
Chapter 12

>From where Hamel stood a queer object came strangely into sight. Below the terrace of St. David's Hall - from a spot, in fact, at the base of the solid wall - it seemed as though a gate had been opened, and there came towards him what he at first took to be a tricycle. As it came nearer, it presented even a weirder appearance. Mr. Fentolin, in a black cape and black skull cap, sat a little forward in his electric carriage, with his hand upon the guiding lever. His head came scarcely above the back of the little vehicle, his hands and body were motionless. He seemed to be progressing without the slightest effort, personal or mechanical, as though he rode, in deed, in some ghostly vehicle. From the same place in the wall had issued, a moment or two later, a man upon a bicycle, who was also coming towards him. Hamel was scarcely conscious of this secondary figure. His eyes were fixed upon the strange personage now rapidly approaching him. There was something which seemed scarcely human in that shrunken fragment of body, the pale face with its waving white hair, the strange expression with which he was being regarded. The little vehicle came to a standstill only a few feet away. Mr. Fentolin leaned forward. His features had lost their delicately benevolent aspect; his words were minatory.

"I am under the impression, sir," he said, "that I saw you with my glasses from the window attempting to force an entrance into that building."

Hamel nodded.

"I not only tried but I succeeded," he remarked. "I got in through the window."

Mr. Fentolin's eyes glittered for a moment. Hamel, who had resumed his place upon the rock close at hand, had been mixed up during his lifetime in many wild escapades. Yet at that moment he had a sudden feeling that there were dangers in life which as yet he had not faced.

"May I ask for your explanation or your excuse?" "

"You can call it an explanation or an excuse, whichever you like," Hamel replied steadily, "but the fact is that this little building, which some one else seems to have appropriated, is mine. If I had not been a good-natured person, I should be engaged, at the present moment, in turning out its furniture on to the beach."

"What is your name?" Mr. Fentolin asked suddenly.

"My name is Hamel - Richard Hamel."

For several moments there was silence. Mr. Fentolin was still leaning forward in his strange little vehicle. The colour seemed to have left even his lips. The hard glitter in his eyes had given place to an expression almost like fear. He looked at Richard Hamel as though he were some strange sea-monster come up from underneath the sands.

"Richard Hamel," he repeated. "Do you mean that you are the son of Hamel, the R.A., who used to be in these parts so often? He was my brother's friend."

"I am his son."

"But his son was killed in the San Francisco earthquake. I saw his name in all the lists. It was copied into the local papers here."

Hamel knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"I take a lot of killing," he observed. "I was in that earthquake, right enough, and in the hospital afterwards, but it was a man named Hamel of Philadelphia who died."

Mr. Fentolin sat quite motionless for several moments. He seemed, if possible, to have shrunken into something smaller still. A few yards behind, Meekins had alighted from his bicycle and was standing waiting.

"So you are Richard Hamel," Mr. Fentolin said at last very softly. "Welcome back to England, Richard Hamel! I knew your father slightly, although we were never very friendly."

He stretched out his hand from underneath the coverlet of his little vehicle - a hand with long, white fingers, slim and white and shapely as a woman's. A single ring with a dull green stone was on his fourth finger. Hamel shook hands with him as he would have shaken hands with a woman. Afterwards he rubbed his fingers slowly together. There was something about the touch which worried him.

"You have been making use of this little shanty, haven't you?" he asked bluntly.

Mr. Fentolin nodded. He was apparently begining to recover himself.

"You must remember," he explained suavely, "that it was built by my grandfather, and that we have had rights over the whole of the foreshore here from time immemorial. I know quite well that my brother gave it to your father - or rather he sold it to him for a nominal sum. I must tell you that it was a most complicated transaction. He had the greatest difficulty in getting any lawyer to draft the deed of sale. There were so many ancient rights and privileges which it was impossible to deal with. Even now there are grave doubts as to the validity of the transaction. When nothing was heard of you, and we all concluded that you were dead, I ventured to take back what I honestly believed to be my own. Owing," he continued slowly, "to my unfortunate affliction, I am obliged to depend for interest in my life upon various hobbies. This little place, queerly enough, has become one of them. I have furnished it, in a way; installed the telephone to the house, connected it with my electric plant, and I come down here when I want to be quite alone, and paint. I watch the sea - such a sea sometimes, such storms, such colour! You notice that ridge of sand out yonder? It forms a sort of natural breakwater. Even on the calmest day you can trace that white line of foam."

"It is a strange coast," Hamel admitted.

Mr. Fentolin pointed with his forefinger northwards.

"Somewhere about there," he indicated, "is the entrance to the tidal river which flows up to the village of St. David's yonder. You see?"

His finger traced its course until it came to a certain point near the beach, where a tall black pillar stood, surmounted by a globe.

"I have had a light fixed there for the benefit of the fishermen," he said, "a light which I work from my own dynamo. Between where we are sitting now and there - only a little way out to sea - is a jagged cluster of cruel rocks. You can see them if you care to swim out in calm weather. Fishermen who tried to come in by night were often trapped there and, in a rough sea, drowned. That is why I had that pillar of light built. On stormy nights it shows the exact entrance to the water causeway."

"Very kind of you indeed," Hamel remarked, "very benevolent."

Mr. Fentolin sighed.

"So few people have any real feeling for sailors," he continued. "The fishermen around here are certainly rather a casual class. Do you know that there is scarcely one of them who can swim? There isn't one of them who isn't too lazy to learn even the simplest stroke. My brother used to say - dear Gerald - that it served them right if they were drowned. I have never been able to feel like that, Mr. Hamel. Life is such a wonderful thing. One night," he went on, dropping his voice and leaning a little forward in his carriage - "it was just before, or was it just after I had fixed that light - I was down here one dark winter night. There was a great north wind and a huge sea running. It was as black as pitch, but I heard a boat making for St. David's causeway strike on those rocks just hidden in front there. I heard those fishermen shriek as they went under. I heard their shouts for help, I heard their death cries. Very terrible, Mr. Hamel! Very terrible!"

Hamel looked at the speaker curiously. Mr. Fentolin seemed absorbed in his subject. He had spoken with relish, as one who loves the things he speaks about. Quite unaccountably, Hamel found himself shivering.

"It was their mother," Mr. Fentolin continued, leaning again a little forward in his chair, "their mother whom I saw pass along the beach just now - a widow, too, poor thing. She comes here often - a morbid taste. She spoke to you, I think?"

"She spoke to me strangely," Hamel admitted. "She gave me the impression of a woman whose brain had been turned with grief."

"Too true," Mr. Fentolin sighed. "The poor creature! I offered her a small pension, but she would have none of it. A superior woman in her way once, filled now with queer fancies," he went on, eyeing Hamel steadily, "the very strangest fancies. She spends her life prowling about here. No one in the village even knows how she lives. Did she speak of me, by-the-by?"

"She spoke of you as being a very kind-hearted man."

Mr. Fentolin sighed.

"The poor creature! Well, well, let us revert to the object of your coming here. Do you really wish to occupy this little shanty, Mr. Hamel?"

"That was my idea," Hamel confessed. "I only came back from Mexico last month, and I very soon got fed up with life in town. I am going abroad again next year. Till then, I am rather at a loose end. My father was always very keen indeed about this place, and very anxious that I should come and stay here for a little time, so I made up my mind to run down. I've got some things waiting at Norwich. I thought I might hire a woman to look after me and spend a few weeks here. They tell me that the early spring is almost the best time for this coast."

Mr. Fentolin nodded slowly. He moistened his lips for a moment. One might have imagined that he was anxious.

"Mr. Hamel," he said softly, "you are quite right. It is the best time to visit this coast. But why make a hermit of yourself? You are a family friend. Come and stay with us at the Hall for as long as you like. It will give me the utmost pleasure to welcome you there," he went on earnestly, "and as for this little place, of what use is it to you? Let me buy it from you. You are a man of the world, I can see. You may be rich, yet money has a definite value. To me it has none. That little place, as it stands, is probably worth - say a hundred pounds. Your father gave, if I remember rightly, a five pound note for it. I will give you a thousand for it sooner than be disturbed."

Hamel frowned slightly.

"I could not possibly think," he said, "of selling what was practically a gift to my father. You are welcome to occupy the place during my absence in any way you wish. On the other hand, I do not think that I care to part with it altogether, and I should really like to spend just a day or so here. I am used to roughing it under all sorts of conditions - much more used to roughing it than I am to staying at country houses." Mr. Fentolin leaned a little out of his carriage. He reached the younger man's shoulder with his hand.

"Ah! Mr. Hamel," he pleaded, "don't make up your mind too suddenly. Am I a little spoilt, I wonder? Well, you see what sort of a creature I am. I have to go through life as best I may, and people are kind to me. It is very seldom I am crossed. It is quite astonishing how often people let me have my own way. Do not make up your mind too suddenly. I have a niece and a nephew whom you must meet. There are some treasures, too, at St. David's Hall. Look at it. There isn't another house quite like it in England. It is worth looking over."

"It is most impressive," Hamel agreed, "and wonderfully beautiful. It seems odd," he added, with a laugh, "that you should care about this little shanty here, with all the beautiful rooms you must have of your own."

"It's Naboth's vineyard," Mr. Fentolin groaned. "Now, Mr. Hamel, you are going to be gracious, aren't you? Let us leave the question of your little habitation here alone for the present. Come back with me. My niece shall give you some tea, and you shall choose your room from forty. You can sleep in a haunted chamber, or a historical chamber, in Queen Elizabeth's room, a Victorian chamber, or a Louis Quinze room. All my people have spent their substance in furniture. Don't look at your bag. Clothes are unnecessary. I can supply you with everything. Or, if you prefer it, I can send a fast car into Norwich for your own things. Come and be my guest, please."

Hamel hesitated. He had not the slightest desire to go to St. David's Hall, and though he strove to ignore it, he was conscious of an aversion of which he was heartily ashamed for this strange fragment of humanity. On the other hand, his mission, the actual mission which had brought him down to these parts, could certainly best be served by an entree into the Hall itself - and there was the girl, whom he felt sure belonged there. He had never for a moment been able to dismiss her from his thoughts. Her still, cold face, the delicate perfection of her clothes and figure, the grey eyes which had rested upon his so curiously, haunted him. He was desperately anxious to see her again. If he refused this invitation, if he rejected Mr. Fentolin's proffered friendship, it would be all the more difficult.

"You are really very kind," he began hesitatingly -

"It is settled," Mr. Fentolin interrupted, "settled. Meekins, you can ride back again. I shall not paint to-day. Mr. Hamel, you will walk by my side, will you not? I can run my little machine quite slowly. You see, I have an electric battery. It needs charging often, but I have a dynamo of my own. You never saw a vehicle like this in all your travellings, did you?"

Hamel shook his head.

"An electrical bath-chair," Mr. Fentolin continued. "Practice has made me remarkably skilful in its manipulation. You see, I can steer to an inch."

He was already turning around. Hamel rose to his feet.

"You are really very kind," he said. "I should like to come up and see the Hall, at any rate, but in the meantime, as we are here, could I just look over the inside of this little place? I found the large shed where the lifeboat used to be kept, locked up."

Mr. Fentolin was manoeuvring his carriage. His back was towards Hamel.

"By all means," he declared. "We will go in together. I have had the entrance widened so that I can ride straight into the sitting-room. But wait."

He paused suddenly. He felt in all his pockets.

"Dear me," he exclaimed, "I find that I have left the keys! We will come down a little later, if you do not mind, Mr. Hamel. Or to-morrow, perhaps. You will not mind? I is very careless of me, but seeing you about the place and imagining that you were an intruder, made me angry, and I started off in a hurry. Now walk by my side up to the house, please, and talk to me. It is so interesting for me to meet men," he went on, as they started along the straight path, "who do things in life; who go to foreign countries, meet strange people, and have new experiences. I have been a good many years like this, you know."

"It is a great affliction," Hamel murmured sympathetically.

"In my youth I was an athlete," Mr. Fentolin continued. "I played cricket for the Varsity and for my county. I hunted, too, and shot. I did all the things a man loves to do. I might still shoot, they tell me, but my strength has ebbed away. I am too weak to lift a gun, too weak even to handle a fishing-rod. I have just a few hobbies in life which keep me alive. Are you a politician, Mr. Hamel?"

"Not in the least," Hamel replied. "I have been out of England too long to keep in touch with politics."

"Naturally," Mr. Fentolin agreed. "It amuses me to follow the course of events. I have a good many friends in London and abroad who are kind to me, who keep me informed, send me odd bits of information not available for every one, and it amuses me to put these things together in my mind and to try and play the prophet. I was in the Foreign Office once, you know. I take up my paper every morning, and it is one of my chief interests to see how near my own speculations come to the truth. Just now for example, there are strange things doing on the Continent."

"In America," Hamel remarked, "they affect to look upon England as a doomed Power."

"Not altogether supine yet," Mr. Fentolin observed, "yet even this last generation has seen weakening. We have lost so much self-reliance. Perhaps it is having these grown-up children who we think can take care of us - Canada and Australia, and the others. However, we will not talk of politics. It bores you, I can see. We will try and find some other subject. Now tell me, don't you think this is ingenious?"

They had reached the foot of the hill upon which the Hall was situated. In front of them, underneath the terrace, was a little iron gate, held open now by Meekins, who had gone on ahead and dismounted from his bicycle.

"I have a subterranean way from here into the Hall," Mr. Fentolin explained. "Come with me. You will only have to stoop a little, and it may amuse you. You need not be afraid. There are electric lights every ten yards. I turn them on with this switch - see."

Mr. Fentolin touched a button in the wall, and the place was at once brilliantly illuminated. A little row of lights from the ceiling and the walls stretched away as far as one could see. They passed through the iron gates, which shut behind them with a click. Stooping a little, Hamel was still able to walk by the side of the man in the chair. They traversed about a hundred yards of subterranean way. Here and there a fungus hung down from the wall, otherwise it was beautifully kept and dry. By and by, with a little turn, they came to an incline and another iron gate, held open for them by a footman. Mr. Fentolin sped up the last few feet into the great hall, which seemed more imposing than ever by reason of this unexpected entrance. Hamel, blinking a little, stepped to his side.

"Welcome!" Mr. Fentolin cried gaily. "Welcome, my friend Mr. Hamel, to St. David's Hall!"