

## [The Vanished Messenger](#)

### [E. Phillips Oppenheim](#)

## Chapter 16

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"Let us follow the example of all great golfers," Hamel said. "Let us for this morning, at any rate, imagine that your whole world is encompassed within these eighteen holes. We have been sent here in a moment of good humour by your tyrant uncle. The sun shines, and the wind is from the west. Why not?"

"That is all very well for you," she retorted, smiling, "but I have topped my drive."

"Purely an incident," he assured her. "The vicissitudes of the game do not enter into the question. I have driven a ball far above my usual form, but I am not gloating over it. I prefer to remember only that I am going to spend the next two hours with you."

She played her shot, and they walked for a little way together. She was suddenly silent.

"Do you know," she said finally, just a little gravely, "I am not at all used to speeches of this sort."

"Then you ought to be," he declared. "Nothing but the lonely life you have been living has kept you from hearing them continually."

She laughed a little at the impotence of her rebuff and paused for a moment to make her next shot. Hamel, standing a little on one side, watched her appraisingly. Her short, grey tweed skirt was obviously the handiwork of an accomplished tailor. Her grey stockings and suede shoes were immaculate and showed a care for her appearance which pleased him. Her swing, too, revealed a grace, the grace of long arms and a supple body, at which previously he had only guessed. The sunshine seemed to have brought out a copper tinge from her abundant brown hair.

"Do you know," he remarked, "I think I am beginning to like your uncle. Great idea of his, sending us off here directly after breakfast."

Her face darkened for a moment, and he realised his error. The same thought, indeed, had been in both their minds. Mr. Fentolin's courteous suggestion had been offered to them almost in the shape of a command. It was scarcely possible to escape from the reflection that he had desired to rid himself of their presence for the morning.

"Of course," he went on, "I knew that these links were good - quite famous, aren't they?"

"I have played on so few others," she told him. "I learned my golf here with King, the professional."

He took off his cap and handed it to his caddy. He himself was beginning already to look younger. The long blue waves came rippling up the creeks. The salt wind, soft with sunshine, blew in their faces. The marshes on the landward side were mauve with lavender blossom, in the distance, the red-tiled cottages nestled deep among a background of green trees and rising fields.

"This indeed is a land of peace," he declared. "If I hadn't to give you quite so many strokes, I should be really enjoying myself."

"You don't play like a man who has been living abroad for a great many years," she remarked. "Tell me about some of the places you have visited?"

"Don't let us talk seriously," he begged. "I'll tell you of them but let it be later on. This morning I feel that the spring air is getting into my head. I have an absurd desire to talk nonsense."

"So far," she admitted, "you haven't been altogether unsuccessful."

"If you are alluding," he replied, "to the personal remarks I was emboldened to make on my way here, I can only say that they were excused by their truthfulness."

"I am not at all sure that you have known me long enough to tell me what colours suit me," she demurred.

"Then what will you say," he enquired, "if I admire the angle of that quill in your hat?"

"Don't do it," she laughed. "If you continue like this, I may have to go home."

"You have sent the car away," he reminded her cheerfully. "You would simply have to sit upon the balcony and reflect upon your wasted morning."

"I decline to talk upon the putting green," she said. "It puts me off. If you will stand perfectly quiet and say nothing, I will play the like."

They moved off presently to the next teeing ground.

"I don't believe this nonsense is good for our golf," she said.

"It is immensely good for us as human beings," he protested.

They had played the ninth hole and turned for home. On their right now was a shimmering stretch of wet sand and a thin line of sea, in the distance. The tide, receding, had left little islands of virgin sand, grass tufted, the home of countless sea-gulls. A brown-sailed fishing boat was racing for the narrow entrance to the tidal way.

"I am beginning to understand what there is about this coast which fascinated my father so," he remarked.

"Are you?" she answered gravely. "Years ago I used to love it, but not now."

He tried to change the subject, but the gloom had settled upon her face once more.

"You don't know what it is like," she went on, as they walked side by side after their balls, "to live day and night in fear, with no one to talk to - no one, that is to say, who is not under the same shadow. Even the voices of the wind and the sea, and the screaming of the birds, seem to bring always an evil message. There is nothing kindly or hopeful even in the sunshine. At night, when the tide comes thundering in as it does so often at this time of the year, one is afraid. There is so much to make one afraid!"

She had turned pale again, notwithstanding the sunshine and the freshening wind. He laid his hand lightly upon her arm. She suffered his touch without appearing to notice it.

"Ah, you mustn't talk like that!" he pleaded. "Do you know what you make me feel like?"

She came back from the world of her own unhappy imaginings.

"Really, I forgot myself," she declared, with a little smile. "Never mind, it does one good sometimes. One up, are you? Henceforth, then, golf - all the rigour of the game, mind."

He fell in with her mood, and their conversation touched only upon the game. On the last green he suffered defeat and acknowledged it with a little grimace.

"If I might say so, Miss Fentolin," he protested, "you are a little too good for your handicap. I used to play a very reasonable scratch myself, but I can't give you the strokes."

She smiled.

"Doubtless your long absence abroad," she began slowly, "has affected your game."

"I was round in eighty-one," he grumbled.

"You must have travelled in many countries," she continued, "where golf was an impossibility."

"Naturally," he admitted. "Let us stay and have lunch and try again."

She shook her head with a little sigh of regret.

"You see, the car is waiting," she pointed out. "We are expected home. I shan't be a minute putting my clubs away."

They sped swiftly along the level road towards St. David's Hall. Far in the distance they saw it, built upon that strange hill, with the sunlight flashing in its windows. He looked at it long and curiously.

"I think," he said, "that yours is the most extraordinarily situated house I have ever seen. Fancy a gigantic mound like that in the midst of an absolutely flat marsh."

She nodded.

"There is no other house quite like it in England," she said. "I suppose it is really a wonderful place. Have you looked at the pictures?"

"Not carefully," he told her.

"You must before you leave," she insisted. "Mr. Fentolin is a great judge, and so was his father."

Their road curved a little to the sea, and at its last bend they were close to the pebbly ridge on which the Tower was built. He touched the electric bell and stopped the car.

"Do let us walk along and have a look at my queer possession once more," he begged. "Luncheon, you told me, is not till half-past one, and it is a quarter to now."

She hesitated for a moment and then assented. They left the car and walked along the little track, bordered with white posts, which led on to the ridge. To their right was the village, separated from them only by one level stretch of meadowland; in the background, the hall. They turned along the raised dike just inside the pebbly beach, and she showed her companion the narrow waterway up to the village. At its entrance was a tall iron upright, with a ladder attached and a great lamp at the top.

"That is to show them the way in at night, isn't it?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Yes," she told him. "Mr. Fentolin had it placed there. And yet," she went on, "curiously enough, since it was erected, there have been more wrecks than ever."

"It doesn't seem a dangerous beach," he remarked.

She pointed to a spot about fifty yards from the Tower. It was the spot to which the woman whom he had met on the day of his arrival had pointed.

"You can't see them," she said; "they are always out of sight, even when the tide is at the lowest - but there are some hideous sunken rocks there. 'The Daggers,' they call them. One or two fishing boats have been lost on them, trying to make the village. When Mr. Fentolin put up the lamp, every one thought that it would be quite safe to try and get in at night. This winter, though, there have been three wrecks which no one could understand. It must be something in the currents, or a sort of optical illusion, because in the last shipwreck one man was saved, and he swore that at the time they struck the rock, they were headed straight for the light."

They had reached the Tower now. Hamel became a little absorbed. They walked around it, and he tried the front door. He found, as he had expected, that it opened readily. He looked around him for several moments.

"Your uncle has been here this morning," he remarked quietly.

"Very likely."

"That outhouse," he continued, "must be quite a large place. Have you any idea what it is he works upon there?"

"None," she answered.

He looked around him once more.

"Mr. Fentolin has been preparing for my coming, he observed. "I see that he has moved a few of his personal things."

She made no reply, only she shivered a little as she stepped back into the sunshine.

"I don't believe you like my little domicile," he remarked, as they started off homeward.

"I don't," she admitted curtly.

"In the train," he reminded her, "you seemed rather to discourage my coming here. Yet last night, after dinner -"

"I was wrong," she interrupted. "I should have said nothing, and yet I couldn't help it. I don't suppose it will make any difference."

"Make any difference to what?"

"I cannot tell you," she confessed. "Only I have a strange antipathy to the place. I don't like it. My uncle sometimes shuts himself up here for quite a long time. We have an idea, Gerald and I, that things happen here sometimes which no one knows of. When he comes back, he is moody and ill-tempered, or else half mad with excitement. He isn't always the amiable creature whom you have met. He has the face of an angel, but there are times -"

"Well, don't let's talk about him," Hamel begged, as her voice faltered. "Now that I am going to stay in the neighbourhood for a few days, you must please remember that it is partly your responsibility. You are not going to shut yourself up, are you? You'll come and play golf again?"

"If he will let me," she promised.

"I think he will let you, right enough," Hamel observed. "Between you and me, I rather think he hates having me down at the Tower at all. He will encourage anything that takes me away, even as far as the Golf Club."

They were approaching the Hall now. She was looking once more as she had looked last night. She had lost her colour, her walk was no longer buoyant. She had the air of a prisoner who, after a brief spell of liberty, enters once more the place of his confinement. Gerald came out to meet them as they climbed the stone steps which led on to the terrace. He glanced behind as he greeted them, and then almost stealthily took a telegram from his pocket.

"This came for you," he remarked, handing it to Hamel. "I met the boy bringing it out of the office."

Hamel tore it open, with a word of thanks. Gerald stood in front of him as he read.

"If you wouldn't mind putting it away at once," he asked, a little uncomfortably. "You see, the telegraph office is in the place, and my uncle has a queer rule that every telegram is brought to him before it is delivered."

Hamel did not speak for a moment. He was looking at the few words scrawled across the pink sheet with a heavy black pencil:

"Make every enquiry in your neighbourhood for an American, John P. Dunster, entrusted with message of great importance, addressed to Von Dusenbergh, The Hague. Is believed to have been in railway accident near Wymondham and to have been taken from inn by young man in motor-car. Suggest that he is being im- properly detained."

Hamel crumpled up the telegram and thrust it into his pocket.

"By-the-by," he asked, as they ascended the steps, "what did you say the name of this poor fellow was who is lying ill up-stairs?"

Gerald hesitated for a moment. Then he answered as though a species of recklessness had seized him.

"He called himself Mr. John P. Dunster."