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Chapter 16

The two men who had walked up together arm in arm from Downing Street, stood for several moments in Pall Mall before separating. The pressman who was passing yearned for the sunlight in his camera. One of the greatest financiers of the city in close confabulation with Mr. Gordon Jones, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was an interesting, almost an historical sight.

"It is a source of the greatest satisfaction to me, Sir Alfred," the Minister was saying earnestly, "to find such royal and whole-hearted support in the city. I am afraid," he went on, with a little twinkle in his eyes, "that there are times when I have scarcely been popular in financial circles."

"We have hated you like poison," the other assured him, with emphasis.

"The capitalists must always hate the man who tries to make wealth pay its just share in the support of the Empire," Mr. Gordon Jones remarked. "The more one has, the less one likes to part with it. However, those days have passed. You bankers have made my task easier at every turn. You have met me in every possible way. To you personally, Sir Alfred, I feel that some day I shall have to express my thanks--my thanks and the thanks of the nation--in a more tangible form."

"You are very kind," the banker acknowledged. "Times like this change everything. We remember only that we are Englishmen."

The Minister hailed a passing taxi and disappeared. The banker strolled slowly along Pall Mall and passed through the portals of an august-looking club. The hall-porter relieved him of his coat and hat with great deference. As he was crossing the hall, after having exchanged greetings with several friends, he came face to face with Surgeon-Major Thomson. The latter paused.

"I am afraid you don't remember me, Sir Alfred," he said, "but I have been hoping for an opportunity of thanking you personally for the six ambulance cars you have endowed. I am Surgeon-Major Thomson, chief inspector of Field Hospitals."

Sir Alfred held out his hand affably.

"I remember you perfectly, Major," he declared. "I am very glad that my gift is acceptable. Anything one can do to lessen the suffering of those who are fighting our battle, is almost a charge upon our means."

"It is very fortunate for us that you feel like that," the other replied. "Thank you once more, sir."

The two men separated. Sir Alfred turned to the hall-porter.

"I am expecting my nephew in to dine," he said,--"Captain Granet. Bring him into the smoking-room, will you, directly he arrives."

"Certainly, sir!"

Sir Alfred passed on across the marble hall. Thomson, whose hand had been upon his hat, replaced it upon the peg. He looked after the great banker and stood for a moment deep in thought. Then he addressed the hall-porter.

"By-the-bye, Charles," he inquired, "if you ask a non-member to dinner, you have to dine in the strangers' room, I suppose?"

"Certainly, sir," the man replied. "It is just at the back of the general dining-room."

"I suppose an ordinary member couldn't dine in there alone?"

"It is not customary, sir."

Surgeon-Major Thomson made his way to the telephone booth. When he emerged, he interviewed the head-waiter.

"Keep a small table for me in the strangers' room," he ordered. "I shall require dinner for two."

"At what time, sir?"

Major Thomson seemed for a moment deaf. He was looking through the open door of the smoking-room to where Sir Alfred was deep in the pages of a review.

"Are there many people dining there to-night?" he asked.

"Sir Alfred has a guest at eight o'clock, sir," the man replied. "There are several others, I think, but they have not ordered tables specially."

"At a quarter past eight, if you please. I shall be in the billiard-room, Charles," he added, turning to the hall-porter.

Sir Alfred wearied soon of the pages of his review and leaned back in his chair, his hands folded in front of him, gazing through the window at the opposite side of the way. A good many people, passing backwards and forwards, glanced at him curiously. For thirty years his had been something like a household name in the city. He had been responsible, he and the great firm of which he was the head, for international finance conducted on the soundest principles, finance which scorned speculation, finance which rolled before it the great snowball of automatically accumulated wealth. His father had been given the baronetcy which he now enjoyed, and which, as he knew very

well, might at any moment be transferred into a peerage. He was a short, rather thick-set man, with firm jaws and keen blue eyes, carefully dressed in somewhat old-fashioned style, with horn-rimmed eyeglass hung about his neck with a black ribbon. His hair was a little close-cropped and stubbly. No one could have called him handsome, no one could have found him undistinguished. Even without the knowledge of his millions, people who glanced at him recognised the atmosphere of power.

"Wonder what old Anselman's thinking about," one man asked another in an opposite corner.

"Money bags," was the prompt reply. "The man thinks money, he dreams money, he lives money. He lives like a prince but he has no pleasures. >From ten in the morning till two, he sits in his office in Lombard Street, and the pulse of the city beats differently in his absence."

"I wonder!" the other murmured.

Other people had wondered, too. Still the keen blue eyes looked across through the misty atmosphere at the grey building opposite. Men and women passed before him in a constant, unseen procession. No one came and spoke to him, no one interfered with his meditations. The two men who had been discussing him passed out of the room presently one of them glanced backwards in his direction.

"After all, I suppose," he observed, as he passed down the hall, "there is something great about wealth or else one wouldn't believe that old Anselman there was thinking of his money-bags. Why, here's Granet. Good fellow! I'd no idea you'd joined this august company of old fogies."

Granet smiled as he shook hands.

"I haven't," he explained. "You have to be a millionaire, don't you, and a great political bug, before they'd let you in? No place for poor soldiers! I have to be content with the Rag."

"Poor devil!" his friend remarked sympathetically.--"best cooking, best wines in London. These Service men look after themselves all right. What are you doing here, anyhow, Granet?"

"I'm dining with my uncle," Granet replied, quickly.

"Sir Alfred's in there, waiting for you," his friend told him, indicating the door.--"he has been sitting at the window watching for you, in fact. So long!"

The two men passed out and Granet was ushered into the smoking-room. Sir Alfred came back from his reverie and was greeted by his nephew cordially. The two men sat by the window for a few moments in silence.

"An aperitif?" Sir Alfred suggested. "Capital!"

They drank mixed vermouth. Sir Alfred picked up an evening paper from his side.

"Any news?" he asked.

"Nothing fresh," Granet replied. "The whole world's excited about this submarine affair. Looks as though we'd got the measure of those Johnnies, doesn't it?"

"It does indeed," Sir Alfred agreed. "Two submarines, one after the other, two of the latest class, too, destroyed within a few miles and without a word of explanation. No wonder every one's excited about it!"

"They're fearfully bucked at the Admiralty, I believe," Granet remarked. "Of course, they'll pretend that they had this new dodge or whatever it may be, up their sleeves all the time."

Sir Alfred nodded.

"Well," he said, "come in to dinner, young fellow. You shall entertain me with tales of your adventures whilst you compare our cuisine here with your own commissariat."

They passed on into the strangers' dining-room, a small but cheerful apartment opening out of the general dining-room. The head-waiter ushered them unctuously to a small table set in the far corner of the room.

"I have obeyed your wishes, Sir Alfred," he announced, as they seated themselves. "No one else will be dining anywhere near you."

Sir Alfred nodded.

"Knowing how modest you soldiers are in talking of your exploits," he remarked to Granet, "I have pleaded for seclusion. Here, in the intervals of our being served with dinner, you can spin me yarns of the Front. The whole thing fascinates me. I want to hear the story of your escape."

They seated themselves, and Sir Alfred studied the menu for a moment through his eyeglass. After the service of the soup they were alone. He leaned a little across the table.

"Ronnie," he said, "I thought it was better to ask you here than to have you down at the city."

Granet nodded.

"This seems all right," he admitted, glancing around. "Well, one part of the great work is finished. I have lived for eleven days not quite sure when I wasn't going to be stood up with my back to the light at the Tower. Now it's over."

"You've seen Pailleton?"

"Seen him, impressed him, given him the document. He has his plans all made."

"Good! Very good!"

Sir Alfred ate soup for several moments as though it were the best soup on earth and nothing else was worth consideration. Then he laid down his spoon.

"Magnificent!" he said. "Now listen--these submarines. There was a Taube close at hand and I can tell you something which the Admiralty here are keeping dark, with their tongues in their cheeks. Both those submarines were sunk under water."

"I guessed it," Granet replied coolly. "I not only guessed it but I came very near the key of the whole thing."

A waiter appeared with the next course, followed by the wine steward, carrying champagne. Sir Alfred nodded approvingly.

"Just four minutes in the ice," he instructed, "not longer. What you tell me about the champagne country is, I must confess, a relief," he added, turning to Granet. "It may not affect us quite so much, but personally I believe that the whole world is happier and better when champagne is cheap. It is the bottled gaiety of the nation. A nation of ginger ale drinkers would be doomed before they reached the second generation. 1900 Pommery, this, Ronnie, and I drink your health. If I may be allowed one moment's sentiment," he added, raising his glass, "let me say that I drink your health from the bottom of my hear, with all the admiration which a man of my age feels for you younger fellows who are fighting for us and our country."

They drank the toast in silence. In a moment or two they were alone again.

"Go on, Ronnie," his uncle said. "I am interested."

"I met Conyers the other day," Granet proceeded, "the man who commands the 'Scorpion.' I managed to get an invitation down to Portsmouth to have lunch with him on his ship. I went down with his sister and the young lady he is engaged to marry. On deck there was a structure of some sort covered up. I tried to make inquiries about it but they headed me off pretty quick. There was even a sentry standing on guard before it--wouldn't let me even feel the shape of it. However, I hadn't given up hope when there came a wireless--no guests to be allowed on board. Conyers had to pack us all off back to the hotel, without stopping even for lunch. From the hotel I got a telescope and I saw a pinnacle with half-a-dozen workmen, and a pilot who was evidently an engineer, land on board. They seemed to be completing the adjustments of some new piece of mechanism. Then they steamed away out of sight of the land."

"A busy life, yours, Ronnie," Sir Alfred remarked, after a moment's pause. "What about it now? I've had two urgent messages from Berlin this morning."

"It's pretty difficult," Granet acknowledged. "The Scorpion's out in the Channel or the North Sea. No getting at her. And I don't believe there's another destroyer yet fitted with this apparatus, whatever it may be."

"They must be making them somewhere, though," Sir Alfred remarked.

His nephew nodded.

"To think," he muttered, "that we've two hundred men spread out at Tyneside, Woolwich and Portsmouth, and not one of them go on to this! A nation of spies, indeed! They're mugs, uncle."

"Not altogether that," the banker replied. "We have some reports, although they don't go far enough. I can put you on to the track of the thing. The apparatus you saw is something in the nature of an inverted telescope, with various extraordinary lenses treated by a new process. You can see forty feet down under the surface of the water for a distance of a mile, and we believe that attached to the same apparatus is an instrument which brings any moving object within the range of what they call a deep-water gun."

"Did that come from reports?" Granet asked eagerly.

"It did," Sir Alfred said. "Further than that, the main part of the instrument is being made under the supervision of Sir Meyville Worth, in a large workshop erected on his estate in a village near Brancaster in Norfolk."

"I take it back," Granet remarked.

"The plans of the instrument should be worth a hundred thousand pounds," Sir Alfred continued calmly. "If that is impossible, the destruction of the little plant would be the next consideration."

"Do I come in here?" Granet inquired.

"You do, Ronnie," his uncle replied. "The name of the village where Sir Meyville Worth lives is Market Burnham, which, as I think I told you, is within a few miles of Brancaster. Geoffrey, at my instigation, has arranged a harmless little golf party to go to Brancaster the day after to-morrow. You will accompany them. In the meantime, Miss Worth, Sir Meyville Worth's only daughter, is staying in London until Wednesday. She is lunching with your aunt at the Ritz to-morrow. I have made some other arrangements in connection with your visit to Norfolk, which will keep for the present. I see that some strangers have entered the room. Tell me exactly how you came by the wound in your foot?"

Granet turned a little around. There was a queer change in his face as he looked back at his uncle.

"Do you know the man at that corner table?" he asked.

Sir Alfred glanced across the room.

"Very slightly. I spoke to him an hour ago. He thanked me for some ambulances. He is the chief inspector of hospitals, I think--Major Thomson, his name is."

"Did you happen to say that I was dining with you?"

Sir Alfred reflected for a moment.

"I believe that I did mention it," he admitted. "Why?"

Granet struggled for a moment with an idea and rejected it. He drained his glass and leaned across the table.

"He's a dull enough person really," he remarked, a little under his breath, "but I seem to be always running up against him. Once or twice he's given me rather a start."

Sir Alfred smiled. He called the wine steward and pointed to his nephew's glass.

"The best thing in the world," he observed drily, as he watched the wine being poured out, "for presentiments."