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## Chapter 11

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Olive Moreton gave a little start as the long, grey, racing car came noiselessly to a standstill by the side of the kerbstone. Captain Granet raised his hat and leaned from the driving seat towards her.

"Hope I didn't frighten you, Miss Moreton?"

"Not at all," she replied. "What a perfectly lovely car!"

He assented eagerly.

"Isn't she! My uncle's present to me to pass away the time until I can do some more soldiering. They only brought it round to me early this morning. Can I take you anywhere?"

"I was just going to see Geraldine Conyers," she began.

"Do you know, I guessed that," he remarked, leaning on one side and opening the door. "Do let me take you. I haven't had a passenger yet."

She stepped in at once.

"As a matter of fact," she told him, "I was looking for a taxicab. I have had a telegram from Ralph. He wants us to go down to Portsmouth by the first train we can catch this morning. He says that if we can get down there in time to have lunch at two o'clock, he can show us over the 'Scorpion.' After to-day she will be closed to visitors, even his own relations. I was just going to see if Geraldine could come."

Granet was thoughtful for a moment. He glanced at the little clock on the dashboard opposite to him.

"I tell you what," he suggested, "why not let me motor you and Miss Conyers down? I don't believe there's another fast train before one o'clock, and we'd get down in a couple of hours, easily. It's just what I'm longing for, a good stretch into the country."

"I should love it," the girl exclaimed, "and I should think Geraldine would. Will you wait while I run in and see her?"

"Of course," Granet replied. "Here we are, and there's Miss Conyers at the window. You go in and talk her over and I'll just see that we've got lots of petrol. I'll have you down there within two hours, all right, if we can get away before the roads are crowded."

She hurried into the house. Geraldine met her on the threshold and they talked together for a few moments. Then Olive reappeared, her face beaming.

"Geraldine would simply love it," she announced. "She will be here in five minutes. Could we just stop at my house for a motor-coat?"

"Certainly!" Granet agreed, glancing at his watch. "This is absolutely ripping! We shall be down there by one o'clock. Why is this to be Conyers' last day for entertaining?"

"I don't know," she answered indifferently. "Some Admiralty regulation, I suppose."

He sighed.

"After all," he declared, "I am not sure whether I chose the right profession. There is so much that is mysterious about the Navy. They are always inventing something or trying something new."

Geraldine came down the steps, waving her hand.

"This is the most delightful ideal!" she exclaimed, as Granet held the door open. "Do you really mean that you are going to take us down to Portsmouth and come and see Ralph?"

"I am not going to worry your brother," he answered, smiling, "but I am going to take you down to Portsmouth, if I may. We shall be there long before you could get there by train, and--well, what do you think of my new toy?"

"Simply wonderful," Geraldine declared. "Olive told me that your uncle had just given it you. What a lucky person you are, Captain Granet!"

He laughed a little shortly as they glided off.

"Do you think so?" he answered. "Well, I am lucky in my uncle, at any rate. He is one of those few people who have a great deal of money and don't mind spending it. I was getting bored to death with my game leg and arm, and certainly this makes one forget both of them. Six cylinders, you see, Miss Conyers, and I wouldn't like to tell you what we can touch if we were pressed."

"You won't frighten us," Geraldine assured him.

Granet glanced once more at the clock in front of him.

"For a time," he remarked, "I am your chauffeur. I just want to see what she'll do--to experiment a little."

>From that point conversation became scanty. The girls leaned back in their seats. Granet sat bolt upright, with his eyes fixed upon the road. Shortly before one o'clock they entered Portsmouth.

"The most wonderful ride I ever had in my life!" Geraldine exclaimed.

"Marvelous!" Olive echoed. "Captain Granet, Ralph promised that there should be a pinnacle at number seven dock from one until three."

Granet pointed with his finger.

"Number seven dock is there," he said, "and there's the pinnacle. I shall go back to the hotel for lunch and wait for you there."

"You will do nothing of the sort," Geraldine insisted. "Ralph would be furious if you didn't come with us."

"Of course!" Olive interposed. "How could you think of anything so ridiculous! It's entirely owing to you that we were able to get here."

Captain Granet looked for a moment doubtful.

"You see, just now," he explained, "I know the regulations for visiting ships in commission are very strict. Perhaps an extra visitor might embarrass your brother."

"How can you be so absurd!" Geraldine protested. "You--a soldier! Why, of course he'd be delighted to have you."

Granet swung the car around into the archway of a hotel exactly opposite the dock.

"All right," he agreed. "We'll leave the car here. Of course, I'd like to come all right."

They crossed the cobbled street and made their way to the dock. The pinnacle was waiting for them and in a very few minutes they were on their way across the harbour. The "Scorpion" was lying well away from other craft, her four squat funnels emitting faint wreaths of smoke. She rode very low in the water and her appearance was certainly menacing.

"Personally," Geraldine observed, leaning a little forward to look at her, "I think a destroyer is one of the most vicious, the most hideous things I ever saw. I do hope that Ralph will be quick and get a cruiser."

"Is that the Scorpion just ahead of us?" Granet asked.

Geraldine nodded.

"Did you ever see anything so ugly? She looks as though she would spit out death from every little crevice."

"She's a fine boat," Granet muttered. "What did your brother say she could do?"

"Thirty-nine knots," Geraldine replied. "It seems wonderful, doesn't it?"

The officer in charge of the pinnacle smiled.

"Our speeds are only nominal, any way," he remarked. "If our chief engineer there had the proper message, there's none of us would like to say what he could get out of those new engines."

He turned and shouted an order. In a moment or two they swung around and drew up by the side of the vessel. Ralph waved his hand to them from the top of the gangway.

"Well done, you people!" he exclaimed. "Hullo Granet! Have you brought the girls down?"

"In the most wonderful racing car you ever saw!" Geraldine told him, as they climbed up the gangway. "We shouldn't have been here for hours if we had waited for the train."

"I met Captain Granet this morning by accident," Olive explained, as she stepped on deck, "and he insisted on bringing us down."

"I hope I'm not in the way at all?" Granet asked anxiously. "If I am, you have only to say the word and put me on shore, and I'll wait, with pleasure, until the young ladies come off. I have a lot of pals down here, too, I could look up."

"Don't be silly, Conyers replied. "Our dear old lady friend Thomson isn't here to worry so I think we can make you free of the ship. Come along down and try a cocktail. Mind your heads. We're not on a battleship, you know. You will find my quarters a little cramped, I'm afraid."

They drank cocktails cheerfully, and afterwards Geraldine exclaimed, taking a long breath. "If Olive weren't so fearfully in love, she'd be suffocated."

Granet paused and looked before him with a puzzled frown.

"What in heaven's name is this?"

Exactly opposite to them was an erection of light framework, obviously built around some hidden object for purposes of concealment. A Marine was standing on guard before it, with drawn cutlass. Granet was in the act of addressing him when an officer ran lightly down the fore part of the ship, and saluted.

"Very sorry, sir," he said, "but would you mind keeping to the other side? This deck is closed, for the present."

"What on earth have you got there?" Granet asked good-humouredly,--"that is if it's anything a landsman may know about?"

The young officer piloted them across to the other side.

"It's just a little something we are not permitted to talk about just now," he replied. "I didn't know the commander expected any visitors to-day or we should have had it roped off. Anything I can show you on this deck?" he inquired politely.

"Nothing at all, thanks," Geraldine assured him. "We'll just stroll about for a little time."

They leaned over the rail together. The young officer saluted and withdrew. A freshening breeze blew in their faces and the sunshine danced upon the foam-flecked sea. The harbour was lively with small craft, an aeroplane was circling overhead, and out in the Roads several warships were lying anchored.

"I was in luck this morning," Granet asserted.

"So were we," Geraldine replied. "I never enjoyed motoring more. Your new car is wonderful."

"She is a beauty, isn't she?" Granet assented enthusiastically. "What she could touch upon fourth speed I wouldn't dare to say. We were going over sixty plenty of times this morning, and yet one scarcely noticed it. You see, she's so beautifully hung."

"You are fortunate," she remarked, "to have an appreciative uncle."

"He is rather a brick," Granet acknowledged. "He's done me awfully well all my life."

She nodded.

"You really are rather to be envied, aren't you, Captain Granet? You have most of the things a man wants. You've had your opportunity, too of doing just the finest things a man can, and you've done them."

He looked gloomily out seawards.

"I am lucky in one way," he admitted. "In others I am not so sure."

She kept her head turned from him. Somehow or other, she divined quite well what was in his mind. She tried to think of something to say, something to dispel the seriousness which she felt to be in the atmosphere, but words failed her. It was he who broke the silence.

"May I ask you a question, Miss Conyers?"

A question? Why not?"

"Are you really engaged to Major Thomson?"

She did not answer him at once. She still kept her eyes resolutely turned away from his. When at last she spoke, her voice was scarcely raised above a whisper.

"Certainly I am," she assented.

He leaned a little closer towards her. His voice sounded to her very deep and firm. It was the voice of a man immensely in earnest.

"I am going to be an awful rotter," he said. "I suppose I ought to take your answer to my question as final. I won't that's all. He came along first but that isn't everything. It's a fair fight between him and me. He hates me and takes no pains to hide it. He hates me because I care for you--you know that. I couldn't keep it to myself even if I would."

She drew a little away but he forced her to look at him. There was something else besides appeal in her eyes.

"You've been the victim of a mistake," he insisted, his hand resting upon hers. "I don't believe that you really care for him at all. He doesn't seem the right sort for you, he's so much older and graver. You mustn't be angry. You must forgive me, please, if I have said more than I ought--if I say more now--because I am going to tell you, now that we are alone together for a moment, that I love you."

She turned upon him a little indignantly, though the distress in her face was still apparent.

"Captain Granet!" she exclaimed. "You should not say that! You have no right--no right at all."

"On the contrary, I have every right, he answered doggedly. "It isn't as though Thomson were my friend. He hates me and I dislike him. Every man has a right to do his best to win the girl he cares for. It's the first time I've felt anything of this sort. I've never wanted the big things before from any woman. And now--"

She turned impetuously away from him. Over their head an electric message was sparkling and crackling. She stood looking up, her hand outstretched as though to keep him away.

"I cannot listen any more," she declared. "If you say another word I shall go below."

He remained for a moment gloomily silent. A young officer stepped out of the wireless room and saluted Geraldine.

"Very sorry for you people, Miss Conyers," he announced, "but I am afraid we'll have to put you on shore. We've an urgent message here from the flag-ship to clear off all guests."

"But we haven't had lunch yet!" Geraldine protested.

Conyers suddenly made his appearance in the gangway, followed by Olive.

"What's the message, Howard?" he inquired.

The officer saluted and handed over a folded piece of paper. Conyers read it with a frown and stepped at once out on to the deck. He gave a few orders, then he turned

back to his guests.

"Gels," he explained, "and you, Granet, I'm frightfully sorry but I can't keep you here another second. I have ordered the pinnacle round. You must get on shore and have lunch at the 'Ship.' I'll come along as soon as I can. Frightfully sorry, Granet, but I needn't apologise to you, need I? War's war, you know and this is a matter of urgency."

"You're not going out this tide?" Geraldine demanded breathlessly.

Conyers shook his head.

"It isn't that," he replied. "We've got some engineers coming over to do some work on deck, and I've had a private tip from my chief to clear out any guests I may have on board."

"Is it anything to do with this wonderful screened-up thing?" Olive asked, strolling towards the framework-covered edifice.

Conyers shrugged his shoulders.

"Can't disclose Government secrets! Between just us four--our friend Thomson isn't here, is he?" he added, smiling,--"we are planning a little Hell for the submarines."

They glanced curiously at the mysterious erection. Granet sighed.

"Secretive chaps, you sailors," he observed. "Never mind, I have a pal in the Admiralty who gives me a few hints now and then. I shall go and pump him."

"Don't you breathe a word about having been board the 'Scorpion,'" Conyers begged quickly. "They wink at it down here, so long as it's done discreetly, but it's positively against the rules, you know."

"Righto!" Granet agreed. "There isn't a soul I'm likely to mention it to."

"I'll come over to the Ship as soon as I can get away," Conyers promised.

They raced across the mile of broken water to the landing-stage. They were all a little silent. Olive was frankly disappointed, Geraldine was busy with her thoughts. Granet's gaze seemed rivetted upon the "Scorpion." Another pinnacle had drawn up alongside and a little company of men were boarding her.

"I only hope that they really have hit upon a device to rid the sea of these cursed submarines!" he remarked, as they made their way across the dock. "I see the brutes have taken to sinking fishing boats now."

"Ralph believes that they have got something," Olive declared eagerly. "He is simply aching to get to work."

"Sailors are all so jolly sanguine," Granet reminded her. "They are doing something pretty useful with nets, of course, in the way your brother was beginning to explain to me when Major Thomson chipped in, but they could only keep a fixed channel clear in that way. What they really need is some way of tackling them when they are under water. Here we are at last. I hope you girls are as hungry as I am."

They lunched in leisurely fashion, Olive in particular glancing often towards the door, and afterwards they sat about in the lounge, drinking their coffee. Granet had seemed to be in high spirits throughout the meal, and told the girls many little anecdotes of his adventures at the Front. Afterwards, however, he became silent, and finally, with a word of excuse, strolled off alone. Olive looked once more at the clock.

"Ralph doesn't seem to be coming back, does he?" she sighed. "Let's walk a little way down to the landing-stage."

The two girls strolled out and made their way towards the harbour. They could see the "Scorpion" but there was no sign of any pinnacle leaving her. Reluctantly they turned back towards the hotel.

"I wonder what has become of Captain Granet?" Olive asked.

Geraldine stopped short. There was a little frown gathering upon her forehead. She pointed up to the roof of the hotel, where a man was crouching with a telescope glued to his eyes. He lowered it almost as they paused, and waved his hand to them.

"Can't see any sign of Conyers," he shouted. "I'm waiting for the pinnacle. Come up here. There's such a ripping view."

They entered the hotel in silence.

"I don't believe," Geraldine remarked uneasily, "that Ralph would like that."

They made their way to the top of the house and were escorted by a buxom chambermaid to what was practically a step-ladder opening out on to a skylight. From here they crawled on to the roof, where they found Granet comfortably ensconced with his back to a chimney, smoking a cigarette.

"This is rather one on your brother," he chuckled.

"Where did you find the telescope?" Geraldine asked.

"I borrowed it from downstairs," he answered. "Do come and have a look. You can see the Scorpion quite distinctly. All the officers seem to be gathered around that mysterious structure on the upper deck. I thought at first it was a stand for a gun but it isn't."

Olive held out her hand for the telescope but Geraldine shook her head. There was a troubled expression in her eyes.

"I suppose it's awfully silly, Captain Granet," she said, "but honestly, I don't think Ralph would take it as a joke at all if he knew that we were up here, trying to find out what was going on."

Olive set down the telescope promptly.

"I didn't think of that," she murmured.

Granet laughed easily.

"Perhaps you are right," he admitted. "All the same, we are a little exceptionally placed, aren't we?--his sister, his fiancée, and--"

He broke off suddenly. A hand had been laid upon his shoulder. A small, dark man, who had come round the corner of the chimney unperceived, was standing immediately behind him.

"I must trouble you all for your names and addresses, if you please," he announced quietly.

The two girls stared at him, dumbfounded. Granet, however, remained perfectly at his ease. He laid down the telescope and scrutinised the newcomer.

"I really don't altogether see," he remarked good humouredly, "why I should give my name and address to a perfect stranger just because he asks for it."

The man opened his coat and displayed a badge.

"I am on Government service, sir."

"Well, I am Captain Granet, back from the Front with dispatches a few days ago," Granet told him. "This is Miss Conyers, sister of Commander Conyers of the 'Scorpion,' and Miss Olive Moreton, his fiancée. We are waiting for Commander Conyers at the present moment, and we were just looking to see if the pinnace had started. Is it against the law to use a telescope in Portsmouth?"

The man made a few notes in his pocket-book. Then he opened the trapdoor and stood on one side.

"No one is allowed out here, sir," he said. "The hotel people are to blame for not having the door locked. I shall have to make a report but I have no doubt that your explanation will be accepted. Will you be so good as to descend, please?"

Granet struggled to his feet and turned towards his companions.

"The fellow's quite right," he decided. "I am only glad that the Government are looking after things so. The Admiralty are much more go-ahead in this way than we are. I vote we have out the car and go down the front to Southsea--unless we are under arrest?" he added pleasantly, turning towards the man who had accosted them.

"You are at liberty to do whatever you please, sir," was the polite reply. "In any case, I think it would be quite useless of you to wait for Commander Conyers."

"Why?" Olive asked quickly.

"The Scorpion has just received orders to leave on this evening's tide, madam," the man announced. "You can see that she is moving even now."

They looked out across the harbour. The smoke was pouring from the funnels of the destroyer. Already she had swung around and was steaming slowly towards the Channel.

"She's off, right enough!" Granet exclaimed. "Nothing left for us, then, but London."