

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

That afternoon we had a scene, and late that night another. The memory of the former is a little blotted out. Things began to move so quickly that, try as I will to arrange their sequence in my mind, I cannot. I cannot even very distinctly remember what she told me at that first explanation. I must have attacked her fiercely--on the score of de Mersch, in the old vein; must have told her that I would not in the interest of the name allow her to see the man again. She told me things, too, rather abominable things, about the way in which she had got Halderschrodt into her power and was pressing him down. Halderschrodt was de Mersch's banker-in-chief; his fall would mean de Mersch's, and so on. The "so on" in this case meant a great deal more. Halderschrodt, apparently, was the "somebody who was up to something" of the American paper--that is to say the allied firms that Halderschrodt represented. I can't remember the details. They were too huge and too unfamiliar, and I was too agitated by my own share in the humanity of it. But, in sum, it seemed that the fall of Halderschrodt would mean a sort of incredibly vast Black Monday--a frightful thing in the existing state of public confidence, but one which did not mean much to me. I forget how she said she had been able to put the screw on him. Halderschrodt, as you must remember, was the third of his colossal name, a man without much genius and conscious of the lack, obsessed with the idea of operating some enormous coup, like the founder of his dynasty, something in which foresight in international occurrence played a chief part. That idea was his weakness, the defect of his mind, and she had played on that weakness. I forget, I say, the details, if I ever heard them; they concerned themselves with a dynastic revolution somewhere, a revolution that was to cause a slump all over the world, and that had been engineered in our Salon. And she had burked the revolution--betrayed it, I suppose--and the consequences did not ensue, and Halderschrodt and all the rest of them were left high and dry.

The whole thing was a matter of under-currents that never came to the surface, a matter of shifting sands from which only those with the clearest heads could come forth.

"And we ... we have clear heads," she said. It was impossible to listen to her without shuddering. For me, if he stood for anything, Halderschrodt stood for stability; there was the tremendous name, and there was the person I had just seen, the person on whom a habit of mind approaching almost to the royal had conferred a presence that had some of the divinity that hedges a king. It seemed frightful merely to imagine his ignominious collapse; as frightful as if she had pointed out a splendid-limbed man and said: "That man will be dead in five

minutes." That, indeed, was what she said of Halderschrodt.... The man had saluted her, going to his death; the austere inclination that I had seen had been the salutation of such a man.

I was so moved by one thing and another that I hardly noticed that Gurnard had come into the room. I had not seen him since the night when he had dined with the Duc de Mersch at Churchill's, but he seemed so part of the emotion, of the frame of mind, that he slid noiselessly into the scene and hardly surprised me. I was called out of the room--someone desired to see me, and I passed, without any transition of feeling, into the presence of an entire stranger--a man who remains a voice to me. He began to talk to me about the state of my aunt's health. He said she was breaking up; that he begged respectfully to urge that I would use my influence to take her back to London to consult Sir James--I, perhaps, living in the house and not having known my aunt for very long, might not see; but he ... He was my aunt's solicitor. He was quite right; my aunt was breaking up, she had declined visibly in the few hours that I had been away from her. She had been doing business with this man, had altered her will, had seen Mr. Gurnard; and, in some way had received a shock that seemed to have deprived her of all volition. She sat with her head leaning back, her eyes closed, the lines of her face all seeming to run downward.

"It is obvious to me that arrangements ought to be made for your return to England," the lawyer said, "whatever engagements Miss Granger or Mr. Etchingham Granger or even Mr. Gurnard may have made."

I wondered vaguely what the devil Mr. Gurnard could have to say in the matter, and then Miss Granger herself came into the room.

"They want me," my aunt said in a low voice, "they have been persuading me ... to go back ... to Etchingham, I think you said, Meredith."

I became conscious that I wanted to return to England, wanted it very much, wanted to be out of this; to get somewhere where there was stability and things that one could understand. Everything here seemed to be in a mist, with the ground trembling underfoot.

"Why ..." Miss Granger's verdict came, "we can go when you like. To-morrow."

Things immediately began to shape themselves on these unexpected lines, a sort of bustle of departure to be in the air. I was employed to conduct the lawyer as far as the porter's lodge, a longish traverse. He beguiled the way by excusing himself for hurrying back to London.

"I might have been of use; in these hurried departures there are generally things. But, you will understand, Mr.--Mr. Etchingham; at a time like this I could hardly spare the hours that it cost me to come over. You would be astonished what a deal of extra work it gives and how far-spreading the evil is. People seem to have gone mad. Even I have been astonished."

"I had no idea," I said.

"Of course not, of course not--no one had. But, unless I am much mistaken--much--there will have to be an enquiry, and people will be very lucky who have had nothing to do with it ..."

I gathered that things were in a bad way, over there as over here; that there were scandals and a tremendous outcry for purification in the highest places. I saw the man get into his fiacre and took my way back across the court-yard rather slowly, pondering over the part I was to fill in the emigration, wondering how far events had conferred on me a partnership in the family affairs.

I found that my tacitly acknowledged function was that of supervising nurse-tender, the sort of thing that made for personal tenderness in the aridity of profuse hired help. I was expected to arrange a rug just a little more comfortably than the lady's maid who would travel in the compartment--to give the finishing touches.

It was astonishing how well the thing was engineered; the removal, I mean. It gave me an even better idea of the woman my aunt had been than even the panic of her solicitor. The thing went as smoothly as the disappearance of a caravan of gypsies, camped for the night on a heath beside gorse bushes. We went to the ball that night as if from a household that had its roots deep in the solid rock, and in the morning we had disappeared.

The ball itself was a finishing touch--the finishing touch of my sister's affairs and the end of my patience. I spent an interminable night, one of those nights that never end and that remain quivering and raw in the memory. I seemed to be in a blaze of light, watching, through a shifting screen of shimmering dresses--her and the Duc de Mersch. I don't know whether the thing was really noticeable, but it seemed that everyone was--that everyone must be--remarking it. I thought I caught women making smile-punctuated remarks behind fans, men answering inaudibly with eyes discreetly on the ground. It was a mixed assembly, somebody's liquidation of social obligations, and there was a sprinkling of the kind of people who do make remarks. It was not the noticeability for its own sake that I hated, but the fact that their relations by their noticeability made me impossible, whilst the notice itself confirmed my own fears. I hung, glowering in

corners, noticeable enough myself, I suppose.

The thing reached a crisis late in the evening. There was a kind of winter-garden that one strolled in, a place of giant palms stretching up into a darkness of intense shadow. I was prowling about in the shadows of great metallic leaves, cursing under my breath, in a fury of nervous irritation; quivering like a horse martyred by a stupidly merciless driver. I happened to stand back for a moment in the narrowest of paths, with the touch of spiky leaves on my hand and on my face. In front of me was the glaring perspective of one of the longer alleys, and, stepping into it, a great band of blue ribbon cutting across his chest, came de Mersch with her upon his arm. De Mersch himself hardly counted. He had a way of glowing, but he paled ineffectual fires beside her mænadic glow. There was something overpowering in the sight of her, in the fire of her eyes, in the glow of her coils of hair, in the poise of her head. She wore some kind of early nineteenth-century dress, sweeping low from the waist with a tenderness of fold that affected one with delicate pathos, that had a virgin quality of almost poignant intensity. And beneath it she stepped with the buoyancy--the long steps--of a triumphing Diana.

It was more than terrible for me to stand there longing with a black, baffled longing, with some of the base quality of an eavesdropper and all the baseness of the unsuccessful.

Then Gurnard loomed in the distance, moving insensibly down the long, glaring corridor, a sinister figure, suggesting in the silence of his oncoming the motionless flight of a vulture. Well within my field of sight he overtook them and, with a lack of preliminary greeting that suggested supreme intimacy, walked beside them. I stood for some moments--for some minutes, and then hastened after them. I was going to do something. After a time I found de Mersch and Gurnard standing facing each other in one of the doorways of the place--Gurnard, a small, dark, impassive column; de Mersch, bulky, overwhelming, florid, standing with his legs well apart and speaking vociferously with a good deal of gesture. I approached them from the side, standing rather insistently at his elbow.

"I want," I said, "I would be extremely glad if you would give me a minute, monsieur." I was conscious that I spoke with a tremour of the voice, a sort of throaty eagerness. I was unaware of what course I was to pursue, but I was confident of calmness, of self-control--I was equal to that. They had a pause of surprised silence. Gurnard wheeled and fixed me critically with his eye-glass. I took de Mersch a little apart, into a solitude of palm branches, and began to speak before he had asked me my errand.

"You must understand that I would not interfere without a good deal of provocation," I was saying, when he cut me short, speaking in a thick, jovial voice.

"Oh, we will understand that, my good Granger, and then ..."

"It is about my sister," I said--"you--you go too far. I must ask you, as a gentleman, to cease persecuting her."

He answered "The devil!" and then: "If I do not----?"

It was evident in his voice, in his manner, that the man was a little--well, gris. "If you do not," I said, "I shall forbid her to see you and I shall ..."

"Oh, oh!" he interjected with the intonation of a reveller at a farce. "We are at that--we are the excellent brother." He paused, and then added: "Well, go to the devil, you and your forbidding." He spoke with the greatest good humour.

"I am in earnest," I said; "very much in earnest. The thing has gone too far, and even for your own sake, you had better ..."

He said "Ah, ah!" in the tone of his "Oh, oh!"

"She is no friend to you," I struggled on, "she is playing with you for her own purposes; you will ..."

He swayed a little on his feet and said: "Bravo ... bravissimo. If we can't forbid him, we will frighten him. Go on, my good fellow ..." and then, "Come, go on ..."

I looked at his great bulk of a body. It came into my head dimly that I wanted him to strike me, to give me an excuse--anything to end the scene violently, with a crash and exclamations of fury.

"You absolutely refuse to pay any attention?" I said.

"Oh, absolutely," he answered.

"You know that I can do something, that I can expose you." I had a vague idea that I could, that the number of small things that I knew to his discredit and the mass of my hatred could be welded into a damning whole. He laughed a high-pitched, hysterical laugh. The dawn was beginning to spread pallidly above us, gleaming mournfully through the glass of the palm-house. People began to pass, muffled up, on their way out of the place.

"You may go ..." he was beginning. But the expression of his face altered. Miss Granger, muffled up like all the rest of the world, was coming out of the inner door. "We have been having a charming ..." he began to her. She touched me gently on the arm.

"Come, Arthur," she said, and then to him, "You have heard the news?"

He looked at her rather muzzily.

"Baron Halderschrodt has committed suicide," she said. "Come, Arthur."

We passed on slowly, but de Mersch followed.

"You--you aren't in earnest?" he said, catching at her arm so that we swung round and faced him. There was a sort of mad entreaty in his eyes, as if he hoped that by unsaying she could remedy an irremediable disaster, and there was nothing left of him but those panic-stricken, beseeching eyes.

"Monsieur de Sabran told me," she answered; "he had just come from making the constatation. Besides, you can hear ..."

Half-sentences came to our ears from groups that passed us. A very old man with a nose that almost touched his thick lips, was saying to another of the same type:

"Shot himself ... through the left temple ... Mon Dieu!"

De Mersch walked slowly down the long corridor away from us. There was an extraordinary stiffness in his gait, as if he were trying to emulate the goose step of his days in the Prussian Guard. My companion looked after him as though she wished to gauge the extent of his despair.

"You would say 'Habet,' wouldn't you?" she asked me.

I thought we had seen the last of him, but as in the twilight of the dawn we waited for the lodge gates to open, a furious clatter of hoofs came down the long street, and a carriage drew level with ours. A moment after, de Mersch was knocking at our window.

"You will ... you will ..." he stuttered, "speak ... to Mr. Gurnard. That is our only chance ... now." His voice came in mingled with the cold air of the morning. I shivered. "You have so much power ... with him and...."

"Oh, I ..." she answered.

"The thing must go through," he said again, "or else ..." He paused. The great gates in front of us swung noiselessly open, one saw into the court-yard. The light was growing stronger. She did not answer.

"I tell you," he asseverated insistently, "if the British Government abandons my railway all our plans ..."

"Oh, the Government won't abandon it," she said, with a little emphasis on the verb. He stepped back out of range of the wheels, and we turned in and left him standing there.

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In the great room which was usually given up to the political plotters stood a table covered with eatables and lit by a pair of candles in tall silver sticks. I was conscious of a raging hunger and of a fierce excitement that made the thought of sleep part of a past of phantoms. I began to eat unconsciously, pacing up and down the while. She was standing beside the table in the glow of the transparent light. Pallid blue lines showed in the long windows. It was very cold and hideously late; away in those endless small hours when the pulse drags, when the clock-beat drags, when time is effaced.

"You see?" she said suddenly.

"Oh, I see," I answered--"and ... and now?"

"Now we are almost done with each other," she answered.

I felt a sudden mental falling away. I had never looked at things in that way, had never really looked things in the face. I had grown so used to the idea that she was to parcel out the remainder of my life, had grown so used to the feeling that I was the integral portion of her life ... "But I--" I said, "What is to become of me?"

She stood looking down at the ground ... for a long time. At last she said in a low monotone:

"Oh, you must try to forget."

A new idea struck me--luminously, overwhelming. I grew reckless. "You--you are growing considerate," I taunted. "You are not so sure, not so cold. I notice a change in you. Upon my soul ..."

Her eyes dilated suddenly, and as suddenly closed again. She said nothing. I grew conscious of unbearable pain, the pain of returning life. She was going away. I should be alone. The future began to exist again, looming up like a vessel through thick mist, silent, phantasmal, overwhelming--a hideous future of irremediable remorse, of solitude, of craving.

"You are going back to work with Churchill," she said suddenly.

"How did you know?" I asked breathlessly. My despair of a sort found vent in violent interjecting of an immaterial query.

"You leave your letters about," she said, "and.... It will be best for you."

"It will not," I said bitterly. "It could never be the same. I don't want to see Churchill. I want...."

"You want?" she asked, in a low monotone.

"You," I answered.

She spoke at last, very slowly:

"Oh, as for me, I am going to marry Gurnard."

I don't know just what I said then, but I remember that I found myself repeating over and over again, the phrases running metrically up and down my mind: "You couldn't marry Gurnard; you don't know what he is. You couldn't marry Gurnard; you don't know what he is." I don't suppose that I knew anything to the discredit of Gurnard--but he struck me in that way at that moment; struck me convincingly--more than any array of facts could have done.

"Oh--as for what he is--" she said, and paused. "I know...." and then suddenly she began to speak very fast.

"Don't you see?--can't you see?--that I don't marry Gurnard for what he is in that sense, but for what he is in the other. It isn't a marriage in your sense at all. And ... and it doesn't affect you ... don't you see? We have to have done with one another, because ... because...."

I had an inspiration.

"I believe," I said, very slowly, "I believe ... you do care...."



She said nothing.

"You care," I repeated.

She spoke then with an energy that had something of a threat in it. "Do you think I would? Do you think I could?... or dare? Don't you understand?" She faltered-- "but then...." she added, and was silent for a long minute. I felt the throb of a thousand pulses in my head, on my temples. "Oh, yes, I care," she said slowly, "but that--that makes it all the worse. Why, yes, I care--yes, yes. It hurts me to see you. I might.... It would draw me away. I have my allotted course. And you-- Don't you see, you would influence me; you would be--you are--a disease--for me."

"But," I said, "I could--I would--do anything."

I had only the faintest of ideas of what I would do--for her sake.

"Ah, no," she said, "you must not say that. You don't understand.... Even that would mean misery for you--and I--I could not bear. Don't you see? Even now, before you have done your allotted part, I am wanting--oh, wanting--to let you go.... But I must not; I must not. You must go on ... and bear it for a little while more--and then...."

There was a tension somewhere, a string somewhere that was stretched tight and vibrating. I was tremulous with an excitement that overmastered my powers of speech, that surpassed my understanding.

"Don't you see ..." she asked again, "you are the past--the passing. We could never meet. You are ... for me ... only the portrait of a man--of a man who has been dead--oh, a long time; and I, for you, only a possibility ... a conception.... You work to bring me on--to make me possible."

"But--" I said. The idea was so difficult to grasp. "I will--there must be a way--"

"No," she answered, "there is no way--you must go back; must try. There will be Churchill and what he stands for--He won't die, he won't even care much for losing this game ... not much.... And you will have to forget me. There is no other way--no bridge. We can't meet, you and I...."

The words goaded me to fury. I began to pace furiously up and down. I wanted to tell her that I would throw away everything for her, would crush myself out, would be a lifeless tool, would do anything. But I could tear no words out of the

stone that seemed to surround me.

"You may even tell him, if you like, what I and Gurnard are going to do. It will make no difference; he will fall. But you would like him to--to make a good fight for it, wouldn't you? That is all I can do ... for your sake."

I began to speak--as if I had not spoken for years. The house seemed to be coming to life; there were noises of opening doors, of voices outside.

"I believe you care enough," I said "to give it all up for me. I believe you do, and I want you." I continued to pace up and down. The noises of returning day grew loud; frightfully loud. It was as if I must hasten, must get said what I had to say, as if I must raise my voice to make it heard amid the clamour of a world awakening to life.

"I believe you do ... I believe you do...." I said again and again, "and I want you." My voice rose higher and higher. She stood motionless, an inscrutable white figure, like some silent Greek statue, a harmony of falling folds of heavy drapery perfectly motionless.

"I want you," I said--"I want you, I want you, I want you." It was unbearable to myself.

"Oh, be quiet," she said at last. "Be quiet! If you had wanted me I have been here. It is too late. All these days; all these--"

"But ..." I said.

From without someone opened the great shutters of the windows, and the light from the outside world burst in upon us.