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Chapter 21

"To-day," Hamel declared, as he stood at the sideboard the following morning at breakfast-time and helped himself to bacon and eggs, "I am positively going to begin reading. I have a case full of books down at the Tower which I haven't unpacked yet."

Esther made a little grimace.

"Look at the sunshine," she said. "There isn't a breath of wind, either. I think to-day that I could play from the men's tees."

Hamel sighed as he returned to his place.

"My good intentions are already half dissipated," he admitted.

She laughed.

"How can we attack the other half?" she asked.

Gerald, who was also on his way to the sideboard, suddenly stopped.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, looking out of the window. "Who's going away this morning, I wonder? There's the Rolls-Royce at the door."

Hamel, too, rose once more to his feet. The two exchanged swift glances. Moved by a common thought, they both started for the door, only to find it suddenly opened before them. Mr. Fentolin glided into the room.

"Uncle!" Gerald exclaimed.

Mr. Fentolin glanced keenly around the room.

"Good morning, everybody," he said. "My appearance at this hour of the morning naturally surprises you. As a matter of fact, I have been up for quite a long time. Esther dear, give me some coffee, will you, and be sure that it is hot. If any of you want to say good-by to Mr. John P. Dunster, you'd better hurry out."

"You mean that he is going?" Hamel asked incredulously.

"He is going," Mr. Fentolin admitted. "I wash my hands of the man. He has given us an infinite amount of trouble, has monopolised Doctor Sarson when he ought to have been attending upon me - a little more hot milk, if you please, Esther - and now, although he really is not fit to leave his room, he insists upon hurrying off to keep an appointment somewhere on the Continent. The little operation we spoke of last night was successful, as Doctor Sarson prophesied, and Mr. Dunster was quite conscious and able to sit up early this morning. We telephoned at six o'clock to Norwich for a surgeon, who is now on his way over here, but he will not wait even to see him. What can you do with a man so obstinate!"

Neither Hamel nor Gerald had resumed their places. The former, after a moment's hesitation, turned towards the door.

"I think," he said, "that I should like to see the last of Mr. Dunster."

"Pray do," Mr. Fentolin begged. "I have said good-by to him myself, and all that I hope is that next time you offer a wayfarer the hospitality of St. David's Hall, Gerald, he may be a more tractable person. This morning I shall give myself a treat. I shall eat an old-fashioned English breakfast. Close the door after you, if you please, Gerald."

Hamel, with Gerald by his side, hurried out into the hall. Just as they crossed the threshold they saw Mr. Dunster, wrapped from head to foot in his long ulster, a soft hat upon his head and one of Mr. Fentolin's cigars in his mouth, step from the bottom stair into the hall and make his way with somewhat uncertain footsteps towards the front door. Doctor Sarson walked on one side, and Meekins held him by the arm. He glanced towards Gerald and his companion and waved the hand which held his cigar.

"So long, my young friend!" he exclaimed. "You see, I've got them to let me make a start. Next time we go about the country in a saloon car together, I hope we'll have better luck. Say, but I'm groggy about the knees!"

"You'd better save your breath," Doctor Sarson advised him grimly. "You haven't any to spare now, and you'll want more than you have before you get to the end of your journey. Carefully down the steps, mind."

They helped him into the car. Hamel and Gerald stood under the great stone portico, watching.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" the boy exclaimed, under his breath.

Hamel was watching the proceedings with a puzzled frown. To his surprise, neither Doctor Sarson nor Meekins were accompanying the departing man.

"He's off, right enough," Hamel declared, as the car glided away. "Do you understand it? I don't."

Gerald did not speak for several moments. His eyes were still fixed upon the back of the disappearing car. Then he turned towards Hamel.

"There isn't much," he said softly, "that Mr. Fentolin doesn't know. If that detective was really on his way here, there wasn't any chance of keeping Mr. Dunster to himself. You see, the whole story is common property. And yet, there's something about the affair that bothers me."

"And me," Hamel admitted, watching the car until it became a speck in the distance.

"He was fairly well cornered," Gerald concluded, as they made their way back to the dining-room, "but it isn't like him to let go of anything so easily."

"So you've seen the last of our guest," Mr. Fentolin remarked, as Hamel and Gerald re-entered the dining-room. "A queer fellow - almost a new type to me. Dogged and industrious, I should think. He hadn't the least right to travel, you know, and I think so long as we had taken the trouble to telephone to Norwich, he might have waited to see the physician. Sarson was very angry about it, but what can you do with these fellows who are never ill? They scarcely know what physical disability means. Well, Mr. Hamel, and how are you going to amuse yourself to-day?"

"I had thought of commencing some reading I brought with me," Hamel replied, "but Miss Esther has challenged me to another game of golf."

"Excellent!" Mr. Fentolin declared. "It is very kind of you indeed, Mr. Hamel. It is always a matter of regret for me that society in these parts is so restricted. My nephew and niece have little opportunity for enjoying themselves. Play golf with Mr. Hamel, by all means, my dear child," he continued, turning to his niece. "Make the most of this glorious spring weather. And what about you, Gerald? What are you doing to-day?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet, sir," the boy replied.

Mr. Fentolin sighed.

"Always that lack of initiative," he remarked. "A lack of initiative is one of your worst faults, I am afraid, dear Gerald."

The boy looked up quickly. For a moment it seemed as though he were about to make a fierce reply. He met Mr. Fentolin's steady gaze, however, and the words died away upon his lips.

"I rather thought," he said, "of going into Norwich, if you could spare me. Captain Holt has asked me to lunch at the Barracks."

Mr. Fentolin shook his head gently.

"It is most unfortunate," he declared. "I have a commission for you later in the day."

Gerald continued his breakfast in silence. He bent over his plate so that his face was almost invisible. Mr. Fentolin was peeling a peach. A servant entered the room.

"Lieutenant Godfrey, sir," he announced.

They all looked up. A trim, clean-shaven, hard-featured young man in naval uniform was standing upon the threshold. He bowed to Esther.

"Very sorry to intrude, sir, at this hour of the morning," he said briskly. "Lieutenant Godfrey, my name. I am flag lieutenant of the Britannia. You can't see her, but she's not fifty miles off at this minute. I landed at Sheringham this morning, hired a car and made the best of my way here. Message from the Admiral, sir."

Mr. Fentolin smiled genially.

"We are delighted to see you, Lieutenant Godfrey," he said. "Have some breakfast."

"You are very good, sir," the officer answered. "Business first. I'll breakfast afterwards, with pleasure, if I may. The Admiral's compliments, and he would take it as a favour if you would haul down your wireless for a few days."

"Had down my wireless," Mr. Fentolin repeated slowly.

"We are doing a lot of manoeuvring within range of you, and likely to do a bit more," the young man explained. "You are catching up our messages all the time. Of course, we know they're quite safe with you, but things get about. As yours is only a private installation, we'd like you, if you don't mind, sir, to shut up shop for a few days."

Mr. Fentolin seemed puzzled.

"But, my dear sir," he protested, "we are not at war, are we?"

"Not yet," the young officer replied, "but God knows when we shall be! We are under sealed orders, anyway, and we don't want any risk of our plans leaking out. That's why we want your wireless disconnected."

"You need say no more," Mr. Fentolin assured him. "The matter is already arranged. Esther, let me present Lieutenant Godfrey - my niece, Miss Fentolin; Mr. Gerald Fentolin, my nephew; Mr. Hamel, a guest. See that Lieutenant Godfrey has some breakfast, Gerald. I will go myself and see my Marconi operator."

"Awfully good of you, sir," the young man declared, "and I am sure we are very sorry to trouble you. In a week or two's time you can go into business again as much as you like. It's only while we are fiddling around here that the Admiral's jumpy about things. May my man have a cup of coffee, sir? I'd like to be on the way back in a quarter of an hour."

Mr. Fentolin halted his chair by the side of the bell, and rang it.

"Pray make use of my house as your own, sir," he said gravely. "From what you leave unsaid, I gather that things are more serious than the papers would have us believe. Under those circumstances, I need not assure you that any help we can render is entirely yours."

Mr. Fentolin left the room. Lieutenant Godfrey was already attacking his breakfast. Gerald leaned towards him eagerly.

"Is there really going to be war?" he demanded.

"Ask those chaps at The Hague," Lieutenant Godfrey answered. "Doing their best to freeze us out, or something. All I know is, if there's going to be fighting, we are ready."

for them. By-the-by, what have you got wireless telegraphy for here, anyway?"

"It's a fad of my uncle's," Gerald replied. "Since his accident he amuses himself in all sorts of queer ways."

Lieutenant Godfrey nodded.

"Poor fellow!" he said. "I heard he was a cripple, or something of the sort. Forgive my asking, but - you people are English, aren't you?"

"Rather!" Gerald answered. "The Fentolins have lived here for hundreds of years. Why do you ask that?"

Lieutenant Godfrey hesitated. He looked, for the moment, scarcely at his ease.

"Oh, I don't know," he replied. "The old man was very anxious I should find out. You see, a lot of information seems to have got over on the other side, and we couldn't think where it had leaked out, except through your wireless. However, that isn't likely, of course, unless you've got one of these beastly Germans in your receiving-room. Now if I can borrow a cigarette, a cigar, or a pipe of tobacco - any mortal thing to smoke - I'll be off, if I may. The old man turned me out at an unearthly hour this morning, and in Sheringham all the shops were closed. Steady on, young fellow," he laughed, as Gerald filled his pockets with cigarettes. "Well, here's good morning to you, Miss Fentolin. Good morning, sir. How long ought it to take me to get to Sheringham?"

"About forty minutes," Gerald told him, "if your car's any good at all."

"It isn't much," was the somewhat dubious reply. "However, we'll shove along. You in the Service?" he enquired, as they walked down the hall together.

"Hope I shall be before long," Gerald answered. "I'm going into the army, though."

"Have to hurry up, won't you?"

Gerald sighed.

"It's a little difficult for me. Here's your car. Good luck to you!"

"My excuses to Mr. Fentolin," Lieutenant Godfrey shouted, "and many thanks."

He jumped into the automobile and was soon on his way back. Gerald watched him until he was nearly out of sight. On the knoll, two of the wireless operators were already at work. Mr. Fentolin sat in his chair below, watching. The blue sparks were flashing. A message was just being delivered. Presently Mr. Fentolin turned his chair, and with Meekins by his side, made his way back to the house. He passed along the ball and into his study. Gerald, who was on his way to the dining-room, heard the ring of the telephone bell and the call for the trunk special line. He hesitated for a moment. Then he made his way slowly down towards the study and stood outside the door, listening. In a moment he heard Mr. Fentolin's clear voice, very low yet very penetrating.

"The Mediterranean Fleet will be forty-seven hours before it comes together," was the message he heard. "The Channel Fleet will manoeuvre off Sheerness, waiting for it. The North Sea Fleet is seventeen units under nominal strength."

Gerald turned the handle of the door slowly and entered. Mr. Fentolin was just replacing the receiver on its stand. He looked up at his nephew, and his eyebrows came together.

"What do you mean by this?" he demanded. "Don't you know that I allow no one in here when I am telephoning on the private wire?"

Gerald closed the door behind him and summoned up all his courage.

"It is because I have heard what you were saying over the telephone that I am here," he declared. "I want to know to whom you were sending that message which you have intercepted outside."