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Chapter 23

It was a queer little gathering in the drawing-room of Market Burnham Hall, queer and in a sense ominous. Two soldiers guarded the door. Another one stood with his back to the wide-flung window, the sunlight flashing upon his drawn bayonet. Granet, although he looked about him for a moment curiously, carried himself with ease and confidence.

"How do you do, Sir Meyville?" he said. "How are you, Thomson?"

Sir Meyville, who was in a state of great excitement, took absolutely no notice of the young man's greeting. Thomson pointed to a chair, in which Granet at once seated himself.

"I have sent for you, Captain Granet," the former began, "to ask you certain questions with reference to the events of last night."

"Delighted to tell you anything I can," Granet replied. "Isn't this a little out of your line, though, Thomson?"

Sir Meyville suddenly leaned forward.

"That is the young man," he declared. "I took him to be the officer in command here and I showed him over my workshop. Quite a mistake--absolutely a wrong impression!"

"It was a mistake for which you could scarcely hold me responsible," Granet protested, "and you must really excuse me if I fail to see the connection. Perhaps you will tell me, Major Thomson, what I am here for?"

Major Thomson seated himself before the desk and leaned a little back in his chair.

"We sent for you," he said, "because we are looking for two men who lit the magnesium light which directed the Zeppelin last night to this locality. One of them lies on the lawn there, with a bullet through his brain. We are still looking for the other."

"Do you imagine that I can be of any assistance to you?" Granet asked.

"That is our impression," Major Thomson admitted. "Perhaps you will be so good as to tell us what you were doing here last night?"

"Certainly," Granet replied. "About half-past ten last night I thought I heard the engine of an airship. We all went out on the lawn but could see nothing. However, I took that opportunity to get my car ready in case there was any excitement going. Later on, as I was on my way upstairs, I distinctly heard the sound once more. I went out, started my car, and drove down the lane. It seemed to be coming in this direction so I followed along, pulled up short of the house, climbed on the top of the bank and saw that extraordinary illumination from the marshland on the other side. I saw a man in a small boat fall back as though he were shot. A moment or two later I returned to my car and was accosted by two soldiers, to whom I gave my name and address. That is really all I know about the matter."

Major Thomson nodded.

"You had only just arrived, then, when the bombs were dropped?"

"I pulled up just before the illumination," Granet asserted.

Thomson looked at him thoughtfully.

"I am going to make a remark, Captain Granet," he said, "upon which you can comment or not, as you choose. Was not your costume last night rather a singular one for the evening? You say that you were on your way upstairs to undress when you heard the Zeppelin. Do you wear rubber shoes and a Norfolk jacket for dinner?"

Granet for a moment bit his lip.

"I laid out those things in case there was anything doing," he said. "As I told you, I felt sure that I had heard an airship earlier in the evening, and I meant to try and follow it if I heard it again."

There was a brief silence. Granet lounged a little back in his chair, but though his air of indifference was perfect, a sickening foreboding was creeping in upon him. He was conscious of failure, of blind, idiotic folly. Never before had he been guilty of such miserable short-sightedness. He fought desperately against the toils which he felt were gradually closing in upon him. There must be some way out!

"Captain Granet," he questioner continued, in his calm, emotionless tone, "according to your story you changed your clothes and reached here at the same time as the Zeppelin, after having heard its approach. It is four miles and a half to the Dormy House Club, and that Zeppelin must have been travelling at the rate of at least sixty miles an hour. Is your car capable of miracles?"

"It is capable of sixty miles an hour," Granet declared.

"Perhaps I may spare you the trouble," Thomson proceeded drily, "of further explanations, Captain Granet, when I tell you that your car was observed by one of the sentries quite a quarter of an hour before the arrival of the Zeppelins and the lighting of that flare. Your statements, to put it mildly, are irreconcilable with the facts of the case. I must ask you once more if you have any other explanation to give as to your movements last night?"

"What other explanation can I give?" Granet asked, his brain working fiercely. "I have told you the truth. What more can I say?"

"You have told me," Major Thomson went on, and his voice seemed like the voice of fate, "that you arrived here in hot haste simultaneously with the lighting of that flare and the dropping of the bombs. Not only one of the sentries on guard here, but two other people have given evidence that your car was out there in the lane for at least a quarter of an hour previous to the happenings of which I have just spoken. For the last time, Captain Granet, I must ask you whether you wish to amend your explanation?"

There was a little movement at the further end of the room. A curtain was drawn back and Isabel Worth came slowly towards them. She stood there, the curtains on either side of her, ghastly pale, her hands clasped in front of her, twitching nervously.

"I am very sorry," she said. "This is all my fault."

They stared at her in amazement. Only Granet, with an effort, kept his face expressionless. Sir Meyville began to mutter to himself.

"God bless my soul!" he mumbled. "Isabel, what do you want, girl? Can't you see that we are engaged?"

She took no notice of him. She turned appealingly towards Major Thomson.

"Can you send the soldiers away for a moment?" she begged. "I don't think that they will be needed."

Major Thomson gave a brief order and the men left the room. Isabel came a little nearer to the table. She avoided looking at Granet.

"I am very sorry indeed," she went on, "if anything I have done has caused all this trouble. Captain Granet came down here partly to play golf, partly at my invitation. He was here yesterday afternoon, as my father knows. Before he left--I asked him to come over last night."

There was a breathless silence. Isabel was standing at the end of the table, her fingers still clasped nervously together, a spot of intense colour in her cheeks. She kept her eyes turned sedulously away from Granet. Sir Meyville gripped her by the shoulder.

"What do you mean, girl?" he demanded harshly. "What do you mean by all this rubbish? Speak out."

Granet looked up for a moment.

"Don't," he begged. "I can clear myself, Miss Worth, if any one is mad enough to have suspicions about me. I should never--"

"The truth may just as well be told," she interrupted. "There is nothing to be ashamed of. It is hideously dull down here, and the life my father has asked me to lead for the last few months has been intolerable. I never sleep, and I invited Captain Granet to come over here at twelve o'clock last night and take me for a motor ride. I was dressed, meaning to go, and Captain Granet came to fetch me. It turned out to be impossible because of all the new sentries about the place, but that is why Captain Granet was here, and that," she concluded, turning to Major Thomson, "is why, I suppose, he felt obliged to tell you what was not the truth. It has been done before."

There was a silence which seemed composed of many elements. Sir Meyville Worth stood with his eyes fixed upon his daughter and an expression of blank, uncomprehending dismay in his features. Granet, a frown upon his forehead, was looking towards the floor. Thomson, with the air of seeing nobody, was studying them all in turn. It was he who spoke first.

"As you justly remark, Miss Worth," he observed, "this sort of thing has been done before. We will leave it there for the present. Will you come this way with me, if you please, Captain Granet? I won't trouble you, Miss Worth, or you, Sir Meyville. You might not like what we are going to see."

Granet rose at once to his feet.

"Of course, I will come wherever you like," he assented.

The two men passed together side by side, in momentous silence, across the stone hall, out of the house, and round the back of the garden to a wooden shed, before which was posted a sentry. The man stood on one side to let them pass. On the bare stone floor inside was stretched the dead body of Collins. The salt water was still oozing from his clothes and limbs, running away in little streams. There was a small blue hole in the middle of his forehead.

"This, apparently," Thomson said, "is the man who lit the magnesium light which showed the Zeppelin where to throw her bombs. The thing was obviously prearranged. Can you identify him?"

"Identify him?" Granet exclaimed. "Why, I was playing bowls with him yesterday afternoon. He is a Glasgow merchant named Collins, and a very fine golf player. He is staying at the Dormy House Club."

"He has also another claim to distinction," Major Thomson remarked drily, "for he is the man who fired those lights. The sergeant who shot him fancied that he heard voices on the creek, and crept up to the wall just before the flare came. The sergeant, I may add, is under the impression that there were two men in the boat."

Granet shook his head dubiously.

"I know nothing whatever of the man or his movements," he declared, "beyond what I have told you. I have scarcely spoken a dozen words to him in my life, and never before our chance meeting at the Dormy House."

"You do not, for instance, happen to know how he came here from the Dormy House?"

"If you mean did he come in my car," Granet answered easily, "please let me assure you that he did not. My errand here last night was indiscreet enough, but I certainly shouldn't have brought another man, especially a stranger, with me."

"Thank you," Major Thomson concluded, "that is all I have to say to you for the present."

"Has there been much damage done?" Granet inquired.

"Very little."

They had reached the corner of the avenue. Granet glanced down towards the road.

"I presume," he remarked, "that I am at liberty to depart?"

Thomson gave a brief order to the soldier who had been attending them.

"You will find the car in which you came waiting to take you back, Captain Granet, he announced.

The two men had paused. Granet was on the point of departure. With the passing of his sudden apprehension of danger, his curiosity was awakened.

"Do you mind telling me, Major Thomson," he asked, "how it is that you, holding, I presume, a medical appointment, were selected to conduct an inquiry like this? I have voluntarily submitted myself to your questioning, but if I had had anything to conceal I might have been inclined to dispute your authority."

Thomson's face was immovable. He simply pointed to the gate at the end of the avenue.

"If it had been necessary, Captain Granet," he said coldly, "I should have been able to convince you that I was acting under authority. As it is, I wish you good-morning."

Granet hesitated, but only for a moment. Then he shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"Good-morning, Major!"

He made his way down to the lane, which was still crowded with villagers and loungers. He was received with a shower of questions as he climbed into the car.

"Not much damage done that I can hear," he told them all. "The corner of the house caught fire and the lawn looks like a sand-pit."

He was driven in silence back to the Dormy House. When he arrived there the place was deserted. The other men were lunching at the golf club. He made his way slowly to the impromptu shed which served for a garage. His own car was standing there. He looked all around to make sure that he was absolutely alone. Then he lifted up the cushion by the driving-seat. Carefully folded and arranged in the corner were the horn-rimmed spectacles and the silk handkerchief of the man who was lying at Market Burnham with a bullet through his forehead.