

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I was at the Hôtel de Luynes--or Granger--early on the following morning. The mists were still hanging about the dismal upper windows of the inscrutable Faubourg; the toilet of the city was being completed; the little hoses on wheels were clattering about the quiet larger streets. I had not much courage thus early in the day. I had started impulsively; stepping with the impulse of immediate action from the doorstep of the dairy where I had breakfasted. But I made detours; it was too early, and my pace slackened into a saunter as I passed the row of porters' lodges in that dead, inscrutable street. I wanted to fly; had that impulse very strongly; but I burnt my boats with my inquiry of the incredibly ancient, one-eyed portress. I made my way across the damp court-yard, under the enormous portico, and into the chilly stone hall that no amount of human coming and going sufficed to bring back to a semblance of life. Mademoiselle was expecting me. One went up a great flight of stone steps into one of the immensely high, narrow, impossibly rectangular ante-rooms that one sees in the frontispieces of old plays. The furniture looked no more than knee-high until one discovered that one's self had no appreciable stature. The sad light slanted in ruled lines from the great height of the windows; an army of motes moved slowly in and out of the shadows. I went after awhile and looked disconsolately out into the court-yard. The portress was making her way across the gravelled space, her arms, her hands, the pockets of her black apron full of letters of all sizes. I remembered that the facteur had followed me down the street. A noise of voices came confusedly to my ears from between half-opened folding-doors; the thing reminded me of my waiting in de Mersch's rooms. It did not last so long. The voices gathered tone, as they do at the end of a colloquy, succeeded each other at longer intervals, and at last came to a sustained halt. The tall doors moved ajar and she entered, followed by a man whom I recognized as the governor of a province of the day before. In that hostile light he looked old and weazened and worried; seemed to have lost much of his rotundity. As for her, she shone with a light of her own.

He greeted me dejectedly, and did not brighten when she let him know that we had a mutual friend in Callan. The Governor, it seemed, in his capacity of Supervisor of the Système, was to conduct that distinguished person through the wilds of Greenland; was to smooth his way and to point out to him excellences of administration.

I wished him a good journey; he sighed and began to fumble with his hat.

"Alors, c'est entendu," she said; giving him leave to depart. He looked at her in an

odd sort of way, took her hand and applied it to his lips.

"C'est entendu," he said with a heavy sigh, drops of moisture spattering from beneath his white moustache, "mais ..."

He ogled again with infinitesimal eyes and went out of the room. He had the air of wishing to wipe the perspiration from his brows and to exclaim, "Quelle femme!" But if he had any such wish he mastered it until the door hid him from sight.

"Why the ..." I began before it had well closed, "do you allow that thing to make love to you?" I wanted to take up my position before she could have a chance to make me ridiculous. I wanted to make a long speech--about duty to the name of Granger. But the next word hung, and, before it came, she had answered:

"He?--Oh, I'm making use of him."

"To inherit the earth?" I asked ironically, and she answered gravely:

"To inherit the earth."

She was leaning against the window, playing with the strings of the blinds, and silhouetted against the leaden light. She seemed to be, physically, a little tired; and the lines of her figure to interlace almost tenderly--to "compose" well, after the ideas of a certain school. I knew so little of her--only just enough to be in love with her--that this struck me as the herald of a new phase, not so much in her attitude to me as in mine to her; she had even then a sort of gravity, the gravity of a person on whom things were beginning to weigh.

"But," I said, irresolutely. I could not speak to her; to this new conception of her, in the way I had planned; in the way one would talk to a brilliant, limpid--oh, to a woman of sorts. But I had to take something of my old line. "How would flirting with that man help you?"

"It's quite simple," she answered, "he's to show Callan all Greenland, and Callan is to write ... Callan has immense influence over a great class, and he will have some of the prestige of--of a Commissioner."

"Oh, I know about Callan," I said.

"And," she went on, "this man had orders to hide things from Callan; you know what it is they have to hide. But he won't now; that is what I was arranging. It's partly by bribery and partly because he has a belief in his beaux yeux--so Callan will be upset and will write an ... exposure; the sort of thing Callan would write if

he were well upset. And he will be, by what this man will let him see. You know what a little man like Callan will feel ... he will be made ill. He would faint at the sight of a drop of blood, you know, and he will see--oh, the very worst, worse than what Radet saw. And he will write a frightful article, and it will be a thunderclap for de Mersch.... And de Mersch will be getting very shaky by then. And your friend Churchill will try to carry de Mersch's railway bill through in the face of the scandal. Churchill's motives will be excellent, but everyone will say ... You know what people say ... That is what I and Gurnard want. We want people to talk; we want them to believe...."

I don't know whether there really was a hesitation in her voice, or whether I read that into it. She stood there, playing with the knots of the window-cords and speaking in a low monotone. The whole thing, the sad twilight of the place, her tone of voice, seemed tinged with unavailing regret. I had almost forgotten the Dimensionist story, and I had never believed in it. But now, for the first time I began to have my doubts. I was certain that she had been plotting something with one of the Duc de Mersch's lieutenants. The man's manner vouched for that; he had not been able to look me in the face. But, more than anything, his voice and manner made me feel that we had passed out of a realm of farcical allegory. I knew enough to see that she might be speaking the truth. And, if she were, her calm avowal of such treachery proved that she was what she had said the Dimensionists were; cold, with no scruples, clear-sighted and admirably courageous, and indubitably enemies of society.

"I don't understand," I said. "But de Mersch then?"

She made a little gesture; one of those movements that I best remember of her; the smallest, the least noticeable. It reduced de Mersch to nothing; he no longer even counted.

"Oh, as for him," she said, "he is only a detail." I had still the idea that she spoke with a pitying intonation--as if she were speaking to a dog in pain. "He doesn't really count; not really. He will crumble up and disappear, very soon. You won't even remember him."

"But," I said, "you go about with him, as if you.... You are getting yourself talked about.... Everyone thinks--" ... The accusation that I had come to make seemed impossible, now I was facing her. "I believe," I added, with the suddenness of inspiration. "I'm certain even, that he thinks that you ..."

"Well, they think that sort of thing. But it is only part of the game. Oh, I assure you it is no more than that."

I was silent. I felt that, for one reason or another, she wished me to believe.

"Yes," she said, "I want you to believe. It will save you a good deal of pain."

"If you wanted to save me pain," I maintained, "you would have done with de Mersch ... for good." I had an idea that the solution was beyond me. It was as if the controlling powers were flitting, invisible, just above my head, just beyond my grasp. There was obviously something vibrating; some cord, somewhere, stretched very taut and quivering. But I could think of no better solution than: "You must have done with him." It seemed obvious, too, that that was impossible, was outside the range of things that could be done--but I had to do my best. "It's a--it's vile," I added, "vile."

"Oh, I know, I know," she said, "for you.... And I'm even sorry. But it has to be gone on with. De Mersch has to go under in just this way. It can't be any other."

"Why not?" I asked, because she had paused. I hadn't any desire for enlightenment.

"It isn't even only Churchill," she said, "not even only that de Mersch will bring down Churchill with him. It is that he must bring down everything that Churchill stands for. You know what that is--the sort of probity, all the old order of things. And the more vile the means used to destroy de Mersch the more vile the whole affair will seem. People--the sort of people--have an idea that a decent man cannot be touched by tortuous intrigues. And the whole thing will be--oh, malodorous. You understand."

"I don't," I answered, "I don't understand at all."

"Ah, yes, you do," she said, "you understand...." She paused for a long while, and I was silent. I understood vaguely what she meant; that if Churchill fell amid the clouds of dust of such a collapse, there would be an end of belief in probity ... or nearly an end. But I could not see what it all led up to; where it left us.

"You see," she began again, "I want to make it as little painful to you as I can; as little painful as explanations can make it. I can't feel as you feel, but I can see, rather dimly, what it is that hurts you. And so ... I want to; I really want to."

"But you won't do the one thing," I returned hopelessly to the charge.

"I cannot," she answered, "it must be like that; there isn't any way. You are so tied down to these little things. Don't you see that de Mersch, and--and all these people--don't really count? They aren't anything at all in the scheme of things. I

think that, even for you, they aren't worth bothering about. They're only accidents; the accidents that--"

"That what?" I asked, although I began to see dimly what she meant.

"That lead in the inevitable," she answered. "Don't you see? Don't you understand? We are the inevitable ... and you can't keep us back. We have to come and you, you will only hurt yourself, by resisting." A sense that this was the truth, the only truth, beset me. It was for the moment impossible to think of anything else--of anything else in the world. "You must accept us and all that we mean, you must stand back; sooner or later. Look even all round you, and you will understand better. You are in the house of a type--a type that became impossible. Oh, centuries ago. And that type too, tried very hard to keep back the inevitable; not only because itself went under, but because everything that it stood for went under. And it had to suffer--heartache ... that sort of suffering. Isn't it so?"

I did not answer; the illustration was too abominably just. It was just that. There were even now all these people--these Legitimists--sneering ineffectually; shutting themselves away from the light in their mournful houses and suffering horribly because everything that they stood for had gone under.

"But even if I believe you," I said, "the thing is too horrible, and your tools are too mean; that man who has just gone out and--and Callan--are they the weapons of the inevitable? After all, the Revolution ..." I was striving to get back to tangible ideas--ideas that one could name and date and label ... "the Revolution was noble in essence and made for good. But all this of yours is too vile and too petty. You are bribing, or something worse, that man to betray his master. And that you call helping on the inevitable...."

"They used to say just that of the Revolution. That wasn't nice of its tools. Don't you see? They were the people that went under.... They couldn't see the good...."

"And I--I am to take it on trust," I said, bitterly.

"You couldn't see the good," she answered, "it isn't possible, and there is no way of explaining. Our languages are different, and there's no bridge--no bridge at all. We can't meet...."

It was that revolted me. If there was no bridge and we could not meet, we must even fight; that is, if I believed her version of herself. If I did not, I was being played the fool with. I preferred to think that. If she were only fooling me she remained attainable. If it was as she said, there was no hope at all--not any.

"I don't believe you," I said, suddenly. I didn't want to believe her. The thing was too abominable--too abominable for words, and incredible. I struggled against it as one struggles against inevitable madness, against the thought of it. It hung over me, stupefying, deadening. One could only fight it with violence, crudely, in jerks, as one struggles against the numbness of frost. It was like a pall, like descending clouds of smoke, seemed to be actually present in the absurdly lofty room--this belief in what she stood for, in what she said she stood for.

"I don't believe you," I proclaimed, "I won't.... You are playing the fool with me ... trying to get round me ... to make me let you go on with these--with these--It is abominable. Think of what it means for me, what people are saying of me, and I am a decent man--You shall not. Do you understand, you shall not. It is unbearable ... and you ... you try to fool me ... in order to keep me quiet ..."

"Oh, no," she said. "Oh, no."

She had an accent that touched grief, as nearly as she could touch it. I remember it now, as one remembers these things. But then I passed it over. I was too much moved myself to notice it more than subconsciously, as one notices things past which one is whirled. And I was whirled past these things, in an ungovernable fury at the remembrance of what I had suffered, of what I had still to suffer. I was speaking with intense rage, jerking out words, ideas, as floodwater jerks through a sluice the débris of once ordered fields.

"You are," I said, "you are--you--you--dragging an ancient name through the dust--you ..."

I forget what I said. But I remember, "dragging an ancient name." It struck me, at the time, by its forlornness, as part of an appeal to her. It was so pathetically tiny a motive, so out of tone, that it stuck in my mind. I only remember the upshot of my speech; that, unless she swore--oh, yes, swore--to have done with de Mersch, I would denounce her to my aunt at that very moment and in that very house.

And she said that it was impossible.