British brother defending his sister from questionable attentions--the person who "tries to show the man he isn't wanted." But de Mersch didn't see the matter in that light at all. He could not, of course. He was as much used to being purred to as my aunt to looking down on non-county persons. He seemed to think I was making an incomprehensible insular joke, and laughed non-committally. It wouldn't have been possible to let him know he wasn't wanted.

"Oh, you needn't be afraid of my brother," she said suddenly. "He is quite harmless. He is even going to give up writing for the papers except when we want him."

The Duc turned from me to her, smiled and bowed. His smile was inane, but he bowed very well; he had been groomed into that sort of thing or had it in the blood.

"We work together still?" he asked.

"Why not?" she answered.

A hubbub of angry voices raised itself behind my back. It was one of the contretemps that made the Salon Grangeur famous throughout the city.

"You forced yourself upon me. Did I say anywhere that you were responsible? If it resembles your particular hell upon earth, what is that to me? You do worse things; you, yourself, monsieur. Haven't I seen ... haven't I seen it?"

The Duc de Mersch looked swiftly over his shoulder toward the window.

"They seem to be angry there," he said nervously. "Had not something better be done, Miss Granger?"

Miss Granger followed the direction of his eyes.

"Why," she said, "we're used to these differences of opinion. Besides, it's only Monsieur Radet; he's forever at war with someone or other."

"He ought to be shown the door," the Duc grumbled.

"Oh, as for that," she answered, "we couldn't. My aunt would be desolated by such a necessity. He is very influential in certain quarters. My aunt wants to catch him for the--He's going to write an article."

"He writes too many articles," the Duc said, with heavy displeasure.

"Oh, he has written one too many," she answered, "but that can be traversed...."

"But no one believes," the Duc objected ... Radet's voice intermittently broke in upon his sotto-voce, coming to our ears in gusts.

"Haven't I seen you ... and then ... and you offer me the cross ... to bribe me to silence ... me...."

In the general turning of faces toward the window in which stood Radet and the other, mine turned too. Radet was a cadaverous, weatherworn, passion-worn individual, badger-grey, and worked up into a grotesquely attitudinised fury of injured self-esteem. The other was a denationalised, shifty-eyed, sallow, grey-bearded governor of one of the provinces of the *Système Groënlandais*; had a closely barbered head, a bull neck, and a great belly. He cast furtive glances round him, uncertain whether to escape or to wait for his say. He looked at the ring that encircled the window at a little distance, and his face, which had betrayed a half-apparent shame, hardened at sight of the cynical masks of the cosmopolitan conspirators. They were amused by the scene. The Holsteiner

gained confidence, shrugged his shoulders.

"You have had the fever very badly since you came back," he said, showing a level row of white teeth. "You did not talk like that out there."

"No--pas si bête--you would have hanged me, perhaps, as you did that poor devil of a Swiss. What was his name? Now you offer me the cross. Because I had the fever, hein?"

I had been watching the Duc's face; a first red flush had come creeping from under the roots of his beard, and had spread over the low forehead and the sides of the neck. The eye-glass fell from the eye, a signal for the colour to retreat. The full lips grew pallid, and began to mutter unspoken words. His eyes wandered appealingly from the woman beside him to me. I didn't want to look him in the face. The man was a trafficker in human blood, an evil liver, and I hated him. He had to pay his price; would have to pay--but I didn't want to see him pay it. There was a limit.

I began to excuse myself, and slid out between the groups of excellent plotters. As I was going, she said to me:

"You may come to me to-morrow in the morning."