CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

We reached London somewhat late in the evening--in the twilight of a summer day. There was the hurry and bustle of arrival, a hurry and bustle that changed the tenor of my thoughts and broke their train. As I stood reflecting before the door of the carriage, I felt a friendly pressure of a hand on my shoulder.

"You'll see to that," Churchill's voice said in my ear. "You'll set the copyists to work."

"I'll go to the Museum to-morrow," I said. There were certain extracts to be made for the "Life of Cromwell"--extracts from pamphlets that we had not conveniently at disposal. He nodded, walked swiftly toward his brougham, opened the door and entered.

I remember so well that last sight of him--of his long, slim figure bending down for the entrance, woefully solitary, woefully weighted; remember so well the gleam of the carriage panels reflecting the murky light of the bare London terminus, the attitude of the coachman stiffly reining back the horse; the thin hand that reached out, a gleam of white, to turn the gleaming handle. There was something intimately suggestive of the man in the motion of that hand, in its tentative outstretching, its gentle, half-persuasive--almost theoretic--grasp of the handle. The pleasure of its friendly pressure on my shoulder carried me over some minutes of solitude; its weight on my body removing another from my mind. I had feared that my ineffective disclosure had chilled what of regard he had for me. He had said nothing, his manner had said nothing, but I had feared. In the railway carriage he had sat remote from me, buried in papers. But that touch on my shoulder was enough to set me well with myself again, if not to afford scope for pleasant improvisation. It at least showed me that he bore me no ill-will, otherwise he would hardly have touched me. Perhaps, even, he was grateful to me, not for service, but for ineffectual good-will. Whatever I read into it, that was the last time he spoke to me, and the last time he touched me. And I loved him very well. Things went so quickly after that.

In a moderately cheerful frame of mind I strolled the few yards that separated me from my club--intent on dining. In my averseness to solitude I sat down at a table where sat already a little, bald-headed, false-toothed Anglo-Indian, a man who bored me into fits of nervous excitement. He was by way of being an incredibly distant uncle of my own. As a rule I avoided him, to-night I dined with him. He was a person of interminable and incredibly inaccurate reminiscences. His long residence in an indigo-producing swamp had affected his memory, which was

supported by only very occasional visits to England.

He told me tales of my poor father and of my poor, dear mother, and of Mr. Bromptons and Mrs. Kenwards who had figured on their visiting lists away back in the musty sixties.

"Your poor, dear father was precious badly off then," he said; "he had a hard struggle for it. I had a bad time of it too; worm had got at all my plantations, so I couldn't help him, poor chap. I think, mind you, Kenny Granger treated him very badly. He might have done something for him--he had influence, Kenny had."

Kenny was my uncle, the head of the family, the husband of my aunt.

"They weren't on terms," I said.

"Oh, I know, I know," the old man mumbled, "but still, for one's only brother ... However, you contrive to do yourselves pretty well. You're making your pile, aren't you? Someone said to me the other day--can't remember who it was--that you were quite one of the rising men--quite one of the men."

"Very kind of someone," I said.

"And now I see," he went on, lifting up a copy of a morning paper, over which I had found him munching his salmon cutlet, "now I see your sister is going to marry a cabinet minister. Ah!" he shook his poor, muddled, baked head, "I remember you both as tiny little dots."

"Why," I said, "she can hardly have been born then."

"Oh, yes," he affirmed, "that was when I came over in '78. She remembered, too, that I brought her over an ivory doll--she remembered."

"You have seen her?" I asked.

"Oh, I called two or three weeks--no, months--ago. She's the image of your poor, dear mother," he added, "at that age; I remarked upon it to your aunt, but, of course, she could not remember. They were not married until after the quarrel."

A sudden restlessness made me bolt the rest of my tepid dinner. With my return to the upper world, and the return to me of a will, despair of a sort had come back. I had before me the problem--the necessity--of winning her. Once I was out of contact with her she grew smaller, less of an idea, more of a person--that one could win. And there were two ways. I must either woo her as one woos a person

barred; must compel her to take flight, to abandon, to cast away everything; or I must go to her as an eligible suitor with the Etchingham acres and possibilities of a future on that basis. This fantastic old man with his mumbled reminiscences spoilt me for the last. One remembers sooner or later that a county-man may not marry his reputed sister without scandal. And I craved her intensely.

She had upon me the effect of an incredible stimulant; away from her I was like a drunkard cut off from his liquor; an opium-taker from his drug. I hardly existed; I hardly thought.

I had an errand at my aunt's house; had a message to deliver, sympathetic enquiries to make--and I wanted to see her, to gain some sort of information from her; to spy out the land; to ask her for terms. There was a change in the appearance of the house, an adventitious brightness that indicated the rise in the fortunes of the family. For me the house was empty and the great door closed hollowly behind me. My sister was not at home. It seemed abominable to me that she should be out; that she could be talking to anyone, or could exist without me. I went sullenly across the road to the palings of the square. As I turned the corner I found my head pivoting on my neck. I was looking over my shoulder at the face of the house, was wondering which was her window.

"Like a love-sick boy--like a damn love-sick boy," I growled at myself. My sense of humour was returning to me. There began a pilgrimage in search of companionship.

London was a desert more solitary than was believable. On those brilliant summer evenings the streets were crowded, were alive, bustled with the chitter-chatter of footsteps, with the chitter-chatter of voices, of laughter.

It was impossible to walk, impossible to do more than tread on one's own toes; one was almost blinded by the constant passing of faces. It was like being in a wheat-field with one's eyes on a level with the indistinguishable ears. One was alone in one's intense contempt for all these faces, all these contented faces; one towered intellectually above them; one towered into regions of rarefaction. And down below they enjoyed themselves. One understood life better; they better how to live. That struck me then--in Oxford Street. There was the intense good-humour, the absolute disregard of the minor inconveniences, of the inconveniences of a crowd, of the ignominy of being one of a crowd. There was the intense poetry of the soft light, the poetry of the summer-night coolness, and they understood how to enjoy it. I turned up an ancient court near Bedford Row.

"In the name of God," I said, "I will enjoy ..." and I did. The poetry of those old deserted quarters came suddenly home to me--all the little commonplace

thoughts; all the commonplace associations of Georgian London. For the time I was done with the meanings of things.

I was seeking Lea--he was not at home. The quarter was honeycombed with the homes of people one knows; of people one used to know, excellent young men who wrote for the papers, who sub-edited papers, who designed posters, who were always just the same. One forgot them for a year or two, one came across them again and found them just the same--still writing for the same papers, still sub-editing the same papers, designing the same posters. I was in the mood to rediscover them in the privacies of their hearths, with the same excellent wives making fair copies of the same manuscripts, with the same gaiety of the same indifferent whiskey, brown or pale or suspicious-looking, in heavy, square, cut-glass stoppered decanters, and with the same indifferent Virginian tobacco at the same level in the same jars.

I was in the mood for this stability, for the excellent household article that was their view of life and literature. I wanted to see it again, to hear again how it was filling the unvarying, allotted columns of the daily, the weekly, or the monthly journals. I wanted to breathe again this mild atmosphere where there are no longer hopes or fears. But, alas!...

I rang bell after bell of that gloomy central London district. You know what happens. One pulls the knob under the name of the person one seeks--pulls it three, or, it may be, four times in vain. One rings the housekeeper's bell; it reverberates, growing fainter and fainter,

gradually stifled by a cavernous subterranean atmosphere. After an age a head peeps round the opening door, the head of a hopeless anachronism, the head of a widow of early Victorian merit, or of an orphan of incredible age. One asks for So-and-so--he's out; for Williams--he's expecting an increase of family, and has gone into the country with madame. And Waring? Oh, he's gone no one knows where, and Johnson who used to live at Number 44 only comes up to town on Tuesdays now. I exhausted the possibilities of that part of Bloomsbury, the possibilities of variety in the types of housekeepers. The rest of London divided itself into bands--into zones. Between here and Kensington the people that I knew could not be called on after dinner, those who lived at Chiswick and beyond were hyperborean--one was bound by the exigencies of time. It was ten o'clock as I stood reflecting on a doorstep--on Johnson's doorstep. I must see somebody, must talk to somebody, before I went to bed in the cheerless room at the club. It was true I might find a political stalwart in the smoking-room--but that was a last resort, a desperate and ignominious pis aller.

There was Fox, I should find him at the office. But it needed a change of tone

before I could contemplate with equanimity the meeting of that individual. I had been preparing myself to confront all the ethically excellent young men and Fox was, ethically speaking, far from excellent, middle-aged, rubicund, leery--a free lance of genius. I made the necessary change in my tone of mind and ran him to earth.

The Watteau room was further enlivened by the introduction of a scarlet plush couch of sumptuous design. By its side stood a couple of electric lights. The virulent green of their shades made the colours of the be-shepherded wall-panels appear almost unearthly, and threw impossible shadows on the deal partition. Round the couch stood chairs with piles of papers neatly arranged on them; round it, on the floor, were more papers lying like the leaves of autumn that one sings of. On it lay Fox, enveloped in a Shetland shawl--a good shawl that was the only honest piece of workmanship in the torn-tawdry place. Fox was as rubicund as ever, but his features were noticeably peaked and there were heavy lines under his eyes--lines cast into deep shadow by the light by which he was reading. I entered unannounced, and was greeted by an indifferent upward glance that changed into one of something like pleasure as he made out my features in the dim light.

"Hullo, you old country hawbuck," he said, with spasmodic jocularity; "I'm uncommon glad to see you." He came to a jerky close, with an indrawing of his breath. "I'm about done," he went on. "Same old thing--sciatica. Took me just after I got here this afternoon; sent out one of the messengers to buy me a sofa, and here I've been ever since. Well, and what's brought you up--don't answer, I know all about it. I've got to keep on talking until this particular spasm's over, or else I shall scream and disturb the flow of Soane's leader. Well, and now you've come, you'll stop and help me to put the Hour to bed, won't you? And then you can come and put me to bed."

He went on talking at high pressure, exaggerating his expressions, heightening his humorous touches with punctuations of rather wild laughter. At last he came to a stop with a half suppressed "Ah!" and a long indrawing of the breath.

"That's over," he said. "Give me a drop of brandy--there's a good fellow." I gave him his nip. Then I explained to him that I couldn't work for the Hour; that I wasn't on terms with de Mersch.

"Been dropping money over him?" he asked, cheerfully. I explained a little more--that there was a lady.

"Oh, it's that," Fox said. "The man is a fool ... But anyhow Mersch don't count for much in this particular show. He's no money in it even, so you may put your

pride in your pocket, or wherever you keep it. It's all right. Straight. He's only the small change."

"But," I said, "everyone says; you said yourself...."

"To be sure," he answered. "But you don't think that I play second fiddle to a bounder of that calibre. Not really?"

He looked at me with a certain seriousness. I remembered, as I had remembered once before, that Fox was a personality--a power. I had never realised till then how entirely--fundamentally--different he was from any other man that I knew. He was surprising enough to have belonged to another race. He looked at me, not as if he cared whether I gave him his due or no, but as if he were astonished at my want of perception of the fact. He let his towzled head fall back upon the plush cushions. "You might kick him from here to Greenland for me," he said; "I wouldn't weep. It suits me to hold him up, and a kicking might restore his equilibrium. I'm sick of him--I've told him so. I knew there was a woman. But don't you worry; I'm the man here."

"If that's the case ..." I said.

"Oh, that's it," he answered.

I helped him to put the paper to bed; took some of the work off his hands. It was all part of the getting back to life; of the resuming of rusty armour; and I wanted to pass the night. I was not unused to it, as it happened. Fox had had several of these fits during my year, and during most of them I had helped him through the night; once or twice for three on end. Once I had had entire control for a matter of five nights. But they gave me a new idea of Fox, those two or three weird hours that night. It was as if I had never seen him before. The attacks grew more virulent as the night advanced. He groaned and raved, and said things--oh, the most astounding things in gibberish that upset one's nerves and everything else. At the height he sang hymns, and then, as the fits passed, relapsed into incredible clear-headedness. It gave me, I say, a new idea of Fox. It was as if, for all the time I had known him, he had been playing a part, and that only now, in the delirium of his pain, in the madness into which he drank himself, were fragments of the real man thrown to the surface. I grew, at last, almost afraid to be alone with him in the dead small hours of the morning, and longed for the time when I could go to bed among the uninspiring, marble-topped furniture of my club.