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Chapter 26

Surgeon-Major Thomson reeled for a moment and caught at the paling by his side. Then he recovered himself almost as quickly, and, leaning forward, gazed eagerly at the long, grey racing-car which was already passing Buckingham Palace and almost out of sight in the slight morning fog. There was a very small cloud of white smoke drifting away into space, and a faint smell of gunpowder in the air. He felt his cheek and, withdrawing his fingers, gazed at them with a little nervous laugh--they were wet with blood.

He looked up and down the broad pathway. For nine o'clock in the morning the Birdcage Walk was marvellously deserted. A girl, however, who had been driving a small car very slowly on the other side of the road, suddenly swung across, drew up by the kerb and leaned towards him.

"Hugh--Major Thomson, what is the matter with you?"

He dabbed his cheek with his pocket handkerchief.

"Nothing," he answered simply.

"Don't be silly!" she exclaimed. "I felt certain that I heard a shot just now, and I saw you reel and spin round for a moment. And your cheek, too--it's all over blood!"

He smiled.

"A bullet did come my way and just graze my cheek," he admitted. "Most extraordinary thing. I wonder whether one of those fellows in the Park had an accident with his rifle."

He glanced thoughtfully across towards where a number of khaki-clad figures were dimly visible behind the railings. Geraldine looked at him severely.

"Of course," she began, "if you really think that I don't know the difference between the report of a pistol and a rifle shot--"

He interrupted her.

"I was wrong," he confessed. "Forgive me. You see, my head was a little turned. Some one did deliberately fire at me, and I believe it was from a grey racing-car. I couldn't see who was driving it and it was out of sight almost at once."

"But I never heard of such a thing!" she exclaimed. "Why on earth should they fire at you? You haven't any enemies, have you?"

"Not that I know of," he assured her.

She stepped from the car and came lightly over to his side.

"Take your handkerchief away," she ordered. "Don't be foolish. You forget that I am a certificated nurse."

He raised his handkerchief and she looked for a moment at the long scar. Her face grew serious.

"Another half-inch," she murmured,--"Hugh, what an abominable thing! A deliberate attempt at murder here, at nine o'clock in the morning, in the Park! I can't understand it."

"Well, I've been under fire before," he remarked, smiling.

"Get into my car at once," she directed. "I'll drive you to a chemist's and put something on that. You can't go about as you are, and it will have healed up then in a day or two."

He obeyed at once and she drove off.

"Of course, I'm a little bewildered about it still," she went on. "I suppose you ought to go to the police-station. It was really a deliberate attempt at assassination, wasn't it? If you had been--"

She paused and he completed her sentence with a humorous twinkle in his eyes.

"If I had been a person of importance, eh? Well, you see, even I must have been in somebody's way."

She drove in silence for some little distance.

"Hugh," she asked abruptly, "why did the War Office send you down to Market Burnham after that Zeppelin raid?"

His face was suddenly immovable. He turned his head very slightly.

"Did Granet tell you that?"

She nodded.

"Captain Granet came to see me yesterday afternoon. He seemed as much surprised as I was. You were a little hard on him, weren't you?"

"I think not!"

"But why were you sent down?" she persisted. "I can't imagine what you have to do with a Zeppelin raid."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I really don't think it is worth while your bothering about the bandage," he said.

"Hugh, you make me so angry!" she exclaimed. "Of course, you may say that I haven't the right to ask, but still I can't see why you should be so mysterious. . . . Here's the chemist's. Now come inside with me, please."

He followed her obediently into the shop at the top of Trafalgar Square. She dressed his wound deftly and adjusted a bandage around his head.

"If you keep that on all day," she said, "I think--but I forgot. I was treating you like an ordinary patient. Don't laugh at me, sir. I am sure none of your professional nurses could have tied that up any better."

"Of course they couldn't," he agreed. "By-the-bye, have you obtained your papers for Boulogne yet?"

"I expect to be going next week. Lady Headley promised to let me know this afternoon. Now I'll take you down to the War Office, if you like."

He took his place once more by her side.

"Hugh," she inquired, "have you any idea who fired that shot?"

"None whatever," he replied, "no definite idea, that is to say. It was some one who as driving a low, grey car. Do we know any one who possesses such a thing?"

She frowned. The exigencies of the traffic prevented her glancing towards him.

"Only Captain Granet," she remarked, "and I suppose even your dislike of him doesn't go so far as to suggest that he is likely to play the would-be murderer in broad daylight."

"It certainly does seem a rather rash and unnecessary proceeding," he assented, "but the fact remains that some one thought it worth while."

"Some one with a grudge against the Chief Inspector of Hospitals," she observed drily.

He did not reply. They drew up outside the War Office.

"Thank you very much," he said, "for playing the Good Samaritan."

She made a little grimace. Suddenly her manner became more earnest. She laid her fingers upon his arm as he stood on the pavement by her side.

"Hugh," she said, "before you go let me tell you something. I think that the real reason why I lost some of my affection for you was because you persisted in treating me without any confidence at all. The little things which may have happened to you abroad, the little details of your life, the harmless side of your profession--there were so many things I should have been interested in. And you told me nothing. There were things which seemed to demand an explanation with regard to your position. You ignored them. You seemed to enjoy moving in a mysterious atmosphere. It's worse than ever now. I am intelligent, am I not--trustworthy?"

"You are both," he admitted gravely. "Thank you very much for telling me this, Geraldine."

"You still have nothing to say to me?" she asked, looking him in the face.

"Nothing," he replied.

She nodded, slipped in her clutch and drove off. Surgeon-Major Thomson entered the War Office and made his way up many stairs and along many wide corridors to a large room on the top floor of the building. Two men were seated at desks, writing. He passed them by with a little greeting and entered an inner apartment. A pile of letters stood upon his desk. He examined them one by one, destroyed some, made pencil remarks upon others. Presently there was a tap at the door and Ambrose entered.

"Chief's compliments and he would be glad if you would step round to his room at once, sir," he announced.

Thomson locked his desk, made his way to the further end of the building and was admitted through a door by which a sentry was standing, to an anteroom in which a dozen people were waiting. His guide passed him through to an inner apartment, where a man was seated alone. He glanced up at Thomson's entrance.

"Good morning, Thomson!" he said brusquely. "Sit down, please. Leave the room, Dawkes, and close the door. Thanks! Thomson, what about this request of yours?"

"I felt bound to bring the matter before you, sir," Thomson replied. "I made my application to the censor and you know the result."

The Chief swung round in his chair.

"Look here," he said, "the censor's department has instructions to afford you every possible assistance in any researches you make. There are just twenty-four names in the United Kingdom which have been admitted to the privileges of free correspondence. The censor has no right to touch any letters addressed to them. Sir Alfred Anselman is upon that list."

Thomson nodded gravely.

"So I have been given to understand," he remarked.

The Chief leaned back in his chair. His cold grey eyes were studying the other's face.

"Thomson," he continued, "I know that you are not a sensationalist. At the same time, this request of yours is a little nerve-shattering, isn't it? Sir Alfred Anselman has been the Chancellor's right-hand man. It was mainly owing to his efforts that the war loan was such a success. He has done more for us in the city than any other Englishman. He has given large sums to the various war funds, his nephew is a very distinguished young officer. Now there suddenly comes a request from you to have the censor pass you copies of all his Dutch correspondence. There'd be the very devil to pay if I consented."

Thomson cleared his throat for a moment.

"Sir," he said, "you and I have discussed this matter indirectly more than once. You are not yet of my opinion but you will be. The halfpenny Press has sickened us so with the subject of spies that the man who groans about espionage to-day is avoided like a pestilence. Yet it is my impression that there is in London, undetected and unsuspected, a marvellous system of German espionage, a company of men who have sold themselves to the enemy, whose names we should have considered above reproach. It is my job to sift this matter to the bottom. I can only do so if you will give me supreme power over the censorship."

"Look here, Thomson," the Chief demanded, "you don't suspect Sir Alfred Anselman?"

"I do, sir!"

The Chief was obviously dumbfounded. He sat, for a few moments, thinking.

"You're a sane man, too, Thomson," he muttered, "but it's the most astounding charge I've ever heard."

"It's the most astounding conspiracy," Thomson replied. "I was in Germany a few weeks ago, as you know."

"I heard all about it. A very brilliant but a very dangerous exploit, that of yours, Thomson."

"I will tell you my impressions, sir," the latter continued. "The ignorance displayed in the German newspapers about England is entirely a matter of censorship. Their actual information as regards every detail of our military condition is simply amazing. They know exactly what munitions are reaching our shores from abroad, they know how we are paying for them, they know exactly our financial condition, they know all about our new guns, they know just how many men we could send over to France to-morrow and how many we could get through in three months' time. They know the private views of every one of the Cabinet Ministers. They knew in Berlin yesterday what took place at the Cabinet Council the day before. You must realise yourself that some of this is true. How does the information get through?"

"There are spies, of course," the Chief admitted.

"The ordinary spy could make no such reports as the Germans are getting hour by hour. If I am to make a success of my job, I want the letters of Sir Alfred Anselman."

The Chief considered for several moments. Then he wrote a few lines on a sheet of paper.

"There'll be the perfect devil to pay," he said simply. "We shall have Cabinet Ministers running about the place like black beetles. What's the matter with your head?"

"I was shot at in the Park," Thomson explained. "A man had a flying go at me from a motor-car."

"Was he caught?"

Thomson shook his head.

"I didn't try," he replied. "I want him at liberty. His time will come when I break up this conspiracy, if I do it at all."

The Chief looked a little aggrieved.

"No one's even let off a pop-gun at me," he grumbled. "They must think you're the more dangerous of the two, Thomson. You'd better do what you can with that order as soon as possible. No telling how soon I may have to rescind it."

Thomson took the hint and departed. He walked quickly back to his room, thrust the order he had received into an envelope, and sent it round to the Censor's Department.