## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I had a sense of walking very fast--almost of taking flight--down a long dim corridor, and of a door that opened into an immense room. All that I remember of it, as I saw it then, was a number of pastel portraits of weak, vacuous individuals, in dulled, gilt, oval frames. The heads stood out from the panelling and stared at me from between ringlets, from under powdered hair, simpering, or contemptuous with the expression that must have prevailed in the monde of the time before the Revolution. At a great distance, bent over account--books and pink cheques on the flap of an escritoire, sat my aunt, very small, very grey, very intent on her work.

The people who built these rooms must have had some property of the presence to make them bulk large--if they ever really did so--in the eyes of dependents, of lackeys. Perhaps it was their sense of ownership that gave them the necessary prestige. My aunt, who was only a temporary occupant, certainly had none of it. Bent intently over her accounts, peering through her spectacles at columns of figures, she was nothing but a little old woman alone in an immense room. It seemed impossible that she could really have any family pride, any pride of any sort. She looked round at me over her spectacles, across her shoulder.

"Ah ... Etchingham," she said. She seemed to be trying to carry herself back to England, to the England of her land-agent and her select visiting list. Here she was no more superior than if we had been on a desert island. I wanted to enlighten her as to the woman she was sheltering--wanted to very badly; but a necessity for introducing the matter seemed to arise as she gradually stiffened into assertiveness.

"My dear aunt," I said, "the woman...." The alien nature of the theme grew suddenly formidable. She looked at me arousedly.

"You got my note then," she said. "But I don't think a woman can have brought it. I have given such strict orders. They have such strange ideas here, though. And Madame--the portière--is an old retainer of M. de Luynes, I haven't much influence over her. It is absurd, but...." It seems that the old lady in the lodge made a point of carrying letters that went by hand. She had an eye for gratuities--and the police, I should say, were concerned. They make a good deal of use of that sort of person in that neighbourhood of infinitesimal and unceasing plotting.

"I didn't mean that," I said, "but the woman who calls herself my sister...."

"My dear nephew," she interrupted, with tranquil force, as if she were taking an arranged line, "I cannot--I absolutely cannot be worried with your quarrels with your sister. As I said to you in my note of this morning, when you are in this town you must consider this house your home. It is almost insulting of you to go to an inn. I am told it is even ... quite an unfit place that you are stopping at--for a member of our family."

I maintained for a few seconds a silence of astonishment.

"But," I returned to the charge, "the matter is one of importance. You must understand that she...."

My aunt stiffened and froze. It was as if I had committed some flagrant sin against etiquette.

"If I am satisfied as to her behaviour," she said, "I think that you might be." She paused as if she were satisfied that she had set me hopelessly in the wrong.

"I don't withdraw my invitation," she said. "You must understand I wish you to come here. But your quarrels you and she must settle. On those terms...."

She had the air of conferring an immense favour, as if she believed that I had, all my life through, been waiting for her invitation to come within the pale. As for me, I felt a certain relief at having the carrying out of my duty made impossible for me. I did not want to tell my aunt and thus to break things off definitely and for good. Something would have happened; the air might have cleared as it clears after a storm; I should have learnt where I stood. But I was afraid of the knowledge. Light in these dark places might reveal an abyss at my feet. I wanted to let things slide.

My aunt had returned to her accounts, the accounts which were the cog-wheels that kept running the smooth course of the Etchingham estates. She seemed to wish to indicate that I counted for not very much in the scheme of things as she saw it.

"I should like to make your better acquaintance," she said, with her head still averted, "there are reasons...." It came suddenly into my head that she had an idea of testamentary dispositions, that she felt she was breaking up, that I had my rights. I didn't much care for the thing, but the idea of being the heir of Etchingham was--well, was an idea. It would make me more possible to my pseudo-sister. It would be, as it were, a starting-point, would make me potentially a somebody of her sort of ideal. Moreover, I should be under the same roof, near her, with her sometimes. One asks so little more than that, that it seemed almost

half the battle. I began to consider phrases of thanks and acceptance and then uttered them.

I never quite understood the bearings of that scene; never quite whether my aunt really knew that my sister was not my sister. She was a wonderfully clever woman of the unscrupulous order, with a sang-froid and self-possession well calculated to let her cut short any inconvenient revelations. It was as if she had had long practice in the art, though I cannot say what occasion she can have had for its practice--perhaps for the confounding of wavering avowers of Dissent at home.

I used to think that she knew, if not all, at least a portion; that the weight that undoubtedly was upon her mind was nothing else but that. She broke up, was breaking up from day to day, and I can think of no other reason. She had the air of being disintegrated, like a mineral under an immense weight--quartz in a crushing mill; of being dulled and numbed as if she were under the influence of narcotics.

There is little enough wonder, if she actually carried that imponderable secret about with her. I used to look at her sometimes, and wonder if she, too, saw the oncoming of the inevitable. She was limited enough in her ideas, but not too stupid to take that in if it presented itself. Indeed they have that sort of idea rather grimly before them all the time--that class.

It must have been that that was daily, and little by little, pressing down her eyelids and deepening the quivering lines of her impenetrable face. She had a certain solitary grandeur, the pathos attaching to the last of a race, of a type; the air of waiting for the deluge, of listening for an inevitable sound--the sound of oncoming waters.

It was weird, the time that I spent in that house--more than weird--deadening. It had an extraordinary effect on me--an effect that my "sister," perhaps, had carefully calculated. She made pretensions of that sort later on; said that she had been breaking me in to perform my allotted task in the bringing on of the inevitable.

I have nowhere come across such an intense solitude as there was there, a solitude that threw one so absolutely upon one's self and into one's self. I used to sit working in one of those tall, panelled rooms, very high up in the air. I was writing at the series of articles for the Bi-Monthly, for Polehampton. I was to get the atmosphere of Paris, you remember. It was rather extraordinary, that process. Up there I seemed to be as much isolated from Paris as if I had been in--well, in Hampton Court. It was almost impossible to write; I had things to think about:

preoccupations, jealousies. It was true I had a living to make, but that seemed to have lost its engrossingness as a pursuit, or at least to have suspended it.

The panels of the room seemed to act as a sounding-board, the belly of an immense 'cello. There were never any noises in the house, only whispers coming from an immense distance--as when one drops stones down an unfathomable well and hears ages afterward the faint sound of disturbed waters. When I look back at that time I figure myself as forever sitting with uplifted pen, waiting for a word that would not come, and that I did not much care about getting. The panels of the room would creak sympathetically to the opening of the entrance-door of the house, the faintest of creaks; people would cross the immense hall to the room in which they plotted; would cross leisurely, with laughter and rustling of garments that after a long time reached my ears in whispers. Then I should have an access of mad jealousy. I wanted to be part of her life, but I could not stand that Salon of suspicious conspirators. What could I do there? Stand and look at them, conscious that they all dropped their voices instinctively when I came near them?

That was the general tone of that space of time, but, of course, it was not always that. I used to emerge now and then to breakfast sympathetically with my aunt, sometimes to sit through a meal with the two of them. I danced attendance on them singly; paid depressing calls with my aunt; calls on the people in the Faubourg; people without any individuality other than a kind of desiccation, the shrivelled appearance and point of view of a dried pippin. In revenge, they had names that startled one, names that recalled the generals and flaneurs of an impossibly distant time; names that could hardly have had any existence outside the memoirs of Madame de Sévigné, the names of people that could hardly have been fitted to do anything more vigorous than be reflected in the mirrors of the Salle des Glaces. I was so absolutely depressed, so absolutely in a state of suspended animation, that I seemed to conform exactly to my aunt's ideas of what was desirable in me as an attendant on her at these functions. I used to stand behind chairs and talk, like a good young man, to the assorted Pères and Abbés who were generally present.

And then I used to go home and get the atmospheres of these people. I must have done it abominably badly, for the notes that brought Polehampton's cheques were accompanied by the bravos of that gentleman and the assurances that Miss Polehampton liked my work--liked it very much.

I suppose I exhibited myself in the capacity of the man who knew--who could let you into a thing or two. After all, anyone could write about students' balls and the lakes in the Bois, but it took someone to write "with knowledge" of the interiors of the barred houses in the Rue de l'Université.

Then, too, I attended the more showy entertainments with my sister. I had by now become so used to hearing her styled "your sister" that the epithet had the quality of a name. She was "mademoiselle votre soeur," as she might have been Mlle. Patience or Hope, without having anything of the named quality. What she did at the entertainments, the charitable bazaars, the dismal dances, the impossibly bad concerts, I have no idea. She must have had some purpose, for she did nothing without. I myself descended into fulfilling the functions of a rudimentarily developed chaperon--functions similar in importance to those performed by the eyes of a mole. I had the maddest of accesses of jealousy if she talked to a man--and such men--or danced with one. And then I was forever screwing my courage up and feeling it die away. We used to drive about in a coupe, a thing that shut us inexorably together, but which quite as inexorably destroyed all opportunities for what one calls making love. In smooth streets its motion was too glib, on the pavé it rattled too abominably. I wanted to make love to her--oh, immensely, but I was never in the mood, or the opportunity was never forthcoming. I used to have the wildest fits of irritation; not of madness or of depression, but of simple wildness at the continual recurrence of small obstacles. I couldn't read, couldn't bring myself to it. I used to sit and look dazedly at the English newspapers--at any newspaper but the Hour. De Mersch had, for the moment, disappeared. There were troubles in his elective grand duchy--he had, indeed, contrived to make himself unpopular with the electors, excessively unpopular. I used to read piquant articles about his embroglio in an American paper that devoted itself to matters of the sort. All sorts of international difficulties were to arise if de Mersch were ejected. There was some other obscure prince of a rival house, Prussian or Russian, who had desires for the degree of royalty that sat so heavily on de Mersch. Indeed, I think there were two rival princes, each waiting with portmanteaux packed and manifestos in their breast pockets, ready to pass de Mersch's frontiers.

The grievances of his subjects--so the Paris-American Gazette said--were intimately connected with matters of finance, and de Mersch's personal finances and his grand ducal were inextricably mixed up with the wild-cat schemes with which he was seeking to make a fortune large enough to enable him to laugh at half a dozen elective grand duchies. Indeed, de Mersch's own portmanteau was reported to be packed against the day when British support of his Greenland schemes would let him afford to laugh at his cantankerous Diet.

The thing interested me so little that I never quite mastered the details of it. I wished the man no good, but so long as he kept out of my way I was not going to hate him actively. Finally the affairs of Holstein-Launewitz ceased to occupy the papers--the thing was arranged and the Russian and Prussian princes unpacked their portmanteaux, and, I suppose, consigned their manifestos to the flames, or

adapted them to the needs of other principalities. De Mersch's affairs ceded their space in the public prints to the topic of the dearness of money. Somebody, somewhere, was said to be up to something. I used to try to read the articles, to master the details, because I disliked finding a whole field of thought of which I knew absolutely nothing. I used to read about the great discount houses and other things that conveyed absolutely nothing to my mind. I only gathered that the said great houses were having a very bad time, and that everybody else was having a very much worse.

One day, indeed, the matter was brought home to me by the receipt from Polehampton of bills instead of my usual cheques. I had a good deal of trouble in cashing the things; indeed, people seemed to look askance at them. I consulted my aunt on the subject, at breakfast. It was the sort of thing that interested the woman of business in her, and we were always short of topics of conversation.

We breakfasted in rather a small room, as rooms went there; my aunt sitting at the head of the table, with an early morning air of being en famille that she wore at no other time of day. It was not a matter of garments, for she was not the woman to wear a peignoir; but lay, I supposed, in her manner, which did not begin to assume frigidity until several watches of the day had passed.

I handed her Polehampton's bills and explained that I was at a loss to turn them to account; that I even had only the very haziest of ideas as to their meaning. Holding the forlorn papers in her hand, she began to lecture me on the duty of acquiring the rudiments of what she called "business habits."

"Of course you do not require to master details to any considerable extent," she said, "but I always have held that it is one of the duties of a...."

She interrupted herself as my sister came into the room; looked at her, and then held out the papers in her hand. The things quivered a little; the hand must have quivered too.

"You are going to Halderschrodt's?" she said, interrogatively. "You could get him to negotiate these for Etchingham?"

Miss Granger looked at the papers negligently.

"I am going this afternoon," she answered. "Etchingham can come...." She suddenly turned to me: "So your friend is getting shaky," she said.

"It means that?" I asked. "But I've heard that he has done the same sort of thing before."

"He must have been shaky before," she said, "but I daresay Halderschrodt...."

"Oh, it's hardly worth while bothering that personage about such a sum," I interrupted. Halderschrodt, in those days, was a name that suggested no dealings in any sum less than a million.

"My dear Etchingham," my aunt interrupted in a shocked tone, "it is quite worth his while to oblige us...."

"I didn't know," I said.

That afternoon we drove to Halderschrodt's private office, a sumptuous--that is the mot juste--suite of rooms on the first floor of the house next to the Duc de Mersch's Sans Souci. I sat on a plush-bottomed gilded chair, whilst my pseudo-sister transacted her business in an adjoining room--a room exactly corresponding with that within which de Mersch had lurked whilst the lady was warning me against him. A clerk came after awhile, carried me off into an enclosure, where my bill was discounted by another, and then reconducted me to my plush chair. I did not occupy it, as it happened. A meagre, very tall Alsatian was holding the door open for the exit of my sister. He said nothing at all, but stood slightly inclined as she passed him. I caught a glimpse of a red, long face, very tired eyes, and hair of almost startling whiteness--the white hair of a comparatively young man, without any lustre of any sort--a dead white, like that of snow. I remember that white hair with a feeling of horror, whilst I have almost forgotten the features of the great Baron de Halderschrodt.

I had still some of the feeling of having been in contact with a personality of the most colossal significance as we went down the red carpet of the broad white marble stairs. With one foot on the lowest step, the figure of a perfectly clothed, perfectly groomed man was standing looking upward at our descent. I had thought so little of him that the sight of the Duc de Mersch's face hardly suggested any train of emotions. It lit up with an expression of pleasure.

"You," he said.

She stood looking down upon him from the altitude of two steps, looking with intolerable passivity.

"So you use the common stairs," she said, "one had the idea that you communicated with these people through a private door." He laughed uneasily, looking askance at me.

"Oh, I ..." he said.

She moved a little to one side to pass him in her descent.

"So things have arranged themselves--là bas," she said, referring, I supposed, to the elective grand duchy.

"Oh, it was like a miracle," he answered, "and I owed a great deal--a great deal--to your hints...."

"You must tell me all about it to-night," she said.

De Mersch's face had an extraordinary quality that I seemed to notice in all the faces around me--a quality of the flesh that seemed to lose all luminosity, of the eyes that seemed forever to have a tendency to seek the ground, to avoid the sight of the world. When he brightened to answer her it was as if with effort. It seemed as if a weight were on the mind of the whole world--a preoccupation that I shared without understanding. She herself, a certain absent-mindedness apart, seemed the only one that was entirely unaffected.

As we sat side by side in the little carriage, she said suddenly:

"They are coming to the end of their tether, you see." I shrank away from her a little--but I did not see and did not want to see. I said so. It even seemed to me that de Mersch having got over the troubles là bas, was taking a new lease of life.

"I did think," I said, "a little time ago that ..."

The wheels of the coupe suddenly began to rattle abominably over the cobbles of a narrow street. It was impossible to talk, and I was thrown back upon myself. I found that I was in a temper--in an abominable temper. The sudden sight of that man, her method of greeting him, the intimacy that the scene revealed ... the whole thing had upset me. Of late, for want of any alarms, in spite of groundlessness I had had the impression that I was the integral part of her life. It was not a logical idea, but strictly a habit of mind that had grown up in the desolation of my solitude.

We passed into one of the larger boulevards, and the thing ran silently.

"That de Mersch was crumbling up," she suddenly completed my unfinished sentence; "oh, that was only a grumble--premonitory. But it won't take long now. I have been putting on the screw. Halderschrodt will ... I suppose he will commit suicide, in a day or two. And then the--the fun will begin."

I didn't answer. The thing made no impression--no mental impression at all.