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## Chapter 9

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Considering the crowded state of the waiting-room and the number of highly important people who were there for the same purpose, Surgeon-Major Thomson seemed to have remarkably little difficulty in procuring the interview he desired. He was conducted by a boy scout into a room on the second floor of the War Office, within a few minutes of his arrival. A tall, grey-haired man in the uniform of a general looked up and nodded with an air of intimacy as soon as the door had been closed.

"Sit down, Thomson. We've been expecting you. Any news?"

"I have come to you for that, sir," the other replied.

The General sighed.

"I am afraid you will be disappointed," he said. "I received your report and I went to a certain official myself--saw him in his own house before breakfast this morning. I had reports of three other men occupying responsible positions in the city, Thomson, against whom there was really tangible and serious evidence. Our friend had the effrontery almost to laugh at me."

There was a little glitter in Thomson's eyes.

"These damned civilians!" he murmured softly. "They've done their best to ruin Great Britain by crabbing every sort of national service during the last ten years. They feed and pamper the vermin who are eating away the foundations of the country, and, damn it all, when we put a clear case to them, when we show them men whom we know to be dangerous, they laugh at us and tell us that it isn't our department! They look upon us as amateurs and speak of Scotland Yard with bated breath. My God! If I had a free hand for ten minutes, there'd be two Cabinet Ministers eating bread and water instead of their dinners to-night."

The General raised his eyebrows. He knew Thomson well enough to be aware how unusual such an ebullition of feeling on his part was.

"Got you a bit worked up, Major," he remarked.

"Isn't it enough to make any man's blood boil?" the other replied. "The country to-day looks to its army and its navy to save it from the humiliation these black-coated parasites have encouraged, and yet even now we haven't a free hand. You and I, who control the secret service of the army, denounce certain men, upon no slight evidence, either, as spies, and we are laughed at! One of those very blatant idiots whose blundering is costing the country millions of money and thousands of brave men, has still enough authority to treat our reports as o much waste paper."

"I am bound to say I agree with you, Thomson," the General declared, a little hopelessly. "It's the weakest spot of our whole organisation, this depending on the civil powers. Tow of my cases were absolutely flagrant. As regards yours, Thomson, I am not at all sure that we shouldn't be well-advised to get just a little more evidence before we press the matter."

"And meanwhile," Thomson retorted bitterly, "leave him a free hand to do what mischief he can. But for the merest accident in the world, the night before last he would have learnt our new scheme for keeping the Channel communication free from submarines."

The General frowned.

"Who's been talking?" he demanded.

"No one who is to be blamed," Thomson replied. "Can't you realise the position? Here's a fellow Service man, a soldier, a D. S. O., who has been specially mentioned for bravery and who very nearly got the Victoria Cross, comes here with the halo of a brilliant escape from the Germans, wounded, a young man of good family and connections, and apparently as keen as mustard to get back again in the fighting line. Good Heavens! The most careful sailor in the world might just drop a hint to that sort of man. What nearly happened last night may happen a dozen times within the next week. Even our great secret, General," Thomson continued, dropping his voice a little, "even that might come to his ears."

The General was undoubtedly disturbed. He searched amongst the papers on his desk and brought out at last a flimsy half-sheet of notepaper which he studied carefully.

"Just read this, Thomson."

Thomson rose and looked over his shoulder. The letter was an autograph one of a few lines only, and dated from a village in the North of France--

My dear Brice,

This is a special request to you. Arrange it any way you please but don't send me Captain Grent out again in any capacity. Keep him at home. Mind, I am not saying word against him as a soldier. He has done some splendid work on more than one occasion, but notwithstanding this I do not wish to see him again with any of the forces under my command.

Ever yours,

F.

"Did you show this to our friend?" Thomson inquired.

"I gave him a digest of its contents," the General replied. "He smiled in a supercilious manner and said I had better do as I was asked."

Thomson said nothing for a moment. His face was very set and he had the air of a man desperately but quietly angry.

"As a matter of fact," General Brice continued, glancing at the clock on his desk, "Granet is in my anteroom at the present moment, I expect. He asked for an interview this afternoon."

"Have him in, if you don't mind," the other suggested. "I can sit at the empty desk over there. I can be making some calculations with reference to the number of hospital beds for each transport. I want to hear him talk to you."

The General nodded and touched a bell.

"You can show Captain Granet in," he told the boy scout who answered it.

Thomson took his place in the far corner of the room and bent over a sheaf of papers. Presently Granet was ushered in. He was leaning a little less heavily upon his stick and he had taken his arm from the sling for a moment. He saluted the General respectfully and glanced across the room towards where Thomson was at work. If he recognised him, however, he made no sign.

"Well, Granet," the General inquired, "how are you getting on?"

"Wonderfully, sir," was the brisk reply. "I have seen my own doctor this morning and he thinks I might come up before the Board on Saturday."

"And what does that mean?"

"I want to get back again, sir," Granet replied eagerly.

The General stroked his grey moustache and looked searchingly at the young officer. He was standing full in the light of a ray of sunshine which came streaming through the high, uncurtained windows. Although he was still a little haggard, his eyes were bright, his lips were parted in an anticipatory smile, his whole expression was engaging. General Brice, studying him closely, felt compelled to admit the improbability of his vague suspicions.

"That's all very well, you know," he reminded him quietly, "but you won't be fit enough for active service for some time to come."

The young man's face fell.

"I am sure they must be wanting me back, sir," he said naively.

The General shook his head.

"I don't want to disappoint you, young fellow," he continued, "but I heard from your Brigadier only yesterday. He has been obliged to fill up your place and I don't think he has room for any one on his staff."

Granet looked a little hurt.

"I thought he might have made a temporary appointment," he said gloomily.

"This is no time to consider individuals," the General pointed out. "What about finding you a billet at home for a time, eh? You've seen a bit of the rough side of the war, you know."

"I'd sooner go out and dig trenches!"

Thomson had risen slowly from his place and, with a sheet of foolscap in his hand, closely covered with writing, crossed the room.

"You might get taken prisoner again, Captain Granet," he remarked drily.

There was a moment's rather tense silence. The young man's lips had come together, his eyes flashed.

"I did not recognise you, Major Thomson," he said calmly. "Have you found a new billet?"

"My old one is sufficiently absorbing just at present," the other replied laying his calculations on the General's desk. "Forgive my interrupting you, sir, but you told me to let you have this as soon as I had finished. That is my estimate of the number of beds we could stow away in the cubic feet you offer us."

The General glanced at the paper and nodded.

"Don't go, Thomson," he said. "I'll talk to you about this later on. Well, Captain Granet," he added, "you'd better leave things in my hands. I'll do the best I can for you."

"I shall be very disappointed if I don't get out to the Front again soon, sir," the young man declared simply.

"I'll do the best I can," the General repeated, touching his bell.

Granet was shown out and the door was closed. General Brice turned towards his companion.

"Thomson," he said, "frankly, I can't believe it. However, we'll find him a billet where he can't possibly do any mischief."

"If you found him a billet where I should like to see him," Surgeon-Major Thomson observed bitterly, "he would never do any more mischief in this world! Any dispatches from the Front, sir?"

General Brice raised his eyebrows.

"Are you off again?" he asked.

"I am going to see that young man's General," Thomson replied. "I shall cross over to-day and be back to-morrow night or Saturday morning."

General Brice nodded thoughtfully.

"Perhaps you are right," he assented. "Yes, I shall have a few reports. You'd better let them know at the Admiralty, and what time you want to go over."

Surgeon-Major Thomson shook hands with the General and turned towards the door.

"When I come back," he said, "I hope I'll be able to convince even you, sir."