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Chapter 2

The little party trooped out of the restaurant and made their way to a corner of the lounge, where tables had already been prepared with coffee and liqueurs. Geraldine Conyers and Captain Granet, who had lingered behind, found a table to themselves. Lady Anselman laid her fingers upon Major Thomson's arm.

"Please talk for a few more minutes to Selarne," she begged. "Your French is such a relief to her."

He obeyed immediately, although his eyes strayed more than once towards the table at which Captain Granet and his companion were seated. Madame Selarne was in a gossipy mood and they found many mutual acquaintances.

"To speak a foreign language as you do," she told him, "is wonderful. Is it in French alone, monsieur, that you excel, or are you, perhaps, a great linguist?"

"I can scarcely call myself that," he replied, "but I do speak several other languages. In my younger days I travelled a good deal."

"German, perhaps, too?" she inquired with a little grimace.

"I was at a hospital in Berlin," he confessed.

Lady Anselman's party was suddenly increased by the advent of some acquaintances from an adjoining table, all of whom desired to be presented to Madame Selarne. Major Thomson, set at liberty, made his way at once towards the small table at which Captain Granet and Geraldine Conyers were seated. She welcomed him with a smile.

"Are you coming to have coffee with us?" she asked?

"If I may," he answered. "I shall have to be off in a few minutes."

A waiter paused before their table and offered a salver on which were several cups of coffee and liqueur glasses. Captain Granet leaned forward in his place and stretched out his hand to serve his companion. Before he could take the cup, however, the whole tray had slipped from the waiter's fingers, caught the corner of the table, and fallen with its contents on to the carpet. The waiter himself--a small, undersized person with black, startled eyes set at that moment in a fixed and unnatural stare--made one desperate effort to save himself and then fell backwards. Every one turned around, attracted by the noise of the falling cups and the sharp, half-stifled groan which broke from the man's lips. Captain Granet sprang to his feet.

"Good heavens! The fellow's in a fit!" he exclaimed.

The maitre d'hotel and several waiters came hurrying up towards the prostrate figure, by the side of which Major Thomson was already kneeling. The manager, who appeared upon the scene as though by magic, and upon whose face was an expression of horror that his clients should have been so disturbed, quickly gave his orders. The man was picked up and carried away. Major Thomson followed behind. Two or three waiters in a few seconds succeeded in removing the debris of the accident, the orchestra commenced a favourite waltz. The maitre d'hotel apologised to the little groups of people for the commotion--they were perhaps to blame for having employed a young man so delicate--he was scarcely fit for service.

"He seemed to be a foreigner," Lady Anselman remarked, as the man addressed his explanations to her.

"He was a Belgian, madam. He was seriously wounded at the commencement of the war. We took him direct from the hospital."

"I hope the poor fellow will soon recover," Lady Anselman declared. "Please do not think anything more of the affair so far as we are concerned. You must let me know later on how he is."

The maitre d'hotel retreated with a little bow. Geraldine turned to Captain Granet.

"I think," she said, "that you must be very kind-hearted, for a soldier."

He turned and looked at her.

"Why?"

"You must have been so many horrible sights--so many dead people, and yet--"

"Well?" he persisted.

"There was something in your face when the man staggered back, a kind of horror almost. I am sure you felt it quite as much as any of us."

He was silent for a moment.

"In a battlefield," he observed slowly, "one naturally becomes a little callous, but here it is different. The fellow did look ghastly ill, didn't he? I wonder what was really the matter with him."

"We shall know when Major Thomson returns," she said.

Granet seemed scarcely to hear her words. A curious fit of abstraction had seized him. His head was turned towards the corridor, he seemed to be waiting.

"Queer sort of stick, Thomson," he remarked presently. "Is he a great friend of yours, Miss Conyers?"

She hesitated for a moment.

"I have known him for some time."

Something in her tone seemed to disturb him. He leaned towards her quickly. His face had lost its good-humoured indifference. He was evidently very much in earnest.

"Please don't think me impertinent," he begged, "but--is he a very great friend?"

She did not answer. She was looking over his shoulder towards where Major Thomson, who had just returned, was answering a little stream of questions.

"The man is in a shockingly weak state," he announced. "He is a Belgian, has been wounded and evidently subjected to great privations. His heart is very much weakened. He had a bad fainting fit, but with a long rest he may recover."

The little party broke up once more into groups. Granet, who had drawn for a moment apart and seemed to be adjusting the knots of his sling, turned to Thomson.

"Has he recovered consciousness yet?" he asked.

"Barely," was the terse reply.

"There was no special cause for his going off like that, I suppose?"

Surgeon-Major Thomson's silence was scarcely a hesitation. He was standing perfectly still, his eyes fixed upon the young soldier.

"At present," he said, "I am not quite clear about that. If you are ready, Geraldine?"

She nodded and they made their farewells to Lady Anselman. Granet looked after them with a slight frown. He drew his aunt on one side for a moment.

"Why is Miss Conyers here without a chaperon?" he asked. "And why did she go away with Thomson?"

Lady Anselman laughed.

"Didn't she tell you?"

"Tell me what?" he insisted eagerly.

Lady Anselman looked at her nephew curiously.

"Evidently," she remarked, "your progress with the young lady was not so rapid as it seemed, or she would have told you her secret--which, by-the-bye, isn't a secret at all. She and Major Thomson are engaged to be married."