CHAPTER NINETEEN

I walked along, got to my club and upstairs into my room peaceably. A feeling of entire tranquillity had come over me. I rested after a strife which had issued in a victory whose meaning was too great to comprehend and enjoy at once. I only knew that it was great because there seemed nothing more left to do. Everything reposed within me--even conscience, even memory, reposed as in death. I had risen above them, and my thoughts moved serenely as in a new light, as men move in sunshine above the graves of the forgotten dead. I felt like a man at the beginning of a long holiday--an indefinite space of idleness with some great felicity--a felicity too great for words, too great for joy--at the end. Everything was delicious and vague; there were no shapes, no persons. Names flitted through my mind--Fox, Churchill, my aunt; but they were living people seen from above, flitting in the dusk, without individuality; things that moved below me in a valley from which I had emerged. I must have been dreaming of them.

I know I dreamed of her. She alone was distinct among these shapes. She appeared dazzling; resplendent with a splendid calmness, and I braced myself to the shock of love, the love I had known, that all men had known; but greater, transcendental, almost terrible, a fit reward for the sacrifice of a whole past. Suddenly she spoke. I heard a sound like the rustling of a wind through trees, and I felt the shock of an unknown emotion made up of fear and of enthusiasm, as though she had been not a woman but only a voice crying strange, unknown words in inspiring tones, promising and cruel, without any passion of love or hate. I listened. It was like the wind in the trees of a little wood. No hate ... no love. No love. There was a crash as of a falling temple. I was borne to the earth, overwhelmed, crushed by an immensity of ruin and of sorrow. I opened my eyes and saw the sun shining through the window-blinds.

I seem to remember I was surprised at it. I don't know why. Perhaps the lingering effect of the ruin in the dream, which had involved sunshine itself. I liked it though, and lay for a time enjoying the--what shall I say?--usualness of it. The sunshine of yesterday--of to-morrow. It occurred to me that the morning must be far advanced, and I got up briskly, as a man rises to his work. But as soon as I got on my legs I felt as if I had already over-worked myself. In reality there was nothing to do. All my muscles twitched with fatigue. I had experienced the same sensations once after an hour's desperate swimming to save myself from being carried out to sea by the tide.

No. There was nothing to do. I descended the staircase, and an utter sense of aimlessness drove me out through the big doors, which swung behind me without

noise. I turned toward the river, and on the broad embankment the sunshine enveloped me, friendly, familiar, and warm like the care of an old friend. A black dumb barge drifted, clumsy and empty, and the solitary man in it wrestled with the heavy sweep, straining his arms, throwing his face up to the sky at every effort. He knew what he was doing, though it was the river that did his work for him.

His exertions impressed me with the idea that I too had something to do. Certainly I had. One always has. Somehow I could not remember. It was intolerable, and even alarming, this blank, this emptiness of the many hours before night came again, till suddenly, it dawned upon me I had to make some extracts in the British Museum for our "Cromwell." Our Cromwell. There was no Cromwell; he had lived, had worked for the future--and now he had ceased to exist. His future--our past, had come to an end. The barge with the man still straining at the oar had gone out of sight under the arch of the bridge, as through a gate into another world. A bizarre sense of solitude stole upon me, and I turned my back upon the river as empty as my day. Hansoms, broughams, streamed with a continuous muffled roll of wheels and a beat of hoofs. A big dray put in a note of thunder and a clank of chains. I found myself curiously unable to understand what possible purpose remained to keep them in motion. The past that had made them had come to an end, and their future had been devoured by a new conception. And what of Churchill? He, too, had worked for the future; he would live on, but he had already ceased to exist. I had evoked him in this poignant thought and he came not alone. He came with a train of all the vanquished in this stealthy, unseen contest for an immense stake in which I was one of the victors. They crowded upon me. I saw Fox, Polehampton, de Mersch himself, crowds of figures without a name, women with whom I had fancied myself in love, men I had shaken by the hand, Lea's reproachful, ironical face. They were near; near enough to touch; nearer. I did not only see them, I absolutely felt them all. Their tumultuous and silent stir seemed to raise a tumult in my breast.

I sprang suddenly to my feet--a sensation that I had had before, that was not new to me, a remembered fear, had me fast; a remembered voice seemed to speak clearly incomprehensible words that had moved me before. The sheer faces of the enormous buildings near at hand seemed to topple forwards like cliffs in an earthquake, and for an instant I saw beyond them into unknown depths that I had seen into before. It was as if the shadow of annihilation had passed over them beneath the sunshine. Then they returned to rest; motionless, but with a changed aspect.

"This is too absurd," I said to myself. "I am not well." I was certainly unfit for any sort of work. "But I must get through the day somehow." To-morrow ... to-

morrow.... I had a pale vision of her face as it had appeared to me at sunset on the first day I had met her.

I went back to my club--to lunch, of course. I had no appetite, but I was tormented by the idea of an interminable afternoon before me. I sat idly for a long time. Behind my back two men were talking.

"Churchill ... oh, no better than the rest. He only wants to be found out. If I've any nose for that sort of thing, there's something in the air. It's absurd to be told that he knew nothing about it.... You've seen the Hour?" I got up to go away, but suddenly found myself standing by their table.

"You are unjust," I said. They looked up at me together with an immense surprise. I didn't know them and I passed on. But I heard one of them ask:

"Who's that fellow?" ...

"Oh--Etchingham Granger...."

"Is he queer?" the other postulated.

I went slowly down the great staircase. A knot of men was huddled round the tape machine; others came, half trotting, half walking, to peer over heads, under arm-pits.

"What's the matter with that thing?" I asked of one of them.

"Oh, Grogram's up," he said, and passed me. Someone from a point of vantage read out:

"The Leader of the House (Sir C. Grogram, Devonport) said that...." The words came haltingly to my ears as the man's voice followed the jerks of the little instrument "... the Government obviously could not ... alter its policy at ... eleventh hour ... at dictates of ... quite irresponsible person in one of ... the daily ... papers."

I was wondering whether it was Soane or Callan who was poor old Grogram's "quite irresponsible person," when I caught the sound of Gurnard's name. I turned irritably away. I didn't want to hear that fool read out the words of that.... It was like the warning croak of a raven in an old ballad.

I began desultorily to descend to the smoking-room. In the Cimmerian gloom of the stairway the voice of a pursuer hailed me.

"I say, Granger! I say, Granger!"

I looked back. The man was one of the rats of the lower journalism, large-boned, rubicund, asthmatic; a mass of flesh that might, to the advantage of his country and himself, have served as a cavalry trooper. He puffed stertorously down towards me.

"I say, I say," his breath came rattling and wheezing. "What's up at the Hour?"

"I'm sure I don't know," I answered curtly.

"They said you took it yesterday. You've been playing the very devil, haven't you? But I suppose it was not off your own bat?"

"Oh, I never play off my own bat," I answered.

"Of course I don't want to intrude," he said again. In the gloom I was beginning to discern the workings of the tortured apoplectic face. "But, I say, what's de Mersch's little game?"

"You'd better ask him," I answered. It was incredibly hateful, this satyr's mask in the dim light.

"He's not in London," it answered, with a wink of the creased eyelids, "but, I suppose, now, Fox and de Mersch haven't had a row, now, have they?"

I did not answer. The thing was wearily hateful, and this was only the beginning. Hundreds more would be asking the same question in a few minutes.

The head wagged on the mountainous shoulders.

"Looks fishy," he said. I recognised that, to force words from me, he was threatening a kind of blackmail. Another voice began to call from the top of the stairs--

"I say, Granger! I say, Granger...."

I pushed the folding-doors apart and went slowly down the gloomy room. I heard the doors swing again, and footsteps patter on the matting behind me. I did not turn; the man came round me and looked at my face. It was Polehampton. There were tears in his eyes.

"I say," he said, "I say, what does it mean; what does it mean?" It was very difficult for me to look at him. "I tell you...." he began again. He had the dictatorial air of a very small, quite hopeless man, a man mystified by a blow of unknown provenance. "I tell you...." he began again.

"But what has it to do with me?" I said roughly.

"Oh, but you ... you advised me to buy." He had become supplicatory. "Didn't you, now?... Didn't you.... You said, you remember ... that...." I didn't answer the man. What had I got to say? He remained looking intently at me, as if it were of the greatest moment to him that I should make the acknowledgment and share the blame--as if it would take an immense load from his shoulders. I couldn't do it; I hated him.

"Didn't you," he began categorically; "didn't you advise me to buy those debentures of de Mersch's?" I did not answer.

"What does it all mean?" he said again. "If this bill doesn't get through, I tell you I shall be ruined. And they say that Mr. Gurnard is going to smash it. They are all saying it, up there; and that you--you on the Hour ... are ... are responsible." He took out a handkerchief and began to blow his nose. I didn't say a single word.

"But what's to be done?" he started again; "what's to be done.... I tell you.... My daughter, you know, she's very brave, she said to me this morning she could work; but she couldn't, you know; she's not been brought up to that sort of thing ... not even typewriting ... and so ... we're all ruined ... everyone of us. And I've more than fifty hands, counting Mr. Lea, and they'll all have to go. It's horrible.... I trusted you, Granger, you know; I trusted you, and they say up there that you...." I turned away from him. I couldn't bear to see the bewildered fear in his eyes. "So many of us," he began again, "everyone I know.... I told them to buy and ... But you might have let us know, Granger, you might have. Think of my poor daughter."

I wanted to say something to the man, wanted to horribly; but there wasn't anything to say--not a word. I was sorry. I took up a paper that sprawled on one of the purple ottomans. I stood with my back to this haggard man and pretended to read.

I noticed incredulously that I was swaying on my legs. I looked round me. Two old men were asleep in armchairs under the gloomy windows. One had his head thrown back, the other was crumpled forward into himself; his frail, white hand just touched the floor. A little further off two young men were talking; they had the air of conspirators over their empty coffee cups.

I was conscious that Polehampton had left me, that he had gone from behind me; but I don't think I was conscious of the passage of time. God knows how long I stood there. Now and then I saw Polehampton's face before my eyes, with the panic-stricken eyes, the ruffled hair, the lines of tears seaming the cheeks, seeming to look out at me from the crumple of the paper that I held. I knew too, that there were faces like that everywhere; everywhere, faces of panic-stricken little people of no more account than the dead in graveyards, just the material to make graveyards, nothing more; little people of absolutely no use but just to suffer horribly from this blow coming upon them from nowhere. It had never occurred to me at the time that their inheritance had passed to me ... to us. And yet, I began to wonder stupidly, what was the difference between me to-day and me yesterday. There wasn't any, not any at all. Only to-day I had nothing more to do.

The doors at the end of the room flew open, as if burst by a great outcry penetrating from without, and a man appeared running up the room--one of those men who bear news eternally, who catch the distant clamour and carry it into quiet streets. Why did he disturb me? Did I want to hear his news? I wanted to think of Churchill; to think of how to explain.... The man was running up the room.

"I say ... I say, you beggars...."

I was beginning to wonder how it was that I felt such an absolute conviction of being alone, and it was then, I believe, that in this solitude that had descended upon my soul I seemed to see the shape of an approaching Nemesis. It is permitted to no man to break with his past, with the past of his kind, and to throw away the treasure of his future. I began to suspect I had gained nothing; I began to understand that even such a catastrophe was possible. I sat down in the nearest chair. Then my fear passed away. The room was filling; it hummed with excited voices. "Churchill! No better than the others," I heard somebody saying. Two men had stopped talking. They were middle-aged, a little gray, and ruddy. The face of one was angry, and of the other sad. "He wanted only to be found out. What a fall in the mud." "No matter," said the other, "one is made a little sad. He stood for everything I had been pinning my faith to." They passed on. A brazen voice bellowed in the distance. "The greatest fall of any minister that ever was." A tall, heavy journalist in a white waistcoat was the centre of a group that turned slowly upon itself, gathering bulk. "Done for--stood up to the last. I saw him get into his brougham. The police had a job.... There's quite a riot down there.... Pale as a ghost. Gurnard? Gurnard magnificent. Very cool and in his best form. Threw them over without as much as a wink. Outraged conscience speech. Magnificent. Why it's the chance of his life." ... And then for a time the voices and the faces

seemed to pass away and die out. I had dropped my paper, and as I stooped to pick it up the voices returned.

--"Granger ... Etchingham Granger.... Sister is going to marry Gurnard."

I got on to my hands and knees to pick up the paper, of course. What I did not understand was where the water came from. Otherwise it was pretty clear. Somebody seemed to be in a fit. No, he wasn't drunk; look at his teeth. What did they want to look at his teeth for; was he a horse?

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It must have been I that was in the fit. There were a lot of men round me, the front row on their knees--holding me, some of them. A man in a red coat and plush breeches--a waiter--was holding a glass of water; another had a small bottle. They were talking about me under their breaths. At one end of the horseshoe someone said:

"He's the man who...." Then he caught my eye. He lowered his voice, and the abominable whisper ran round among the heads. It was easy to guess:

"the man who was got at." I was to be that for the rest of my life. I was to be famous at last. There came the desire to be out of it.

I struggled to my feet.

Someone said: "Feel better now?" I answered: "I--oh, I've got to go and see...."

It was rather difficult to speak distinctly; my tongue got in the way. But I strove to impress the fool with the idea that I had affairs that must be attended to--that I had private affairs.

"You aren't fit. Let me...."

I pushed him roughly aside--what business was it of his? I slunk hastily out of the room. The others remained. I knew what they were going to do--to talk things over, to gabble about "the man who...."

It was treacherous walking, that tessellated pavement in the hall. Someone said: "Hullo, Granger," as I passed. I took no notice.

Where did I wish to go to? There was no one who could minister to me; the whole world had resolved itself into a vast solitary city of closed doors. I had no friend--

no one. But I must go somewhere, must hide somewhere, must speak to someone. I mumbled the address of Fox to a cabman. Some idea of expiation must have been in my mind; some idea of seeing the thing through, mingled with that necessity for talking to someone--anyone.

I was afraid too; not of Fox's rage; not even of anything that he could do--but of the sight of his despair. He had become a tragic figure.

I reached his flat and I had said: "It is I," and again, "It is I," and he had not stirred. He was lying on the sofa under a rug, motionless as a corpse. I had paced up and down the room. I remember that the pile of the carpet was so long that it was impossible to walk upon it easily. Everything else in the room was conceived in an exuberance of luxury that now had something of the macabre in it. It was that now--before, it had been unclean. There was a great bed whose lines suggested sinking softness, a glaring yellow satin coverlet, vast, like a sea. The walls were covered with yellow satin, the windows draped with lace worth a king's ransom, the light was softened, the air dead, the sounds hung slumbrously. And, in the centre of it, that motionless body. It stirred, pivoted on some central axis beneath the rug, and faced me sitting. There was no look of inquiry in the bloodshot eyes--they turned dully upon me, topaz-coloured in a blood-red setting. There was no expression in the suffused face.

"You want?" he said, in a voice that was august by dint of hopelessness.

"I want to explain," I said. I had no idea that this was what I had come for.

He answered only: "You!" He had the air of one speaking to something infinitely unimportant. It was as if I had no inkling of the real issue.

With a bravery of desperation I began to explain that I hadn't stumbled into the thing; that I had acted open-eyed; for my own ends ... "My own ends." I repeated it several times. I wanted him to understand, and I did explain. I kept nothing from him; neither her coming, nor her words, nor my feelings. I had gone in with my eyes open.

For the first time Fox looked at me as if I were a sentient being. "Oh, you know that much," he said listlessly.

"It's no disgrace to have gone under to her," I said; "we had to." His despair seemed to link him into one "we" with myself. I wanted to put heart into him. I don't know why.

He didn't look at me again.

"Oh, that," he said dully, "I--I understand who you mean.... If I had known before I might have done something. But she came of a higher plane." He seemed to be talking to himself. The half-forgotten horror grew large; I remembered that she had said that Fox, like herself, was one of a race apart, that was to supersede us--Dimensionists. And, when I looked at him now, it was plain to me that he was of a race different to my own, just as he had always seemed different from any other man. He had had a different tone in triumph; he was different now, in his despair. He went on: "I might have managed Gurnard alone, but I never thought of her coming. You see one does one's best, but, somehow, here one grows rather blind. I ought to have stuck to Gurnard, of course; never to have broken with him. We ought all to have kept together.--But I kept my end up as long as he was alone."

He went on talking in an expressionless monotone, perhaps to himself, perhaps to me. I listened as one listens to unmeaning sounds--to that of a distant train at night. He was looking at the floor, his mouth moving mechanically. He sat perfectly square, one hand on either knee, his back bowed out, his head drooping forward. It was as if there were no more muscular force in the whole man--as if he were one of those ancient things one sees sunning themselves on benches by the walls of workhouses.

"But," I said angrily, "it's not all over, you can make a fight for it still."

"You don't seem to understand," he answered, "it is all over--the whole thing. I ran Churchill and his conscious rectitude gang for all they were worth.... Well, I liked them, I was a fool to give way to pity.--But I did.--One grows weak among people like you. Of course I knew that their day was over.... And it's all over," he said again after a long pause.

"And what will you do?" I asked, half hysterically.

"I don't just know," he answered; "we've none of us gone under before. There haven't been enough really to clash until she came."

The dead tranquillity of his manner was overwhelming; there was nothing to be said. I was in the presence of a man who was not as I was, whose standard of values, absolute to himself, was not to be measured by any of mine.

"I suppose I shall cut my throat," he began again.

I noticed with impersonal astonishment that the length of my right side was covered with the dust of a floor. In my restless motions I came opposite the

fireplace. Above it hung a number of tiny, jewelled frames, containing daubs of an astonishing lewdness. The riddle grew painful. What kind of a being could conceive this impossibly barbaric room, could enshrine those impossibly crude designs, and then fold his hands? I turned fiercely upon him. "But you are rich enough to enjoy life," I said.

"What's that?" he asked wearily.

"In the name of God," I shouted, "what do you work for--what have you been plotting and plotting for, if not to enjoy your life at the last?" He made a small indefinite motion of ignorance, as if I had propounded to him a problem that he could not solve, that he did not think worth the solving.

It came to me as the confirmation of a suspicion--that motion. They had no joy, these people who were to supersede us; their clear-sightedness did nothing more for them than just that enabling them to spread desolation among us and take our places. It had been in her manner all along, she was like Fate; like the abominable Fate that desolates the whole length of our lives; that leaves of our hopes, of our plans, nothing but a hideous jumble of fragments like those of statues, smashed by hammers; the senseless, inscrutable, joyless Fate that we hate, and that debases us forever and ever. She had been all that to me ... and to how many more?

"I used to be a decent personality," I vociferated at him. "Do you hear--decent. I could look a man in the face. And you cannot even enjoy. What do you come for? What do you live for? What is at the end of it all?"

"Ah, if I knew ..." he answered, negligently.