

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

At noon of the next day I gave Fox his look in at his own flat. He was stretched upon a sofa--it was evident that I was to take such of his duties as were takeable. He greeted me with words to that effect.

"Don't go filling the paper with your unbreeched geniuses," he said, genially, "and don't overwork yourself. There's really nothing to do, but you're being there will keep that little beast Evans from getting too cock-a-hoop. He'd like to jerk me out altogether; thinks they'd get on just as well without me."

I expressed in my manner general contempt for Evans, and was taking my leave.

"Oh, and--" Fox called after me. I turned back. "The Greenland mail ought to be in to-day. If Callan's contrived to get his flood-gates open, run his stuff in, there's a good chap. It's a feature and all that, you know."

"I suppose Soane's to have a look at it," I asked.

"Oh, yes," he answered; "but tell him to keep strictly to old Cal's lines--rub that into him. If he were to get drunk and run in some of his own tips it'd be awkward. People are expecting Cal's stuff. Tell you what: you take him out to lunch, eh? Keep an eye on the supplies, and ram it into him that he's got to stick to Cal's line of argument."

"Soane's as bad as ever, then?" I asked.

"Oh," Fox answered, "he'll be all right for the stuff if you get that one idea into him." A prolonged and acute fit of pain seized him. I fetched his man and left him to his rest.

At the office of the Hour I was greeted by the handing to me of a proof of Callan's manuscript. Evans, the man across the screen, was the immediate agent.

"I suppose it's got to go in, so I had it set up," he said.

"Oh, of course it's got to go in," I answered. "It's to go to Soane first, though."

"Soane's not here yet," he answered. I noted the tone of sub-acid pleasure in his voice. Evans would have enjoyed a fiasco.

"Oh, well," I answered, nonchalantly, "there's plenty of time. You allow space on those lines. I'll send round to hunt Soane up."

I felt called to be upon my mettle. I didn't much care about the paper, but I had a definite antipathy to being done by Evans--by a mad Welshman in a stubborn fit. I knew what was going to happen; knew that Evans would feign inconceivable stupidity, the sort of black stupidity that is at command of individuals of his primitive race. I was in for a day of petty worries. In the circumstances it was a thing to be thankful for; it dragged my mind away from larger issues. One has no time for brooding when one is driving a horse in a jibbing fit.

Evans was grimly conscious that I was moderately ignorant of technical details; he kept them well before my eyes all day long.

At odd moments I tried to read Callan's article. It was impossible. It opened with a description of the squalor of the Greenlander's life, and contained tawdry passages of local colour.

I knew what was coming. This was the view of the Greenlanders of pre-Merschian Greenland, elaborated, after the manner of Callan--the Special Commissioner--so as to bring out the glory and virtue of the work of regeneration. Then in a gush of superlatives the work itself would be described. I knew quite well what was coming, and was temperamentally unable to read more than the first ten lines.

Everything was going wrong. The printers developed one of their sudden crazes for asking idiotic questions. Their messengers came to Evans, Evans sent them round the pitch-pine screen to me. "Mr. Jackson wants to know----"

The fourth of the messengers that I had despatched to Soane returned with the news that Soane would arrive at half-past nine. I sent out in search of the strongest coffee that the city afforded. Soane arrived. He had been ill, he said, very ill. He desired to be fortified with champagne. I produced the coffee.

Soane was the son of an Irish peer. He had magnificent features--a little blurred nowadays--and a remainder of the grand manner. His nose was a marvel of classic workmanship, but the floods of time had reddened and speckled it--not offensively, but ironically; his hair was turning grey, his eyes were bloodshot, his heavy moustache rather ragged. He inspired one with the respect that one feels for a man who has lived and does not care a curse. He had a weird intermittent genius that made it worth Fox's while to put up with his lapses and his brutal snubs.

I produced the coffee and pointed to the sofa of the night before.

"Damn it," he said, "I'm ill, I tell you; I want ..."

"Exactly!" I cut in. "You want a rest, old fellow. Here's Cal's article. We want something special about it. If you don't feel up to it I'll send round to Jenkins."

"Damn Jenkins," he said; "I'm up to it."

"You understand," I said, "you're to write strictly on Callan's lines. Don't insert any information from extraneous sources. And make it as slashing as you like--on those lines."

He grunted in acquiescence. I left him lying on the sofa, drinking the coffee. I had tenderly arranged the lights for him as Fox had arranged them the night before. As I went out to get my dinner I was comfortably aware of him, holding the slippers close to his muddled eyes and philosophically damning the nature of things.

When I returned, Soane, from his sofa, said something that I did not catch--something about Callan and his article.

"Oh, for God's sake," I answered, "don't worry me. Have some more coffee and stick to Cal's line of argument. That's what Fox said. I'm not responsible."

"Deuced queer," Soane muttered. He began to scribble with a pencil. From the tone of his voice I knew that he had reached the precise stage at which something brilliant--the real thing of its kind--might be expected.

Very late Soane finished his leader. He looked up as he wrote the last word.

"I've got it written," he said. "But ... I say, what the deuce is up? It's like being a tall clock with the mainspring breaking, this."

I rang the bell for someone to take the copy down.

"Your metaphor's too much for me, Soane," I said.

"It's appropriate all the way along," he maintained, "if you call me a mainspring. I've been wound up and wound up to write old de Mersch and his Greenland up--and it's been a tight wind, these days, I tell you. Then all of a sudden ..."

A boy appeared and carried off the copy.

"All of a sudden," Soane resumed, "something gives--I suppose something's given--"

-and there's a whirr-rr-rr and the hands fly backwards and old de Mersch and Greenland bump to the bottom, like the weights."

The boom of the great presses was rattling the window frames. Soane got up and walked toward one of the cupboards.

"Dry work," he said; "but the simile's just, isn't it?"

I gave one swift step toward the bell-button beside the desk. The proof of Callan's article, from which Soane had been writing, lay a crumpled white streamer on the brown wood of Fox's desk. I made toward it. As I stretched out my hand the solution slipped into my mind, coming with no more noise than that of a bullet; impinging with all the shock and remaining with all the pain. I had remembered the morning, over there in Paris, when she had told me that she had invited one of de Mersch's lieutenants to betray him by not concealing from Callan the real horrors of the Systeme Groënlandais--flogged, butchered, miserable natives, the famines, the vices, diseases, and the crimes. There came suddenly before my eyes the tall narrow room in my aunt's house, the opening of the door and her entry, followed by that of the woebegone governor of a province--the man who was to show Callan things--with his grating "Cest entendu ..."

I remembered the scene distinctly; her words; her looks; my utter unbelief. I remembered, too, that it had not saved me from a momentary sense of revolt against that inflexible intention of a treachery which was to be another step toward the inheritance of the earth. I had rejected the very idea, and here it had come; it was confronting me with all its meaning and consequences. Callan had been shown things he had not been meant to see, and had written the truth as he had seen it. His article was a small thing in itself, but he had been sent out there with tremendous flourishes of de Mersch's trumpets. He was the man who could be believed. De Mersch's supporters had practically said: "If he condemns us we are indeed damned." And now that the condemnation had come, it meant ruin, as it seemed to me, for everybody I had known, worked for, seen, or heard of, during the last year of my life. It was ruin for Fox, for Churchill, for the ministers, and for the men who talk in railway carriages, for shopkeepers and for the government; it was a menace to the institutions which hold us to the past, that are our guarantees for the future. The safety of everything one respected and believed in was involved in the disclosure of an atrocious fraud, and the disclosure was in my hands. For that night I had the power of the press in my keeping. People were waiting for this pronouncement. De Mersch's last card was his philanthropy; his model state and his happy natives.

The drone of the presses made the floor under my feet quiver, and the whole building vibrated as if the earth itself had trembled. I was alone with my

knowledge. Did she know; had she put the power in my hand? But I was alone, and I was free.

I took up the proof and began to read, slanting the page to the fall of the light. It was a phrenetic indictment, but under the paltry rhetoric of the man there was genuine indignation and pain. There were revolting details of cruelty to the miserable, helpless, and defenceless; there were greed, and self-seeking, stripped naked; but more revolting to see without a mask was that falsehood which had been hiding under the words that for ages had spurred men to noble deeds, to self-sacrifice, to heroism. What was appalling was the sudden perception that all the traditional ideals of honour, glory, conscience, had been committed to the upholding of a gigantic and atrocious fraud. The falsehood had spread stealthily, had eaten into the very heart of creeds and convictions that we lean upon on our passage between the past and the future. The old order of things had to live or perish with a lie. I saw all this with the intensity and clearness of a revelation; I saw it as though I had been asleep through a year of work and dreams, and had awakened to the truth. I saw it all; I saw her intention. What was I to do?

Without my marking its approach emotion was upon me. The fingers that held up the extended slips tattooed one on another through its negligible thickness.

"Pretty thick that," Soane said. He was looking back at me from the cupboard he had opened. "I've rubbed it in, too ... there'll be hats on the green to-morrow." He had his head inside the cupboard, and his voice came to me hollowly. He extracted a large bottle with a gilt-foiled neck.

"Won't it upset the apple cart to-morrow," he said, very loudly; "won't it?"

His voice acted on me as the slight shake upon a phial full of waiting chemicals; crystallised them suddenly with a little click. Everything suddenly grew very clear to me. I suddenly understood that all the tortuous intrigue hinged upon what I did in the next few minutes. It rested with me now to stretch out my hand to that button in the wall or to let the whole world--"the ... the probity ... that sort of thing," she had said--fall to pieces. The drone of the presses continued to make itself felt like the quiver of a suppressed emotion. I might stop them or I might not. It rested with me.

Everybody was in my hands; they were quite small. If I let the thing go on, they would be done for utterly, and the new era would begin.

Soane had got hold of a couple of long-stalked glasses. They clinked together whilst he searched the cupboard for something.

"Eh, what?" he said. "It is pretty strong, isn't it? Ought to shake out some of the supporters, eh? Bill comes on to-morrow ... do for that, I should think." He wanted a corkscrew very badly.

But that was precisely it--it would "shake out some of the supporters," and give Gurnard his patent excuse. Churchill, I knew, would stick to his line, the saner policy. But so many of the men who had stuck to Churchill would fall away now, and Gurnard, of course, would lead them to his own triumph.

It was a criminal verdict. Callan had gone out as a commissioner--with a good deal of drum-beating. And this was his report, this shriek. If it sounded across the house-tops--if I let it--good-by to the saner policy and to Churchill. It did not make any difference that Churchill's was the saner policy, because there was no one in the nation sane enough to see it. They wanted purity in high places, and here was a definite, criminal indictment against de Mersch. And de Mersch would--in a manner of speaking, have to be lynched, policy or no policy.

She wanted this, and in all the earth she was the only desirable thing. If I thwarted her--she would ... what would she do now? I looked at Soane.

"What would happen if I stopped the presses?" I asked. Soane was twisting his corkscrew in the wire of the champagne bottle.

It was fatal; I could see nothing on earth but her. What else was there in the world. Wine? The light of the sun? The wind on the heath? Honour! My God, what was honour to me if I could see nothing but her on earth? Would honour or wine or sun or wind ever give me what she could give? Let them go.

"What would happen if what?" Soane grumbled, "D--n this wire."

"Oh, I was thinking about something," I answered. The wire gave with a little snap and he began to ease the cork. Was I to let the light pass me by for the sake of ... of Fox, for instance, who trusted me? Well, let Fox go. And Churchill and what Churchill stood for; the probity; the greatness and the spirit of the past from which had sprung my conscience and the consciences of the sleeping millions around me--the woman at the poultry show with her farmers and shopkeepers. Let them go too.

Soane put into my hand one of his charged glasses. He seemed to rise out of the infinite, a forgotten shape. I sat down at the desk opposite him.

"Deuced good idea," he said, suddenly, "to stop the confounded presses and spoofoff old Fox. He's up to some devilry. And, by Jove, I'd like to get my knife in him;

Jove, I would. And then chuck up everything and leave for the Sandwich Islands. I'm sick of this life, this dog's life.... One might have made a pile though, if one'd known this smash was coming. But one can't get at the innards of things.--No such luck--no such luck, eh?" I looked at him stupidly; took in his blood-shot eyes and his ruffled grizzling hair. I wondered who he was. "Il s'agissait de...?" I seemed to be back in Paris, I couldn't think of what I had been thinking of. I drank his glass of wine and he filled me another. I drank that too.

Ah yes--even then the thing wasn't settled, even now that I had recognized that Fox and the others were of no account ... What remained was to prove to her that I wasn't a mere chattel, a piece in the game. I was at the very heart of the thing. After all, it was chance that had put me there, the blind chance of all the little things that lead in the inevitable, the future. If, now, I thwarted her, she would ... what would she do? She would have to begin all over again. She wouldn't want to be revenged; she wasn't revengeful. But how if she would never look upon me again?

The thing had reduced itself to a mere matter of policy. Or was it passion?

A clatter of the wheels of heavy carts and of the hoofs of heavy horses on granite struck like hammer blows on my ears, coming from the well of the court-yard below. Soane had finished his bottle and was walking to the cupboard. He paused at the window and stood looking down.

"Strong beggars, those porters," he said; "I couldn't carry that weight of paper--not with my rot on it, let alone Callan's. You'd think it would break down the carts."

I understood that they were loading the carts for the newspaper mails. There was still time to stop them. I got up and went toward the window, very swiftly. I was going to call to them to stop loading. I threw the casement open.

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Of course, I did not stop them. The solution flashed on me with the breath of the raw air. It was ridiculously simple. If I thwarted her, well, she would respect me. But her business in life was the inheritance of the earth, and, however much she might respect me--or by so much the more--she would recognise that I was a force to deflect her from the right line--"a disease for me," she had said.

"What I have to do," I said, "is to show her that ... that I had her in my hands and that I co-operated loyally."

The thing was so simple that I triumphed; triumphed with the full glow of wine, triumphed looking down into that murky court-yard where the lanthorns danced about in the rays of a great arc lamp. The gilt letters scattered all over the windows blazed forth the names of Fox's innumerable ventures. Well, he ... he had been a power, but I triumphed. I had co-operated loyally with the powers of the future, though I wanted no share in the inheritance of the earth. Only, I was going to push into the future. One of the great carts got into motion amidst a shower of sounds that whirled upward round and round the well. The black hood swayed like the shoulders of an elephant as it passed beneath my feet under the arch. It disappeared--it was co-operating too; in a few hours people at the other end of the country--of the world--would be raising their hands. Oh, yes, it was co-operating loyally.

I closed the window. Soane was holding a champagne bottle in one hand. In the other he had a paper knife of Fox's--a metal thing, a Japanese dagger or a Deccan knife. He sliced the neck off the bottle.

"Thought you were going to throw yourself out," he said; "I wouldn't stop you. I'm sick of it ... sick."

"Look at this ... to-night ... this infernal trick of Fox's.... And I helped too.... Why?... I must eat." He paused "... and drink," he added. "But there is starvation for no end of fools in this little move. A few will be losing their good names too.... I don't care, I'm off.... By-the-bye: What is he doing it for? Money? Funk?--You ought to know. You must be in it too. It's not hunger with you. Wonderful what people will do to keep their pet vice going.... Eh?" He swayed a little. "You don't drink--what's your pet vice?"

He looked at me very defiantly, clutching the neck of the empty bottle. His drunken and overbearing glare seemed to force upon me a complicity in his squalid bargain with life, rewarded by a squalid freedom. He was pitiful and odious to my eyes; and somehow in a moment he appeared menacing.

"You can't frighten me," I said, in response to the strange fear he had inspired. "No one can frighten me now." A sense of my inaccessibility was the first taste of an achieved triumph. I had done with fear. The poor devil before me appeared infinitely remote. He was lost; but he was only one of the lost; one of those that I could see already overwhelmed by the rush from the flood-gates opened at my touch. He would be destroyed in good company; swept out of my sight together with the past they had known and with the future they had waited for. But he was odious. "I am done with you," I said.

"Eh; what?... Who wants to frighten?... I wanted to know what's your pet vice...."



Won't tell? You might safely--I'm off.... No.... Want to tell me mine?... No time.... I'm off.... Ask the policeman ... crossing sweeper will do.... I'm going."

"You will have to," I said.

"What.... Dismiss me?... Throw the indispensable Soane overboard like a squeezed lemon?... Would you?... What would Fox say?... Eh? But you can't, my boy--not you. Tell you ... tell you ... can't.... Beforehand with you ... sick of it.... I'm off ... to the Islands--the Islands of the Blest.... I'm going to be an ... no, not an angel like Fox ... an ... oh, a beachcomber. Lie on white sand, in the sun ... blue sky and palm-trees--eh?... S.S. Waikato. I'm off.... Come too ... lark ... dismiss yourself out of all this. Warm sand, warm, mind you ... you won't?" He had an injured expression. "Well, I'm off. See me into the cab, old chap, you're a decent fellow after all ... not one of these beggars who would sell their best friend ... for a little money ... or some woman. Will see the last of me...."

I didn't believe he would reach the South Seas, but I went downstairs and watched him march up the street with a slight stagger under the pallid dawn. I suppose it was the lingering chill of the night that made me shiver. I felt unbounded confidence in the future, there was nothing now between her and me. The echo of my footsteps on the flagstones accompanied me, filling the empty earth with the sound of my progress.