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Chapter 10

Surgeon-Major Thomson awoke about twelve hours later with a start. He had been sleeping so heavily that he was at first unable to remember his whereabouts. His mind moved sluggishly across the brief panorama of his hurried journey--the special train from Victoria to Folkestone; the destroyer which had brought him and a few other soldiers across the Channel, black with darkness, at a pace which made even the promenade deck impossible; the landing at Boulogne, a hive of industry notwithstanding the darkness; the clanking of waggons, the shrieking of locomotives, the jostling of crowds, the occasional flashing of an electric torch. And then the ride in the great automobile through the misty night. He rubbed his eyes and looked around him. A grey morning was breaking. The car had come to a standstill before a white gate, in front of which was stationed a British soldier, with drawn bayonet. Surgeon-Major Thomson pulled himself together and answered the challenge.

"A friend," he answered,--"Surgeon-Major Thomson, on his Majesty's service."

He leaned from the car for a moment and held out something in the hollow of his hand. The man saluted and drew back. The car went along a rough road which led across a great stretch of pastureland. On the ridge of the hills on his right, little groups of men were at work unlimbering guns. Once or twice, with a queer, screeching sound, a shell, like a little puff of white smoke, passed high over the car and fell somewhere in the grey valley below. In the distance he could see the movements of a body of troops through the trees, soldiers on the way to relieve their comrades in the trenches. As the morning broke, the trenches themselves came into view--long, zig-zag lines, silent, and with no sign of the men who crawled about inside like ants. He passed a great brewery transformed into a canteen, from which a line of waggons, going and returning, were passing all the time backwards and forwards into the valley. Every now and then through the stillness came the sharp crack of a rifle from the snipers lying hidden in the little stretches of woodland and marshland away on the right. A motor-omnibus, with its advertisement signs still displayed but a great red cross floating above it, came rocking down the road on its way to the field hospital in the distance. As yet, however, the business of fighting seemed scarcely to have commenced.

They passed several small houses and farms, in front of each of which was stationed a sentry. Once, from the hills behind, a great white-winged aeroplane glided over his head on its way to make a reconnaissance. Queerest sight of all, here and there were peasants at work in the fields. One old man leaned upon his spade and watched as the car passed. Not a dozen yards from him was a great hole in the ground where a shell had burst, and a little further away a barn in ruins. The car was forced to stop here to let a cavalcade of ammunition waggons pass by. Surgeon-Major Thomson leaned from his seat and spoke to the old man.

"You are not afraid of the German shells, then?" he asked.

"Monsieur," the old man answered, "one must live or die--it does not matter which. For the rest, if one is to live, one must eat. Therefore I work. Four sons I have and a nephew away yonder," he added, waving his hand southwards. "That is why I dig alone. Why do you not send us more soldiers, Monsieur l'Anglais?"

"Wait but a little time longer," Thomson answered cheerfully.

The old man looked sadly at his ruined barn.

"It is always 'wait,'" he muttered, "and one grows old and tired. Bonjour, monsieur!"

The car passed on again and suddenly dropped into a little protected valley. They came to a standstill before a tiny chateau, in front of which stretched what might once have been an ornamental garden, but which was now torn to pieces by gun carriages, convoy waggons, and every description of vehicle. From the top of the house stretched many wires. A sentry stood at the iron gates and passed Major Thomson after a perfunctory challenge. An office with mud-stained boots and wind-tossed hair, who looked as though he had been out all night, stood on the steps of the house and welcomed Thomson.

"Hullo, Major," he called out, "just across, eh?"

"This moment," Thomson assented. "Anything fresh?"

"Nothing to speak of," the other replied. "We've just had a message in that the French have been giving them a knock. We've had a quit time the last two days. They're bringing up some more Bavarians, we think."

"Do you think I could have a few words with the General?" Major Thomson asked.

"Come in and have some coffee. Yes, he'll see you, of course. He is in his own room with two of the flying men, just for the moment. I'll let you know when you can go in."

They passed into an apartment which had once been the dining-room of the chateau, and in which a long table was laid. One or two staff officers greeted Thomson, and the man who had brought him in attended to his wants.

"The General had his breakfast an hour ago," the latter observed. "We're pretty well forward here and we have to keep on the qui vive. We got some shells yesterday dropped within a quarter of a mile of us. I think we're going to try and give them a push back on the left flank. I'll go in and see about you, Thomson."

"Good fellow! You might tell them to give my chauffeur something. The destroyer that brought me over is waiting at Boulogne, and I want to be in London to-night."

One of the officers from the other side of the table, smiled queerly.

"London! My God!" he muttered. "There is still a London, I suppose? Savoy and Carlton going still? Pall Mall where it was?"

"And very much as it was," Thomson assured him. "London's wonderfully unchanged. You been out long?"

"September the second," was the cheerful reply. "I keep on getting promised a week but I can't bring it off."

"He's such a nut with the telephones," the man by his side explained, helping himself to marmalade. "The General positively can't spare him."

"Oh, chuck it!" the other exclaimed in disgust. "What about you?--the only man with an eye to a Heaven-ordained gun position, as old Wattles declared one day. We're all living wonders, Major," he went on, turning to Thomson, "but if I don't get a Sole Colbert and a grill at the Savoy, and a front seat at the Alhambra, before many weeks have passed, I shall get stale--that's what'll happen to me."

"Hope you'll have your hair cut before you go back, a man from the other end of the table remarked. "Your own mother wouldn't know you like that--much less your sweetheart."

The young man fingered his locks reflectively.

"Chap who was going to cut it for me got shot yesterday," he grumbled. "Anything doing as you came over the ridge, Major?"

Thomson shook his head.

"One aeroplane and a few shells."

"That would be Johnny Oates going out in his Bleriot," some one remarked. "He'll be back here before long with a report."

The officer who had met Thomson in the garden, re-entered the room.

"General says he'll see you at once," he announced.

Thomson followed his guide into a small back room. An officer was seated before a desk, writing, another was shouting down a telephone, and a third was making some measurements upon a large Ordnance map nailed upon one of the walls. The General was standing with his back to the fire and a pipe in his mouth. He nodded cheerily to Thomson.

"When did you leave London?" he asked.

"Nine o'clock last evening, sir," Thomson replied. "Rather a record trip. We had a special down and a destroyer over."

"And I'm going to tell you what you want to know," the General continued glancing at a document in his hand. "Well, close the door, Harewood. Out with it?"

"It's about Captain Granet of Harrison's staff," Thomson began.

The General frowned and knocked the ashes from his pipe.

"Well," he asked, "what is it?"

"We've reasons of our own for wishing to know exactly what you meant by asking the War Office not to send him back again," Thomson continued.

The General hesitated.

"Well, what are they?"

"They are a little intangible, sir," Thomson confessed, "but exceedingly important. Without any direct evidence, I have come to the conclusion that Captain Granet is a mysterious person and needs watching. As usual, we are in trouble with the civil authorities, and, to be frank with you, I am trying to strengthen my case."

The General shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well," he decided, "under the circumstances you have the right to know what my message meant. We sent Granet back because of a suspicion which may be altogether unjustifiable. The suspicion was there, however, and it was sufficiently strong for me to make up my mind that I should prefer not to have him back again. Now you shall know the facts very briefly. Granet was taken prisoner twice. No one saw him taken--as a matter of fact, both of the affairs were night attacks. He seemed suddenly to disappear--got too far ahead of his men, was his explanation. All I can say is that he was luckier than most of them. Anything wandering about loose in a British uniform--but there, I won't go on with that. He came back each time with information as to what he had seen. Each time we planned an attack on the strength of that information. Each time that information proved to be misleading and our attack failed, costing us heavy losses. Of course, dispositions might have been changed since his observations were made, but there the fact remains. Further," the General continued, filling his pipe slowly and pressing in the tobacco, "on the second occasion we had four hundred men thrown forward into the village of Ossray. They were moved in the pitch darkness, and silently. It was impossible for any word of their presence in Ossray to have been known to the Germans. Yet the night of Granet's capture the village was shelled, and those who escaped were cut off and made prisoners. Follow me, Major?"

"Yes, sir!" Thomson acquiesced.

"Those are just the facts," the General concluded. "Now on the other hand, Granet has handled his men well, shown great personal bravery, and has all the appearance of a keen soldier. I hate to do him a wrong even in my thoughts but there were others besides myself to whom these coincidences seemed amazing. We simply decided that they'd better give Granet a billet at home. That's the reason of my message."

"I am very much obliged to you, sir," Thomson said slowly. "You have given me exactly the information which we desire."

The General was called away for a moment to give some instructions to the young officer who was sitting in a distant corner of the room with a telephone band around his head. He signed to Thomson, however, to remain.

"Now that I have gratified your curiosity," he said, when he returned, "perhaps you will gratify mine? Will you tell me just how you over in England have come to have such suspicions of this man?"

"That," Thomson explained, "is almost a personal matter with me. Three months ago I spent the night with the Third Army Corps up by Niemen. I was there on other business, as you may imagine, but there was some hot fighting and I went out to help. I was attending to some of our fellows and got very near to the German lines. I became separated from the others a little and was groping about when I heard voices talking German within a few feet of me. I couldn't hear what they said but I could just

distinguish two figures. One of them made off towards the German lines. The other, after standing still for a moment, came in my direction. I took out my revolver, and to tell you the truth I very nearly fired on sight, for it would have been an exceedingly awkward matter for me to have been taken prisoner just then. Just as my finger was on the trigger, I became conscious that the man who was approaching was humming 'Tipperary.' I flashed my light on his face and saw at once that he was a British officer. He addressed me quickly in German. I answered him in English. I fancied for a moment that he seemed annoyed. 'We'd better get out of this,' he whispered. 'We're within a hundred yards of the German trenches and they are bringing searchlights up.' 'Who were you talking to just now?' I asked, as we stole along. 'No one at all,' he answered. I didn't take the thing seriously for the moment, although it seemed to me queer. Afterwards I regretted, however, that I hadn't set myself to discover the meaning of what was apparently a deliberate lie. The next time I met Granet was at a luncheon party at the Ritz, a few days ago. I recognised his face at once, although I had only seen it by the flash of my electric lamp. From that moment I have had my suspicions."

The General nodded. He was looking a little grave.

"It's a hateful thing to believe," he said, "that any one wearing his Majesty's uniform could ever play such a dastardly part. However, on the whole I am rather glad that it passed in that request to the War Office. Anything more we can do for you, Major?"

Thomson took the hint and departed. A few minutes later he was in his car and on his way back to Boulogne.