
Chapter 15

Mr. Fentolin led the way to a delightful little corner of his library, where before the open grate, recently piled with hissing logs, an easy chair had been drawn. He wheeled himself up to the other side of the hearthrug and leaned back with a little air of exhaustion. The butler, who seemed to have appeared unsummoned from somewhere among the shadows, served coffee and poured some old brandy into large and wonderfully thin glasses.

"Why my house should be turned into an asylum to gratify the hospitable instincts of my young nephew, I cannot imagine," Mr. Fentolin grumbled. "A most extraordinary person, our visitor, I can assure you. Quite violent, too, he was at first."

"Have you had any outside advice about his condition?" Hamel inquired.

Mr. Fentolin glanced across those few feet of space and looked at Hamel with swift suspicion.

"Why should I?" he asked. "Doctor Sarson is fully qualified, and the case seems to present no unusual characteristics."

Hamel sipped his brandy thoughtfully.

"I don't know why I suggested it," he admitted. "I only thought that an outside doctor might help you to get rid of the fellow."

Mr. Fentolin shrugged his shoulders.

"After all," he said, "the matter is of no real consequence. Doctor Sarson assures me that we shall be able to send him on his way very shortly. In the meantime, Mr. Hamel, what about the Tower?"

"What about it?" Hamel asked, selecting a cigar from the box which had been pushed to his side. "I am sure I haven't any wish to inconvenience you."

"I will be quite frank," Mr. Fentolin declared. "I do not dispute your right for a moment. On the other hand, my few hours daily down there have become a habit with me. I do not wish to give them up. Stay here with us, Mr. Hamel. You will be doing us a great kindness. My nephew and niece have too little congenial society. Make up your mind to give us a fortnight of your time, and I can assure you that we will do our best to make yours a pleasant stay."

Hamel was a little taken aback.

"Mr. Fentolin," he said, "I couldn't think of accepting your hospitality to such an extent. My idea in coming here was simply to fulfil an old promise to my father and to rough it at the Tower for a week or so, and when that was over, I don't suppose I should ever be likely to come back again. You had better let me carry out that plan, and afterwards the place shall be entirely at your disposal."

"You don't quite understand," Mr. Fentolin persisted, a little irritably. "I sit there every morning. I want, for instance, to be there to-morrow morning, and the next morning, and the morning afterwards, to finish a little seascape I have commenced. Nowhere else will do. Call it a whim or what you will I have begun the picture, and I want to finish it."

"Well, you can sit there all right," Hamel assured him. "I shall be out playing golf or fishing. I shall do nothing but sleep there."

"And very uncomfortable you will be," Mr. Fentolin pointed out. "You have no servant, I understand, and there is no one in the village fit to look after you. Think of my thirty-nine empty rooms, my books here, my gardens, my motor-cars, my young people, entirely at your service. You can have a suite to yourself. You can disappear when you like. To all effects and purposes you will be the master of St. David's Hall. Be reasonable. Don't you think, now, that you can spend a fortnight more pleasantly under such circumstances than by playing the misanthrope down at the Tower?"

"Please don't think," Hamel begged, "that I don't appreciate your hospitality. I should feel uncomfortable, however, if I paid you a visit of the length you have suggested. Come, I don't see," he added, "why my occupation of the Tower should interfere with you. I should be away from it by about nine or ten o'clock every morning. I should probably only sleep there. Can't you accept the use of it all the rest of the time? I can assure you that you will be welcome to come and go as though it were entirely your own."

Mr. Fentolin had lit a cigarette and was watching the blue smoke curl upwards to the ceiling.

"You're an obstinate man, Mr. Hamel," he sighed, "but I suppose you must have your own way. By-the-by, you would only need to use the up-stairs room and the sitting-room. You will not need the outhouse - rather more than an outhouse, though isn't it? I mean the shed which leads out from the kitchen, where the lifeboat used to be kept?"

"I don't think I shall need that," Hamel admitted, a little hesitatingly.

"To tell you the truth," Mr. Fentolin continued, "among my other hobbies I have done a little inventing. I work sometimes at a model there. It is foolish, perhaps, but I wish no one to see it. Do you mind if I keep the keys of the place?"

"Not in the least," Hamel replied. "Tell me, what direction do your inventions take, Mr. Fentolin?"

"Before you go," Mr. Fentolin promised, "I will show you my little model at work. Until then we will not talk of it. Now come, be frank with me. Shall we exchange ideas for a little time? Will you talk of books? They are my daily friends. I have thousands of them, beloved companions on every side. Or will you talk of politics or travel? Or would you

rather be frivolous with my niece and nephew? That, I think, is Esther playing."

"To be quite frank," Hamel declared bluntly, "I should like to talk to your niece."

Mr. Fentolin smiled as though amused. His amusement, however, was perfectly good-natured.

"If you will open this door," he said, "you will see another one exactly opposite to you. That is the drawing-room. You will find Esther there. Before you go, will you pass me the Quarterly Review? Thank you."

Hamel crossed the hall, opened the door of the room to which he had been directed, and made his way towards the piano. Esther was there, playing softly to herself with eyes half closed. He came and stood by her side, and she stopped abruptly. Her eyes questioned him. Then her fingers stole once more over the keys, more softly still.

"I have just left your uncle," Hamel said. "He told me that I might come in here."

"Yes?" she murmured.

"He was very hospitable," Hamel continued. "He wanted me to remain here as a guest and not go to the Tower at all."

"And you?"

"I am going to the Tower," he said. "I am going there to-morrow or the day after."

The music swelled beneath her fingers.

"For how long?"

"For a week or so. I am just giving your uncle time to clear out his belongings. I am leaving him the outhouse."

"He asked you to leave him that?" she whispered.

"Yes!

"You are not going in there at all?"

"Not at all."

Again she played a little more loudly for a few moments. Then the music died away once more.

"What reason did he give for keeping possession of that?"

"Another bobby," Hamel replied. "He is an inventor, it seems. He has the model of something there; he would not tell me what."

She shivered a little, and her music drifted away. She bent over the keys, her face hidden from him.

"You will not go away just yet?" she asked softly. "You are going to stay for a few days, at any rate?"

"Without a doubt," he assured her. "I am altogether my own master."

"Thank God," she murmured.

He leaned with his elbow against the top of the piano, looking down at her. Since dinnertime she had fastened a large red rose in the front of her gown.

"Do you know that this is all rather mysterious?" he said calmly.

"What is mysterious?" she demanded.

"The atmosphere of the place: your uncle's queer aversion to my having the Tower; your visitor upstairs, who fights with the servants while we are at dinner; your uncle himself, whose will seems to be law not only to you but to your brother, who must be of age, I should think, and who seems to have plenty of spirit."

"We live here, both of us," she told him. "He is our guardian."

"Naturally," Hamel replied, "and yet, it may have been my fancy, of course, but at dinnertime I seemed to get a queer impression."

"Tell it me?" she insisted, her fingers breaking suddenly into a livelier melody. "Tell it me at once? You were there all the time. I could see you watching. Tell me what you thought?"

She had turned her head now, and her eyes were fixed upon his. They were large and soft, capable, he knew, of infinite expression. Yet at that moment the light that shone from them was simply one of fear, half curious, half shrinking.

"My impression," he said, "was that both of you disliked and feared Mr. Fentolin, yet for some reason or other that you were his abject slaves."

Her fingers seemed suddenly inspired with diabolical strength and energy. Strange chords crashed and broke beneath them. She played some unfamiliar music with tense and fierce energy. Suddenly she paused and rose to her feet.

"Come out on to the terrace," she invited. "You are not afraid of cold?"

He followed her without a word. She opened the French windows, and they stepped out on to the long, broad stone promenade. The night was dark, and there was little

to be seen. The light was burning at the entrance to the waterway; a few lights were twinkling from the village. The soft moaning of the sea was distinctly audible. She moved to the edge of the palisading. He followed her closely.

"You are right, Mr. Hamel," she said. "I think that I am more afraid of him than any woman ever was of any man in this world."

"Then why do you live here?" he protested. "You must have other relations to whom you could go. And your brother - why doesn't he do something - go into one of the professions? He could surely leave easily enough?"

"I will tell you a secret," she answered calmly. "Perhaps it will help you to understand. You know my uncle's condition. You know that it was the result of an accident?"

"I have heard so," he replied gravely.

She clutched at his arm.

"Come," she said.

Side by side they walked the entire length of the terrace. When they reached the corner, they were met with a fierce gust of wind. She battled along, and he followed her. They were looking inland now. There were no lights visible - nothing but dark, chaotic emptiness. From somewhere below him he could hear the wind in the tree-tops.

"This way," she directed. "Be careful."

They walked to the very edge of the palisading. It was scarcely more than a couple of feet high. She pointed downwards.

"Can you see?" she whispered.

By degrees his eyes faintly penetrated the darkness. It was as though they were looking down a precipice. The descent was perfectly sheer for nearly a hundred feet. At the bottom were the pine trees.

"Come here again in the morning," she whispered. "You will see then. I brought you here to show you the place. It was here that the accident happened."

"What accident?"

"Mr. Fentolin's," she continued. "It was here that he went over. He was picked up with both his legs broken. They never thought that he would live."

Hamel shivered a little. As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he saw more distinctly than ever the sheer fall, the tops of the bending trees below.

"What a horrible thing!" he exclaimed.

"It was more horrible than you know," she continued, dropping her voice a little, almost whispering in his ear. "I do not know why I tell you this - you, a stranger - but if I do not tell some one, I think that the memory of it will drive me mad. It was no accident at all. Mr. Fentolin was thrown over!"

"By whom?" he asked.

She clung to his arm for a moment.

"Ah, don't ask me!" she begged. "No one knows. My uncle gave out, as soon as he was conscious, that it was an accident."

"That, at any rate, was fine of him," Hamel dedared.

She shivered.

"He was proud, at least, of our family name. Whatever credit he deserves for it, he must have. It was owing to that accident that we became his slaves: nothing but that - his absolute slaves, to wait upon him, if he would, hand and foot. You see, he has never been able to marry. His life was, of course, ruined. So the burden came to us. We took it up, little thinking what was in store for us. Five years ago we came here to live. Gerald wanted to go into the army; I wanted to travel with my mother. Gerald has done all the work secretly, but he has never been allowed to pass his examinations. I have never left England except to spend two years at the strictest boarding-school in Paris, to which I was taken and fetched away by one of his creatures. We live here, with the shadow of this thing always with us. We are his puppets. If we hesitate to do his bidding, he reminds us. So far, we have been his creatures, body and soul. Whether it will go on, I cannot say - oh, I cannot say! It is bad for us, but - there is mother, too. He makes her life a perfect hell!"

A roar of wind came booming once more across the marshes, bending the trees which grew so thickly beneath them and which ascended precipitately to the back of the house. The French windows behind rattled. She looked around nervously.

"I am afraid of him all the time," she murmured. "He seems to overhear everything - he or his creatures. Listen!"

They were silent for several moments. He whispered in her ear so closely that through the darkness he could, see the fire in her eyes.

"You are telling me half," he said. "Tell me everything. Who threw your uncle over the parapet?"

She stood by his side, motionless and trembling.

"It was the passion of a moment," she said at last, speaking hoarsely. "I cannot tell you. Listen! Listen!"

"There is no one near," Hamel assured her. "It is the wind which shakes the windows. I wish that you would tell me everything. I would like to be your friend. Believe me, I have that desire, really. There are so many things which I do not understand. That it is dull here for you, of course, is natural, but there is something more than that. You seem always to fear something. Your uncle is a selfish man, naturally, although to look at him he seems to have the disposition of an angel. But beyond that, is there anything of which you are afraid? You seem all the time to live in fear."

She suddenly clutched his hand. There was nothing of affection in her touch, and yet he felt a thrill of delight.

"There are strange things which happen here," she whispered, "things which neither Gerald nor I understand. Yet they terrify us. I think that very soon the end will come. Neither of us can stand it very much longer. We have no friends. Somehow or other, he seems to manage to keep us always isolated."

"I shall not go away from here," Hamel said firmly, "at present. Mind, I am not at all sure that, living this solitary life as you do, you have not become a little over-nervous; that you have not exaggerated the fear of some things. To me your uncle seems merely quixotic and egregiously selfish. However that may be, I am going to remain." She clutched once, more at his arm, her finger was upraised. They listened together. From somewhere behind them came the clear, low wailing of a Violin.

"It is Mr. Fentolin," she whispered. "Please come in; let us go in at once. He only plays when he is excited. I am afraid! Oh, I am afraid that something is going to happen!"

She was already round the corner and on her way to the main terrace. He followed her closely.