CHAPTER SIXTEEN

We parted in London next day, I hardly know where. She seemed so part of my being, was for me so little more than an intellectual force, so little of a physical personality, that I cannot remember where my eyes lost sight of her.

I had desolately made the crossing from country to country, had convoyed my aunt to her big house in one of the gloomy squares in a certain district, and then we had parted. Even afterward it was as if she were still beside me, as if I had only to look round to find her eyes upon me. She remained the propelling force, I a boat thrust out upon a mill-pond, moving more and more slowly. I had been for so long in the shadow of that great house, shut in among the gloom, that all this light, this blazing world--it was a June day in London--seemed impossible, and hateful. Over there, there had been nothing but very slow, fading minutes; now there was a past, a future. It was as if I stood between them in a cleft of unscalable rocks.

I went about mechanically, made arrangements for my housing, moved in and out of rooms in the enormous mausoleum of a club that was all the home I had, in a sort of stupor. Suddenly I remembered that I had been thinking of something; that she had been talking of Churchill. I had had a letter from him on the morning of the day before. When I read it, Churchill and his "Cromwell" had risen in my mind like preposterous phantoms; the one as unreal as the other--as alien. I seemed to have passed an infinity of æons beyond them. The one and the other belonged as absolutely to the past as a past year belongs. The thought of them did not bring with it the tremulously unpleasant sensations that, as a rule, come with the thoughts of a too recent temps jadis, but rather as a vein of rose across a gray evening. I had passed his letter over; had dropped it half-read among the litter of the others. Then there had seemed to be a haven into whose mouth I was drifting.

Now I should have to pick the letters up again, all of them; set to work desolately to pick up the threads of the past; and work it back into life as one does half-drowned things. I set about it listlessly. There remained of that time an errand for my aunt, an errand that would take me to Etchingham; something connected with her land steward. I think the old lady had ideas of inducting me into a position that it had grown tacitly acknowledged I was to fill. I was to go down there; to see about some alterations that were in progress; and to make arrangements for my aunt's return. I was so tired, so dog tired, and the day still had so many weary hours to run, that I recognised instinctively that if I were to come through it sane I must tire myself more, must keep on going--until I sank. I

drifted down to Etchingham that evening, I sent a messenger over to Churchill's cottage, waited for an answer that told me that Churchill was there, and then slept, and slept.

I woke back in the world again, in a world that contained the land steward and the manor house. I had a sense of recovered power from the sight of them, of the sunlight on the stretches of turf, of the mellow, golden stonework of the long range of buildings, from the sound of a chime of bells that came wonderfully sweetly over the soft swelling of the close turf. The feeling came not from any sense of prospective ownership, but from the acute consciousness of what these things stood for. I did not recognise it then, but later I understood; for the present it was enough to have again the power to set my foot on the ground, heel first. In the streets of the little town there was a sensation of holiday, not pronounced enough to call for flags, but enough to convey the idea of waiting for an event.

The land steward, at the end of a tour amongst cottages, explained there was to be a celebration in the neighbourhood--a "cock-and-hen show with a political annex"; the latter under the auspices of Miss Churchill. Churchill himself was to speak; there was a possibility of a pronouncement. I found London reporters at my inn, men I half knew. They expressed mitigated delight at the view of me, and over a lunch-table let me know what "one said"--what one said of the outside of events I knew too well internally. They most of them had the air of my aunt's solicitor when he had said, "Even I did not realise...." their positions saving them the necessity of concealing surprise. "One can't know everything." They fumbled amusingly about the causes, differed with one another, but were surprisingly unanimous as to effects, as to the panic and the call for purification. It was rather extraordinary, too, how large de Mersch loomed on the horizon over here. It was as if the whole world centred in him, as if he represented the modern spirit that must be purified away by burning before things could return to their normal state. I knew what he represented ... but there it was.

It was part of my programme, the attendance at the poultry show; I was to go back to the cottage with Churchill, after he had made his speech. It was rather extraordinary, the sensations of that function. I went in rather late, with the reporter of the Hour, who was anxious to do me the favour of introducing me without payment--it was his way of making himself pleasant, and I had the reputation of knowing celebrities. It was rather extraordinary to be back again in the midst of this sort of thing, to be walking over a crowded, green paddock, hedged in with tall trees and dotted here and there with the gaily striped species of tent that is called marquee. And the type of face, and the style of the costume! They would have seemed impossible the day before yesterday.

There were all Miss Churchill's gang of great dames, muslin, rustling,

marriageable daughters, a continual twitter of voices, and a sprinkling of the peasantry, dun-coloured and struck speechless.

One of the great ladies surveyed me as I stood in the centre of an open space, surveyed me through tortoise-shell glasses on the end of a long handle, and beckoned me to her side.

"You are unattached?" she asked. She had pretensions to voice the county, just as my aunt undoubtedly set the tone of its doings, decided who was visitable, and just as Miss Churchill gave the political tone. "You may wait upon me, then," she said; "my daughter is with her young man. That is the correct phrase, is it not?"

She was a great lady, who stood nearly six foot high, and whom one would have styled buxom, had one dared. "I have a grievance," she went on; "I must talk to someone. Come this way. There!" She pointed with the handle of her glasses to a pen of glossy blackbirds. "You see!... Not even commended!--and I assure you the trouble I have taken over them, with the idea of setting an example to the tenantry, is incredible. They give a prize to one of our own tenants ... which is as much as telling the man that he is an example to me. Then they wonder that the country is going to the dogs. I assure you that after breakfast I have had the scraps collected from the plates--that was the course recommended by the poultry manuals--and have taken them out with my own hands."

The sort of thing passed for humour in the county, and, being delivered with an air and a half Irish ruefulness, passed well enough.

"And that reminds me," she went on, "--I mean the fact that the country is going to the dogs, as my husband [You haven't seen him anywhere, have you? He is one of the judges, and I want to have a word with him about my Orpingtons] says every morning after he has looked at his paper--that ... oh, that you have been in Paris, haven't you? with your aunt. Then, of course, you have seen this famous Duc de Mersch?"

She looked at me humourously through her glasses. "I'm going to pump you, you know," she said, "it is the duty that is expected of me. I have to talk for a countyful of women without a tongue in their heads. So tell me about him. Is it true that he is at the bottom of all this mischief? Is it through him that this man committed suicide? They say so. He was mixed up in that Royalist plot, wasn't he?--and the people that have been failing all over the place are mixed up with him, aren't they?"

"I ... I really don't know," I said; "if you say so...."

"Oh, I assure you I'm sound enough," she answered, "the Churchills--I know you're a friend of his--haven't a stauncher ally than I am, and I should only be too glad to be able to contradict. But it's so difficult. I assure you I go out of my way; talk to the most outrageous people, deny the very possibility of Mr. Churchill's being in any way implicated. One knows that it's impossible, but what can one do? I have said again and again--to people like grocers' wives; even to the grocers, for that matter--that Mr. Churchill is a statesman, and that if he insists that this odious man's railway must go through, it is in the interests of the country that it should. I tell them...."

She paused for a minute to take breath and then went on: "I was speaking to a man of that class only this morning, rather an intelligent man and quite nice--I was saying, 'Don't you see, my dear Mr. Tull, that it is a question of international politics. If the grand duke does not get the money for his railway, the grand duke will be turned out of his--what is it--principality? And that would be most dangerous--in the present condition of affairs over there, and besides....' The man listened very respectfully, but I could see that he was not convinced. I buckled to again...."

"'And besides,' I said, 'there is the question of Greenland itself. We English must have Greenland ... sooner or later. It touches you, even. You have a son who's above--who doesn't care for life in a country town, and you want to send him abroad--with a little capital. Well, Greenland is just the place for him.' The man looked at me, and almost shook his head in my face."

"'If you'll excuse me, my lady,' he said, 'it won't do. Mr. Churchill is a man above hocus-pocus. Well I know it that have had dealings with him. But ... well, the long and the short of it is, my lady, that you can't touch pitch and not be defiled; or, leastwise, people'll think you've been defiled--those that don't know you. The foreign nations are all very well, and the grand duchy--and the getting hold of Greenland, but what touches me is this--My neighbour Slingsby had a little money, and he gets a prospectus. It looked very well--very well--and he brings it in to me. I did not have anything to do with it, but Slingsby did. Well, now there's Slingsby on the rates and his wife a lady born, almost. I might have been taken in the same way but for--for the grace of God, I'm minded to say. Well, Slingsby's a good man, and used to be a hard-working man--all his life, and now it turns out that that prospectus came about by the man de Mersch's manoeuvres--"wild-cat schemes," they call them in the paper that I read. And there's any number of them started by de Mersch or his agents. Just for what? That de Mersch may be the richest man in the world and a philanthropist. Well, then, where's Slingsby, if that's philanthropy? So Mr. Churchill comes along and says, in a manner of speaking, "That's all very well, but this same Mr. Mersch is the grand duke of somewhere or other, and we must bolster him up in his kingdom, or else there

will be trouble with the powers." Powers--what's powers to me?--or Greenland? when there's Slingsby, a man I've smoked a pipe with every market evening of my life, in the workhouse? And there's hundreds of Slingsbys all over the country.'"

"The man was working himself--Slingsby was a good sort of man. It shocked even me. One knows what goes on in one's own village, of course. And it's only too true that there's hundreds of Slingsbys--I'm not boring you, am I?"

I did not answer for a moment. "I--I had no idea," I said; "I have been so long out of it and over there one did not realise the ... the feeling."

"You've been well out of it," she answered; "one has had to suffer, I assure you." I believed that she had had to suffer; it must have taken a good deal to make that lady complain. Her large, ruddy features followed the droop of her eyes down to the fringe of the parasol that she was touching the turf with. We were sitting on garden seats in the dappled shade of enormous elms.

There was in the air a touch of the sounds discoursed by a yeomanry band at the other end of the grounds. One could see the red of their uniforms through moving rifts in the crowd of white dresses.

"That wasn't even the worst," she said suddenly, lifting her eyes and looking away between the trunks of the trees. "The man has been reading the papers and he gave me the benefit of his reflections. 'Someone's got to be punished for this;' he said, 'we've got to show them that you can't be hand-and-glove with that sort of blackguard, without paying for it. I don't say, mind you, that Mr. Churchill is or ever has been. I know him, and I trust him. But there's more than me in the world, and they can't all know him. Well, here's the papers saying--or they don't say it, but they hint, which is worse in a way--that he must be, or he wouldn't stick up for the man. They say the man's a blackguard out and out--in Greenland too; has the blacks murdered. Churchill says the blacks are to be safe-guarded, that's the word. Well, they may be--but so ought Slingsby to have been, yet it didn't help him. No, my lady, we've got to put our own house in order and that first, before thinking of the powers or places like Greenland. What's the good of the saner policy that Mr. Churchill talks about, if you can't trust anyone with your money, and have to live on the capital? If you can't sleep at night for thinking that you may be in the workhouse to-morrow--like Slingsby? The first duty of men in Mr. Churchill's position--as I see it--is to see that we're able to be confident of honest dealing. That's what we want, not Greenlands. That's how we all feel, and you know it, too, or else you, a great lady, wouldn't stop to talk to a man like me. And, mind you, I'm true blue, always have been and always shall be, and, if it was a matter of votes, I'd give mine to Mr. Churchill to-morrow. But there's a many that wouldn't, and there's a many that believe the hintings.'"

My lady stopped and sighed from a broad bosom. "What could I say?" she went on again. "I know Mr. Churchill and I like him--and everyone that knows him likes him. I'm one of the stalwarts, mind you; I'm not for giving in to popular clamour; I'm for the 'saner policy,' like Churchill. But, as the man said: 'There's a many that believe the hintings.' And I almost wish Churchill.... However, you understand what I meant when I said that one had had to suffer."

"Oh, I understand," I said. I was beginning to. "And Churchill?" I asked later, "he gives no sign of relenting?"

"Would you have him?" she asked sharply; "would you make him if you could?" She had an air of challenging. "I'm for the 'saner policy!' cost what it may. He owes it to himself to sacrifice himself, if it comes to that."

"I'm with you too," I answered, "over boot and spur." Her enthusiasm was contagious, and unnecessary.

"Oh, he'll stick," she began again after consultation with the parasol fringe. "You'll hear him after a minute. It's a field day to-day. You'll miss the other heavy guns if you stop with me. I do it ostentatiously--wait until they've done. They're all trembling; all of them. My husband will be on the platform--trembling too. He is a type of them. All day long and at odd moments at night I talk to him--out-talk him and silence him. What's the state of popular feeling to him? He's for the country, not the town--this sort of thing has nothing to do with him. It's a matter to be settled by Jews in the City. Well, he sees it at night, and then in the morning the papers undo all my work. He begins to talk about his seat--which I got for him. I've been the 'voice of the county' for years now. Well, it'll soon be a voice without a county.... What is it? 'The old order changeth.' So, I've arranged it that I shall wait until the trembling big-wigs have stuttered their speeches out, and then I'm going to sail down the centre aisle and listen to Churchill with visible signs of approval. It won't do much to-day, but there was a time when it would have changed the course of an election.... Ah, there's Effie's young man. It's time."

She rose and marched, with the air of going to a last sacrifice, across the deserted sward toward a young man who was passing under the calico flag of the gateway.

"It's all right, Willoughby," she said, as we drew level, "I've found someone else to face the music with me; you can go back to Effie." A bronzed and grateful young man murmured thanks to me.

"It's an awful relief, Granger," he said; "can't think how you can do it. I'm hooked,

but you...."

"He's the better man," his mother-in-law-elect said, over her shoulder. She sailed slowly up the aisle beside me, an almost heroic figure of a matron. "Splendidly timed, you see," she said, "do you observe my husband's embarrassment?"

It was splendid to see Churchill again, standing there negligently, with the diffidence of a boy amid the bustle of applause. I understood suddenly why I loved him so, this tall, gray man with the delicate, almost grotesque, mannerisms. He appealed to me by sheer force of picturesqueness, appealed as some forgotten mediaeval city might. I was concerned for him as for some such dying place, standing above the level plains; I was jealous lest it should lose one jot of its glory, of its renown. He advocated his saner policy before all those people; stood up there and spoke gently, persuasively, without any stress of emotion, without more movement than an occasional flutter of the glasses he held in his hand. One would never have recognised that the thing was a fighting speech but for the occasional shiver of his audience. They were thinking of their Slingsbys; he affecting, insouciantly, to treat them as rational people.

It was extraordinary to sit there shut in by that wall of people all of one type, of one idea; the idea of getting back; all conscious that a force of which they knew nothing was dragging them forward over the edge of a glacier, into a crevasse. They wanted to get back, were struggling, panting even--as a nation pants--to get back by their own way that they understood and saw; were hauling, and hauling desperately, at the weighted rope that was dragging them forward. Churchill stood up there and repeated: "Mine is the only way--the saner policy," and his words would fly all over the country to fall upon the deaf ears of the panic-stricken, who could not understand the use of calmness, of trifling even, in the face of danger, who suspected the calmness as one suspects the thing one has not. At the end of it I received his summons to a small door at the back of the building. The speech seemed to have passed out of his mind far more than out of mine.

"So you have come," he said; "that's good, and so.... Let us walk a little way ... out of this. My aunt will pick us up on the road." He linked his arm into mine and propelled me swiftly down the bright, broad street. "I'm sorry you came in for that, but--one has to do these things."

There was a sort of resisted numbness in his voice, a lack of any resiliency. My heart sank a little. It was as if I were beside an invalid who did not--must not--know his condition; as if I were pledged not to notice anything. In the open the change struck home as a hammer strikes; in the pitiless searching of the unrestrained light, his grayness, his tremulousness, his aloofness from the things

about him, came home to me like a pang.

"You look a bit fagged," I said, "perhaps we ought not to talk about work." His thoughts seemed to come back from a great distance, oh, from an infinite distance beyond the horizon, the soft hills of that fat country. "You want rest," I added.

"I--oh, no," he answered, "I can't have it ... till the end of the session. I'm used to it too."

He began talking briskly about the "Cromwell;" proofs had emerged from the infinite and wanted attention. There were innumerable little matters, things to be copied for the appendix and revisions. It was impossible for me to keep my mind upon them.

It had come suddenly home to me that this was the world that I belonged to; that I had come back to it as if from an under world; that to this I owed allegiance. She herself had recognised that; she herself had bidden me tell him what was a-gate against him. It was a duty too; he was my friend. But, face to face with him, it became almost an impossibility. It was impossible even to put it into words. The mere ideas seemed to be untranslatable, to savour of madness. I found myself in the very position that she had occupied at the commencement of our relations: that of having to explain--say, to a Persian--the working principles of the telegraph. And I was not equal to the task. At the same time I had to do something. I had to. It would be abominable to have to go through life forever, alone with the consciousness of that sort of treachery of silence. But how could I tell him even the comprehensibles? What kind of sentence was I to open with? With pluckings of an apologetic string, without prelude at all--or how? I grew conscious that there was need for haste; he was looking behind him down the long white road for the carriage that was to pick us up.

"My dear fellow...." I began. He must have noted a change in my tone, and looked at me with suddenly lifted eyebrows. "You know my sister is going to marry Mr. Gurnard."

"Why, no," he answered--"that is ... I've heard...." he began to offer good wishes.

"No, no," I interrupted him hurriedly, "not that. But I happen to know that Gurnard is meditating ... is going to separate from you in public matters." An expression of dismay spread over his face.

"My dear fellow," he began.

"Oh, I'm not drunk," I said bitterly, "but I've been behind the scenes--for a long time. And I could not ... couldn't let the thing go on without a word."

He stopped in the road and looked at me.

"Yes, yes," he said, "I daresay.... But what does it lead to?... Even if I could listen to you--I can't go behind the scenes. Mr. Gurnard may differ from me in points, but don't you see?..." He had walked on slowly, but he came to a halt again. "We had better put these matters out of our minds. Of course you are not drunk; but one is tied down in these matters...."

He spoke very gently, as if he did not wish to offend me by this closing of the door. He seemed suddenly to grow very old and very gray. There was a stile in the dusty hedge-row, and he walked toward it, meditating. In a moment he looked back at me. "I had forgotten," he said; "I meant to suggest that we should wait here--I am a little tired." He perched himself on the top bar and became lost in the inspection of the cord of his glasses. I went toward him.

"I knew," I said, "that you could not listen to ... to the sort of thing. But there were reasons. I felt forced. You will forgive me." He looked up at me, starting as if he had forgotten my presence.

"Yes, yes," he said, "I have a certain--I can't think of the right word--say respect--for your judgment and--and motives ... But you see, there are, for instance, my colleagues. I couldn't go to them ..." He lost the thread of his idea.

"To tell the truth," I said, with a sudden impulse for candour, "it isn't the political aspect of the matter, but the personal. I spoke because it was just possible that I might be of service to you--personally--and because I would like you ... to make a good fight for it." I had borrowed her own words.

He looked up at me and smiled. "Thank you," he said. "I believe you think it's a losing game," he added, with a touch of gray humour that was like a genial hour of sunlight on a wintry day. I did not answer. A little way down the road Miss Churchill's carriage whirled into sight, sparkling in the sunlight, and sending up an attendant cloud of dust that melted like smoke through the dog-roses of the leeward hedge.

"So you don't think much of me as a politician," Churchill suddenly deduced smilingly. "You had better not tell that to my aunt."

I went up to town with Churchill that evening. There was nothing waiting for me there, but I did not want to think. I wanted to be among men, among crowds of

men, to be dazed, to be stupefied, to hear nothing for the din of life, to be blinded by the blaze of lights.

There were plenty of people in Churchill's carriage; a military member and a local member happened to be in my immediate neighbourhood. Their minds were full of the financial scandals, and they dinned their alternating opinions into me. I assured them that I knew nothing about the matter, and they grew more solicitous for my enlightenment.

"It all comes from having too many eggs in one basket," the local member summed up. "The old-fashioned small enterprises had their disadvantages, but--mind you--these gigantic trusts.... Isn't that so, General?"

"Oh, I quite agree with you," the general barked; "at the same time...." Their voices sounded on, intermingling, indistinguishable, soothing even. I seemed to be listening to the hum of a threshing-machine--a passage of sound booming on one note, a passage, a half-tone higher, and so on, and so on. Visible things grew hazy, fused into one another.