

## Chapter 14

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Mr. Fentolin, on leaving the dining-room, steered his chair with great precision through the open, wrought-iron doors of a small lift at the further end of the hall, which Doctor Sarson, who stepped in with him, promptly directed to the second floor. Here they made their way to the room in which Mr. Dunster was lying. Doctor Sarson opened the door and looked in. Almost immediately he stood at one side, out of sight of Mr. Dunster, and nodded to Mr. Fentolin.

"If there is any trouble," he whispered, "send for me. I am better away, for the present. My presence only excites him."

Mr. Fentolin nodded.

"You are right," he said. "Go down into the dining-room. I am not sure about that fellow Hamel, and Gerald is in a queer temper. Stay with them. See that they are not alone."

The doctor silently withdrew, and Mr. Fentolin promptly glided past him into the room. Mr. John P. Dunster, in his night clothes, was sitting on the side of the bed. Standing within a few feet of him, watching him all the time with the subtle intentness of a cat watching a mouse, stood Meekins. Mr. Dunster's head was still bound, although the bandage had slipped a little, apparently in some struggle. His face was chalklike, and he was breathing quickly.

"So you've come at last!" he exclaimed, a little truculently. "Are you Mr. Fentolin?"

Mr. Fentolin gravely admitted his identity. His eyes rested upon his guest with an air of tender interest. His face was almost beautiful.

"You are the owner of this house - I am underneath your roof - is that so?"

"This is certainly St. David's Hall," Mr. Fentolin replied. "It really appears as though your conclusions were correct."

"Then will you tell me why I am kept a prisoner here?"

Mr. Fentolin's expression was for a moment clouded. He seemed hurt.

"A prisoner," he repeated softly. "My dear Mr. Dunster, you have surely forgotten the circumstances which procured for me the pleasure of this visit; the condition in which you arrived here - only, after all, a very few hours ago?"

"The circumstances," Mr. Dunster declared drily, "are to me still inexplicable. At Liverpool Street Station I was accosted by a young man who informed me that his name was Gerald Fentolin, and that he was on his way to The Hague to play in a golf tournament. His story seemed entirely probable, and I permitted him a seat in the special train I had chartered for Harwich. There was an accident and I received this blow to my head - only a trifling affair, after all. I come to my senses to find myself here. I do not know exactly what part of the world you call this, but from the fact that I can see the sea from my window, it must be some considerable distance from the scene of the accident. I find that my dressing-case has been opened, my pocket-book examined, and I am apparently a prisoner. I ask you, Mr. Fentolin, for an explanation."

Mr. Fentolin smiled reassuringly.

"My dear sir," he said, "my dear Mr. Dunster, I believe I may have the pleasure of calling you - your conclusions seem to me just a little melodramatic. My nephew - Gerald Fentolin - did what I consider the natural thing, under the circumstances. You had been courteous to him, and he repaid the obligation to the best of his ability. The accident to your train happened in a dreary part of the country, some thirty miles from here. My nephew adopted a course which I think, under the circumstances, was the natural and hospitable one. He brought you to his home. There was no hospital or town of any importance nearer."

"Very well," Mr. Dunster decided. "I will accept your version of the affair. I will, then, up to this point acknowledge myself your debtor. But will you tell me why my dressing-case has been opened, my clothes removed, and a pocket-book containing papers of great importance to me has been tampered with?"

"My dear Mr. Dunster," his host replied calmly, "you surely cannot imagine that you are among thieves! Your dressing-case was opened and the contents of your pocket-book inspected with a view to ascertaining your address, or the names of some friends with whom we might communicate."

"Am I to understand that they are to be restored to me, then?" Mr. Dunster demanded.

"Without a doubt, yes!" Mr. Fentolin assured him. "You, however, are not fit for anything, at the present moment, but to return to your bed, from which I understand you rose rather suddenly a few minutes ago."

"On the contrary," Mr. Dunster insisted, "I am feeling absolutely well enough to travel. I have an appointment on the Continent of great importance, as you may judge by the fact that at Liverpool Street I chartered a special train. I trust that nothing in my manner may have given you offence, but I am anxious to get through with the business which brought me over to this side of the water. I have sent for you to ask that my pocket-book, dressing-case, and clothes be at once restored to me, and that I be provided with the means of continuing my journey without a moment's further delay."

Mr. Fentolin shook his head very gently, very regretfully, but also firmly.

"Mr. Dunster," he pleaded, "do be reasonable. Think of all you have been through. I can quite sympathise with you in your impatience, but I am forced to tell you that the doctor who has been attending you since the moment you were brought into this house has absolutely forbidden anything of the sort."

Mr. Dunster seemed, for a moment, to struggle for composure.

"I am an American citizen," he declared. "I am willing to listen to the advice of any physician, but so long as I take the risk, I am not bound to follow it.

In the present case I decline to follow it. I ask for facilities to leave this house at once."

Mr. Fentolin sighed.

"In your own interests," he said calmly, "they will not be granted to you."

Mr. Dunster had spoken all the time like a man struggling to preserve his self-control. There were signs now that his will was ceasing to serve him. His eyes flashed fire, his voice was raised.

"Will not be granted to me?" he repeated. "Do you mean to say, then, that I am to be kept here against my will?"

Mr. Fentolin made no immediate reply. With the delicate fingers of his right hand he pushed back the hair from his forehead. He looked at his questioner soothingly, as one might look at a spoiled child.

"Against my will?" Mr. Dunster repeated, raising his voice still higher. "Mr. Fentolin, if the truth must be told, I have heard of you before and been warned against you. I decline to accept any longer the hospitality of your roof. I insist upon leaving it. If you will not provide me with any means of doing so, I will walk."

He made a motion as though to rise from the bed. Meekins' hand very gently closed upon his arm. One could judge that the grip was like a grip of iron.

"Dear me," Mr. Fentolin said, "this is really very unreasonable of you! If you have heard of me, Mr. Dunster, you ought to understand that notwithstanding my unfortunate physical trouble, I am a person of consequence and position in this county. I am a magistrate, ex-high sheriff, and a great land-owner here. I think I may say without boasting that I represent one of the most ancient families in this country. Why, therefore, should you treat me as though it were to my interest to inveigle you under my roof and keep you there for some guilty purpose? Cannot you understand that it is for your own good I hesitate to part with you?"

"I understand nothing of the sort," Mr. Dunster exclaimed angrily. "Let us bring this nonsense to an end. I want my clothes, and if you won't lend me a car or a trap, I'll walk to the nearest railway station."

Mr. Fentolin shook his head.

"I am quite sure," he said, "that you are not in a position to travel. Even in the dining-room just now I heard a disturbance for which I was told that you were responsible."

"I simply insisted upon having my clothes," Mr. Dunster explained. "Your servant refused to fetch them. Perhaps I lost my temper. If so, I am sorry. I am not used to being thwarted."

"A few days' rest -" Mr. Fentolin began.

"A few days' rest be hanged!" Mr. Dunster interrupted fiercely. "Listen, Mr. Fentolin," he added, with the air of one making a last effort to preserve his temper, "the mission with which I am charged is one of greater importance than you can imagine. So much depends upon it that my own life, if that is in danger, would be a mere trifle in comparison with the issues involved. If I am not allowed to continue upon my journey at once, the consequences may be more serious than I can tell you, to you and yours, to your own country. There! - I am telling you a great deal, but I want you to understand that I am in earnest. I have a mission which I must perform, and which I must perform quickly."

"You are very mysterious," Mr. Fentolin murmured.

"I will leave nothing to chance," Mr. Dunster continued. "Send this man who seems to have constituted himself my jailer out of earshot, and I will tell you even more."

Mr. Fentolin turned to Meekins.

"You can leave the room for a moment," he ordered. "Wait upon the threshold."

Meekins very unwillingly turned to obey.

"You will excuse me, sir," he objected doubtfully, "but I am not at all sure that he is safe."

Mr. Fentolin smiled faintly.

"You need have no fear, Meekins," he declared. "I am quite sure that you are mistaken. I think that Mr. Dunster is incapable of any act of violence towards a person in my unfortunate position. I am willing to trust myself with him - perfectly willing, Meekins."

Meekins, with ponderous footsteps, left the room and closed the door behind him. Mr. Fentolin leaned a little forward in his chair. It seemed as though he were on springs. The fingers of his right hand had disappeared in the pocket of his black velvet dinner-coat. He was certainly prepared for all emergencies.

"Now, Mr. Dunster," he said softly, "you can speak to me without reserve."

Mr. Dunster dropped his voice. His tone became one of fierce eagerness.

"Look here," he exclaimed, "I don't think you ought to force me to give myself away like this, but, after all, you are an Englishman, with a stake in your country, and I presume you don't want her to take a back seat for the next few generations. Listen here. It's to save your country that I want to get to The Hague without a second's delay. I tell you that if I don't get there, if the message I convey doesn't reach its destination, you may find an agreement signed between certain Powers which will mean the greatest diplomatic humiliation which Great Britain has ever known. Aye, and more than that!" Mr. Dunster continued. "It may be that the bogey you've been setting before yourself for all these years may trot out into life, and you may find St. David's Hall a barrack for German soldiers before many months have passed."

Mr. Fentolin shook his head in gentle disbelief.

"You are speaking to one," he declared, "who knows more of the political situation than you imagine. In my younger days I was in the Foreign Office. Since my unfortunate

accident I have preserved the keenest interest in politics. I tell you frankly that I do not believe you. As the Powers are grouped at present, I do not believe in the possibility of a successful invasion of this country."

"Perhaps not," Mr. Dunster replied eagerly, "but the grouping of the Powers as it has existed during the last few years is on the eve of a great change. I cannot take you wholly into my confidence. I can only give you my word of honour as a friend to your country that the message I carry is her only salvation. Having told you as much as that, I do not think I am asking too much if I ask you for my clothes and dressing-case, and for the fastest motor-car you can furnish me with. I guess I can get from here to Yarmouth, and from there I can charter something which will take me to the other side."

Mr. Fentolin raised the little gold whistle to his lips and blew it very softly. Meekins at once entered, closing the door behind him. He moved silently to the side of the man who had risen now from the bed, and who was standing with his hand grasping the post and his eyes fixed upon Mr. Fentolin, as though awaiting his answer.

"Our conversation," the latter said calmly, "has reached a point, Mr. Dunster, at which I think we may leave it for the moment. You have told me some very surprising things. I perceive that you are a more interesting visitor even than I had thought."

He raised his left hand, and Meekins, who seemed to have been waiting for some signal of the sort, suddenly, with a movement of his knee and right arm, flung Dunster back upon the bed. The man opened his mouth to shout, but already, with lightning-like dexterity, his assailant had inserted a gag between his teeth. Treating his struggles as the struggles of a baby, Meekins next proceeded to secure his wrists with handcuffs. He then held his feet together while he quietly wound a coil of cord around them. Mr. Fentolin watched the proceedings from his chair with an air of pleased and critical interest.

"Very well done, Meekins - very neatly done, indeed!" he exclaimed. "As I was saying, Mr. Dunster," he continued, turning his chair, "our conversation has reached a point at which I think we may safely leave it for a time. We will discuss these matters again. Your pretext of a political mission is, of course, an absurd one, but fortunately you have fallen into good hands. Take good care of Mr. Dunster, Meekins. I can see that he is a very important personage. We must be careful not to lose sight of him."

Mr. Fentolin steered his chair to the door, opened it, and passed out. On the landing he blew his whistle; the lift almost immediately ascended. A moment or two later he glided into the dining-room. The three men were still seated around the table. A decanter of wine, almost empty, was before Doctor Sarson, whose pallid cheeks, however, were as yet unflushed.

"At last, my dear guest," Mr. Fentolin exclaimed, turning to Hamel, "I am able to return to you. If you will drink no more wine, let us have our coffee in the library, you and I. I want to talk to you about the Tower."