

Literature.org:
[Authors](#)
[Contact](#)

[The Vanished Messenger](#)

[E. Phillips Oppenheim](#)

This Book:
[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 17

Mr. Fentolin, having succeeded in getting rid of his niece and his somewhat embarrassing guest for at least two hours, was seated in his study, planning out a somewhat strenuous morning, when his privacy was invaded by Doctor Sarson.

"Our guest," the latter announced, in his usual cold and measured tones, "has sent me to request that you will favour him with an interview."

Mr. Fentolin laid his pen deliberately down.

"So soon," he murmured. "Very well, Sarson, I am at his service. Say that I will come at once."

Mr. Fentolin lost no time in paying this suggested visit. Mr. John P. Dunster, shaved and clothed, was seated in an easy-chair drawn up to the window of his room, smoking what he was forced to confess was a very excellent cigar. He turned his head as the door opened, and Mr. Fentolin waved his hand pleasantly.

"Really," he declared, "this is most agreeable. I had an idea, Mr. Dunster, that I should find you a reasonable person. Men of your eminence in their profession usually are."

Mr. Dunster looked at the speaker curiously.

"And what might my profession be, Mr. Fentolin?" he asked. "You seem to know a great deal about me."

"It is true," Mr. Fentolin admitted. "I do know a great deal."

Mr. Dunster knocked the ash from his cigar.

"Well," he said, "I have been the hearer of several important communications from my side of the Atlantic to England and to the Continent, and I have always known that there was a certain amount of risk in the business. Once I had an exceedingly narrow shave," he continued reminiscently, "but this is the first time I have ever been dead up against it, and I don't mind confessing that you've fairly got me puzzled. Who the mischief are you, Mr. Fentolin, and what are you interfering about?"

Mr. Fentolinn smiled queerly.

"I am what you see," he replied. "I am one of those unfortunate human beings who, by reason of their physical misfortunes, are cut off from the world of actual life. I have been compelled to seek distraction in strange quarters. I have wealth - great wealth I suppose I should say; an inordinate curiosity, a talent for intrigue. As to the direction in which I carry on my intrigues, or even as to the direct interests which I study, that is a matter, Mr. Dunster, upon which I shall not gratify your curiosity nor anybody else's. But, you see, I am admitting freely that it does interest me to interfere in great affairs."

"But how on earth did you get to know about me," Mr. Dunster asked, "and my errand? You couldn't possibly have got me here in an ordinary way. It was an entire fluke."

"There, you speak with some show of reason. I have a nephew whom you have met, who is devoted to me."

"Mr. Gerald Fentolin," Mr. Dunster remarked drily.

"Precisely," Mr. Fentolin declared. "Well, I admit frankly the truth of what you say. Your - shall we say capture, was by way of being a gigantic fluke. My nephew's instructions simply were to travel down by the train to Harwich with you, to endeavour to make your acquaintance, to follow you on to your destination, and, if any chance to do so occurred, to relieve you of your pocket-book. That, however, I never ventured to expect. What really happened was, as you have yourself suggested, almost in the nature of a miracle. My nephew showed himself to be possessed of gifts which were a revelation to me. He not only succeeded in travelling with you by the special train, but after its wreck he was clever enough to bring you here, instead of delivering you over to the mercies of a village doctor. I really cannot find words to express my appreciation of my nephew's conduct."

"I could," Mr. Dunster muttered, "very easily!"

Mr. Fentolin sighed gently.

"Perhaps our points of view might differ."

"We have spent a very agreeable few minutes in explanations," Mr. Dunster continued. "Would it be asking too much if I now suggest that we remove the buttons from our foils?"

"Why not?" Mr. Fentolin assented smoothly. "Your first question to yourself, under these circumstances, would naturally be: 'What does Mr. Fentolin want with me?' I will answer that question for you. All that I ask - it is really very little - is the word agreed upon."

Mr. Dunster held his cigar a little way off and looked steadfastly at his host for a moment. So you have interpreted my cipher?"

Mr. Fentolin spread out the palms of his hands in a delicate gesture.

"My dear Mr. Dunster," he said, "one of the simplest, I think, that was ever strung together. I am somewhat of an authority upon ciphers."

"I gather," Mr. Dunster went on, although his cigar was burning itself out, "that you have broken the seal of my dispatches?"

Mr. Fentolin closed his eyes as though he had heard a discord.

"Nothing so clumsy as that, I hope," he murmured gently. "I will not insult a person of your experience and intelligence by enumerating the various ways in which the seal of a dispatch may be liquefied. It is quite true that I have read with much pleasure the letter which you are carrying from a certain group of very distinguished men to a certain person now in The Hague. The letter, however, is replaced in its envelope; the seal is still there. You need have no fears whatever concerning it. All that I require is that one word from you."

"And if I give you that one word?" Mr. Dunster asked.

"If you give it me, as I think you will," Mr. Fentolin replied suavely, "I shall then telegraph to my agent, or rather I should say to a dear friend of mine who lives at The Hague, and that single word will be cabled by him from The Hague to New York."

"And in that case," Mr. Dunster enquired, "what would become of me?"

"You would give us the great pleasure of your company here for a very brief visit," Mr. Fentolin answered. "We should, I can assure you, do our very best to entertain you."

"And the dispatch which I am carrying to The Hague?"

"Would remain here with you."

Mr. Dunster knocked the ash from his cigar. Without being a man of great parts, he was a shrewd person, possessed of an abundant stock of common sense. He applied himself, for a few moments, to a consideration of this affair, without arriving at any satisfactory conclusion.

"Come, Mr. Fentolin," he said at last, "you must really forgive me, but I can't see what you're driving at. You are an Englishman, are you not?"

"I am an Englishman," Mr. Fentolin confessed "or rather," he added, with ghastly humour, "I am half an Englishman."

"You are, I am sure," Mr. Dunster continued, "a person of intelligence, a well-read person, a person of perceptions. Surely you can see and appreciate the danger with which your country is threatened?"

"With regard to political affairs," Mr. Fentolin admitted, "I consider myself unusually well posted - in fact, the study of the diplomatic methods of the various great Powers is rather a hobby of mine."

"Yet," Mr. Dunster persisted, "you do not wish this letter delivered to that little conference in The Hague, which you must be aware is now sitting practically to determine the fate of your nation?"

"I do not wish," Mr. Fentolin replied, "I do not intend, that that letter shall be delivered. Why do you worry about my point of view? I may have a dozen reasons. I may believe that it will be good for my country to suffer a little chastisement."

"Or you may," Mr. Dunster suggested, glancing keenly at his host, "be the paid agent of some foreign Power."

Mr. Fentolin shook his head.

"My means," he pointed out, "should place me above such suspicion. My income, I really believe, is rather more than fifty thousand pounds a year. I should not enter into these adventures, which naturally are not entirely dissociated from a certain amount of risk, for the purposes of financial gain."

Mr. Dunster was still mystified.

"Granted that you do so from pure love of adventure," he declared, "I still cannot see why you should range yourself on the side of your country's enemies."

"In time," Mr. Fentolin observed, "even that may become clear to you. At present, well - just that word, if you please?"

Mr. Dunster shook his head.

"No," he decided, "I do not think so. I cannot make up my mind to tell you that word."

Mr. Fentolin gave no sign of annoyance or even disappointment. He simply sighed. His eyes were full of a gentle sympathy, his face indicated a certain amount of concern.

"You distress me," he declared. "Perhaps it is my fault. I have not made myself sufficiently clear. The knowledge of that word is a necessity to me. Without it I cannot complete my plans. Without it I very much fear, dear Mr. Dunster, that your sojourn among us may be longer than you have any idea of."

Mr. Dunster laughed a little derisively.

"We've passed those days," he remarked. "I've done my best to enter into the humour of this situation, but there are limits. You can't keep prisoners in English country houses, nowadays. There are a dozen ways of communicating with the outside world, and when that's once done, it seems to me that the position of Squire Fentolin of St. David's Hall might be a little peculiar."

Mr. Fentolin smiled, very slightly, still very blandly.

"Alas, my stalwart friend, I fear that you are by nature an optimist! I am not a betting man, but I am prepared to bet you a hundred pounds to one that you have made your last communication with the outside world until I say the word."

Mr. Dunster was obviously plentifully supplied with either courage or bravado, for he only laughed.

"Then you had better make up your mind at once, Mr. Fentolin, how soon that word is to be spoken, or you may lose your money," he remarked.

Mr. Fentolin sat very quietly in his chair.

"You mean, then," he asked, "that you do not intend to humour me in this little matter?"

"I do not intend," Mr. Dunster assured him, "to part with that word to you or to any one else in the the world. When my message has been presented to the person to whom it has been addressed, when my trust is discharged, then and then only shall I send that cablegram. That moment can only arrive at the end of my journey."

Mr. Fentolin leaned now a little forward in his chair. His face was still smooth and expressionless, but there was a queer sort of meaning in his words.

"The end of your journey," he said grimly, "may be nearer than you think."

"If I am not heard of in The Hague to-morrow at the latest," Mr. Dunster pointed out, "remember that before many more hours have passed, I shall be searched for, even to the far corners of the earth."

"Let me assure you," Mr. Fentolin promised serenely, "that though your friends search for you up in the skies or down in the bowels of the earth, they will not find you. My hiding-places are not as other people's."

Mr. Dunster beat lightly with his square, blunt forefinger upon the table which stood by his side.

"That's not the sort of talk I understand," he declared curtly. "Let us understand one another, if we can. What is to happen to me, if I refuse to give you that word?"

Mr. Fentolin held his hand in front of his eyes, as though to shut out some unwelcome vision.

"Dear me," he exclaimed, "how unpleasant Why should you force me to disclose my plans? Be content, dear Mr. Dunster, with the knowledge of this one fact: we cannot part with you. I have thought it over from every point of view, and I have come to that conclusion; always presuming," he went on, "that the knowledge of that little word of which we have spoken remains in its secret chamber of your memory."

Mr. Dunster smoked in silence for a few minutes.

"I am very comfortable here," he remarked.

"You delight me," Mr. Fentolin murmured.

"Your cook," Mr. Dunster continued, "has won my heartfelt appreciation. Your cigars and wines are fit for any nobleman. Perhaps, after all, this little rest is good for me."

Mr. Fentolin listened attentively.

"Do not forget," he said, "that there is always a limit fixed, whether it be one day, two days, or three days."

"A limit to your complacency, I presume?"

Mr. Fentolin assented.

"Obviously, then," Mr. Dunster concluded, "you wish those who sent me to believe that my message has been delivered. Yet there I must confess that you puzzle me. What I cannot see is, to put it bluntly, where you come in. Any one of the countries represented at this little conference would only be the gainers by the miscarriage of my message, which is, without doubt, so far as they are concerned, of a distasteful nature. Your own country alone could be the sufferer. Now what interest in the world, then, is there left - what interest in the world can you possibly represent - which can be the gainer by your present action?"

Mr. Fentolin's eyes grew suddenly a little brighter. There was a light upon his face strange to witness,

"The power which is to be the gainer," he said quietly, "is the power encompassed by these walls,"

He touched his chest; his long, slim fingers were folded upon it.

"When I meet a man whom I like," he continued softly, "I take him into my confidence. Picture me, if you will, as a kind of Puck. Haven't you heard that with the decay of the body comes sometimes a malignant growth in the brain; a Caliban-like desire for evil to fall upon the world; a desire to escape from the loneliness of suffering, the isolation of black misery?"

Mr. John P. Dunster let his cigar burn out. He looked steadfastly at this strange little figure whose chair had imperceptibly moved a little nearer to his.

"You know what the withholding of this message you carry may mean," Mr. Fentolin proceeded. "You come here, bearing to Europe the word of a great people, a people whose voice is powerful enough even to still the gathering furies. I have read your ciphered message. It is what I feared. It is my will, mine - Miles Fentolin's - that that message be not delivered."

"I wonder," Mr. Dunster muttered under his breath, "whether you are in earnest."

"In your heart," Mr. Fentolin told him, "you know that I am. I can see the truth in your face. Now, for the first time, you begin to understand."

"To a certain extent," Mr. Dunster admitted. "Where I am still in the dark, however, is why you should expect that I should become your confederate. It is true that by holding me up and obstructing my message, you may bring about the evil you seek, but unless that word is cabled back to New York, and my senders believe that my message has been delivered, there can be no certainty. What has been trusted to me as the safest means of transmission, might, in an emergency, be committed to a cable."

"Excellent reasoning," Fentolin agreed. "For the very reasons you name that word will be given."

Mr. Dunster's face was momentarily troubled. There was something in the still, cold emphasis of this man's voice which made him shiver.

"Do you think," Mr. Fentolin went on, "that I spend a great fortune buying the secrets of the world, that I live from day to day with the risk of ignominious detection always

hovering about me - do you think that I do this and am yet unprepared to run the final risks of life and death? Have you ever talked with a murderer, Mr. Dunster? Has curiosity ever taken you within the walls of Sing Sing? Have you sat within the cell of a doomed man and felt the thrill of his touch, of his close presence? Well, I will not ask you those questions. I will simply tell you that you are talking to one now."

Mr. Dunster had forgotten his extinct cigar. He found it difficult to remove his eyes from Mr. Fentolin's face. He was half fascinated, half stirred with a vague, mysterious fear. Underneath these wild words ran always that hard note of truth.

"You seem to be in earnest," he muttered.

"I am," Mr. Fentolin assured him quietly. "I have more than once been instrumental in bringing about the death of those who have crossed my purposes. I plead guilty to the weakness of Nero. Suffering and death are things of joy to me. There!"

"I am not sure," Mr. Dunster said slowly, "that I ought not to wring your neck."

Mr. Fentolin smiled. His chair receded an inch or two. There was never a time when his expression had seemed more seraphic.

"There is no emergency of that sort," he remarked, "for which I am not prepared."

His little revolver gleamed for a minute beneath his cuff. He backed his chair slowly and with wonderful skill towards the door.

"We will fix the period of your probation, Mr. Dunster, at - say, twenty-four hours," he decided. "Please make yourself until then entirely at home. My cook, my cellar, my cigar cabinets, are at your disposal. If some happy impulse," he concluded, "should show you the only reasonable course by dinnertime, it would give me the utmost pleasure to have you join us at that meal. I can promise you a cheque beneath your plate which even you might think worth considering, wine in your glass which kings might sigh for, cigars by your side which even your Mr. Pierpont Morgan could not buy. Au revoir!"

The door opened and closed. Mr. Dunster sat staring into the open space like a man still a little dazed.