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Chapter 24

Mr. Gordon Jones rose to his feet. It had been an interesting, in some respects a momentous interview. He glanced around the plain but handsomely furnished office, a room which betrayed so few evidences of the world-flung power of its owner.

"After all, Sir Alfred," he remarked, smiling, "I am not sure that it is Downing Street which rules. We can touch our buttons and move armies and battleships across the face of the earth. You pull down your ledger, sign your name, and you can strike a blow as deadly as any we can conceive."

The banker smiled.

"Let us be thankful, then," he said, "that the powers we wield are linked together in the great cause."

Mr. Gordon Jones hesitated.

"Such things, I know, are little to you, Sir Alfred," he continued, "but at the same time I want you to believe that his Majesty's Government will not be unmindful of your help at this juncture. To speak of rewards at such a time is perhaps premature. I know that ordinary honours do not appeal to you, yet it has been suggested to me by a certain person that I should assure you of the country's gratitude. In plain words, there is nothing you may ask for which it would not be our pleasure and privilege to give you."

Sir Alfred bowed slightly.

"You are very kind," he said. "Later on, perhaps, one may reflect. At present there seems to be only one stern duty before us, and for that one needs no reward."

The two men parted. Sir Alfred rose from the chair in front of his desk and threw himself into the easy-chair which his guest had been occupying. A ray of city sunshine found its way through the tangle of tall buildings on the other side of the street, lay in a zigzag path across his carpet, and touched the firm lines of his thoughtful face. He sat there, slowly tapping the sides of the chair with his pudgy fingers. So a great soldier might have sat, following out the progress of his armies in different countries, listening to the roar of their guns, watching their advance, their faltering, their success and their failures. Sir Alfred's vision was in a sense more sordid in many ways more complicated, yet it too, had its dramatic side. He looked at the money-markets of the world, he saw exchanges rise and fall. He saw in the dim vista no khaki-clad army with flashing bayonets, but a long, thin line of black-coated men with fallow faces, clutching their money-bags.

There was a knock at the door and his secretary entered.

"Captain Granet has been here for some time, sir," he announced softly.

The banker came back to the present. He woke up, indeed, with a little start.

"Show my nephew in at once," he directed. "I shall be engaged with him for at least a quarter of an hour. Kindly go round to the Bank of England and arrange for an interview with Mr. Williams for three o'clock this afternoon."

The clerk silently withdrew. Granet entered, a few minutes later. The banker greeted him pleasantly.

"Well, Ronnie," he exclaimed, "I thought that you were going to be down in Norfolk for a week! Come in. Bring your chair up to my side, so. This is one of my deaf mornings."

Granet silently obeyed. Sir Alfred glanced around the room. There was no possible hiding-place, not the slightest chance of being overheard.

"What about it, Ronnie?"

"We did our share," Granet answered. "Collins was there at the Dormy House Club. We got the signal and we lit the flare. They came down to within two or three hundred feet, and they must have thrown twenty bombs, at least. They damaged the shed but missed the workshop. The house caught fire, but they managed to put that out."

"You escaped all right, I'm glad to see?"

"They got Collins," Granet said, dropping his voice almost to a whisper. "He was shot by my side. They caught me, too. I've been in a few tight corners but nothing tighter than that. Who do you think was sent down from the War Office to hold an inquiry? Thomson--that fellow Thomson!"

The banker frowned.

"Do you mean the man who is the head of the hospitals?"

"Supposed to be," Granet answered grimly. "I am beginning to wonder--Tell me, you haven't heard anything more about him, have you?"

"Not a word," Sir Alfred replied. "Why should I?"

"Nothing except that I have an uncomfortable feeling about him," Granet went on. "I wish I felt sure that he was just what he professes to be. He is the one man who seems to suspect me. If it hadn't been for Isabel Worth, I was done for--finished--down at that wretched hole! He had me where I couldn't move. The girl lied and got me out of it."

Sir Alfred drummed for a moment with his fingers upon the table.

"I am not sure that these risks are worth while for you, Ronnie," he said.

The young man shrugged his shoulders. His face certainly seemed to have grown thinner during the last few days.

"I don't mind it so much abroad," he declared. "It seems a different thing there, somehow. But over here it's all wrong; it's the atmosphere, I suppose. And that fellow Thomson means mischief--I'm sure of it."

"Is there any reason for ill-feeling between you two?" the banker inquired.

Granet nodded.

"You've hit it, sir."

"Miss Conyers, eh?"

The young man's face underwent a sudden change.

"Yes," he confessed. "If I hadn't begun this, if I hadn't gone so far into it that no other course was possible, I think that I should have been content to be just what I seem to be--because of her."

Sir Alfred leaned back in his chair. He was looking at his nephew as a man of science might have looked at some interesting specimen.

"Well," he said, "I suppose you simply confirm the experience of the ages, but, frankly, you amaze me. You are moving amongst the big places of life, you are with those who are making history, and you would be content to give the whole thing up. For what? You would become a commonplace, easy-going young animal of a British soldier, for the sake of the affection of a good-looking, well-bred, commonplace British young woman. I don't understand you, Ronald. You have the blood of empire-makers in your veins. Your education and environment have developed an outward resemblance to the thing you profess to be, but behind--don't you feel the grip of the other things?"

"I feel them, right enough," Granet replied. "I have felt them for the last seven or eight years. But I am feeling something else, too, something which I dare say you never felt, something which I have never quite believed in."

Sir Alfred leaned back in his chair.

"In a way," he admitted, "this is disappointing. You are right. I have never felt the call of those other things. When I was a young man, I was frivolous simply when I felt inclined to turn from the big things of life for purposes of relaxation. When an alliance was suggested to me, I was content to accept it, but thank heavens I have been Oriental enough to keep women in my life where they belong. I am disappointed in you, Ronnie."

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

"I haven't flinched," he said.

"No, but the soft spot's there," was the grim reply. "However, let that go. Tell me why you came up? Wasn't it better to have stayed down at Brancaster for a little longer?"

"Perhaps," his nephew assented. "My arm came on a little rocky and I had to chuck golf. Apart from that, I wasn't altogether comfortable about things at Market Burnham. I was obliged to tell Thomson that I saw nothing of Collins that night but they know at the Dornby House Club that he started with me in the car and has never been heard of since. Then there was the young woman."

"Saved you by a lie, didn't she?" the banker remarked. "That may be awkward later on."

"I'm sick of my own affairs," Granet declared gloomily. "Is there anything fresh up here at all?"

Sir Alfred frowned slightly.

"Nothing very much," he said. "At the same time, there are distinct indications of a change which I don't like. With certain statesmen here at the top of the tree, it was perfectly easy for me to carry out any schemes which I thought necessary. During the last few weeks, however, there has been a change. Nominally, things are the same. Actually, I seem to find another hand at work, another hand which works with the censorship, too. One of my very trusted agents in Harwich made the slightest slip the other day. A few weeks ago, he would either have been fined twenty pounds or interned. Do you know what happened to him on Wednesday? Of course you don't he was arrested at one o'clock and shot in half an hour. Then you saw the papers this morning? All sailings between here and a certain little spot we know of have been stopped without a moment's warning. I am compelled to pause in several most interesting schemes."

"Nothing for me, I suppose?" Granet asked, a little nervously.

Sir Alfred looked at him.

"Not for the moment," he replied, "but there will be very soon. Take hold of yourself Ronnie. Don't look downwards so much. You and I are walking in the clouds. It is almost as bad to falter as to slip. Confess--you've been afraid."

"I have," Granet admitted, "not afraid of death but afraid of what might follow upon discovery. I am half inclined, if just one thing in the world came my way, to sail for New York to-morrow and start again."

"When those fears come to you," Sir Alfred continued slowly, "consider me. I run a greater risk than you. There are threads from this office stretching to many corners of England, to many corners of America, to most cities of Europe. If a man with brains should seize upon any one of them, he might follow it backwards--even here."

Sir Alfred touched his chest for a moment. Then his hand dropped to his side and he proceeded.

"For twenty-eight years I have ruled the money-markets of the world. No Cabinet Council is held in this country at which my influence is not represented. The Ministers

come to me one by one for help and advice. I represent the third great force of war, and there isn't a single member of the present Government who doesn't look upon me as the most important person in the country. Yet I, too, have enemies, Ronnie. There is the halfpenny Press. They'd give a million for the chance that may come at any day. They'd print my downfall in blacker lines than the declaration of war. They'd shriek over my ruin with a more brazen-throated triumph even than they would greet the heralds of peace. And the threads are there, Ronald. Sometimes I feel one shiver a little. Sometimes I have to stretch out my arm and brush too curious an inquirer into the place where curiosity ends. I sit and watch and I am well served. There are men this morning at Buckingham Palace with a V.C. to be pinned upon their breast, who faced dangers for ten minutes, less than I face day and night."

Granet rose to his feet.

"For a moment," he exclaimed, "I had forgotten! . . . Tell me," he added, with sudden vigour, "what have we don't it for? You made your great name in England, you were Eton and Oxford. Why is it that when the giant struggle comes it should be Germany who governs your hear, it should be Germany who calls even to me?"

Sir Alfred held out his hand. His eye had caught the clock.

"Ronnie," he said, "have you ever wondered why in a flock of sheep every lamb knows its mother? Germany was the mother of our stock. Birth, life and education count for nothing when the great days come, when the mother voice speaks. It isn't that we are false to England, it is that we are true to our own. You must go now, Ronnie! I have an appointment."

Granet walked out to the street a little dazed, and called for a taxi.

"I suppose that must be it," he muttered to himself.