

Chapter 20

In the middle of that night Hamel sat up in bed, awakened with a sudden start by some sound, only the faintest echo of which remained in his consciousness. His nerves were tingling with a sense of excitement. He sat up in bed and listened. Suddenly it came again - a long, low moan of pain, stifled at the end as though repressed by some outside agency. He leaped from his bed, hurried on a few clothes, and stepped out on to the landing. The cry had seemed to him to come from the further end of the long corridor - in the direction, indeed, of the room where Mr. Dunster lay. He made his way there, walking on tiptoe, although his feet fell noiselessly upon the thick carpet. A single light was burning from a bracket in the wall, insufficient to illuminate the empty spaces, but enough to keep him from stumbling. The corridor towards the south end gradually widened, terminating in a splendid high window with stained glass, a broad seat, and a table. On the right, the end room was Mr. Dunster's apartment, and on the left a flight of stairs led to the floor above. Hamel stood quite still, listening. There was a light in the room, as he could see from under the door, but there was no sound of any one moving. Hamel listened intently, every sense strained. Then the sound of a stair creaking behind diverted his attention. He looked quickly around. Gerald was descending. The boy's face was white, and his eyes were filled with fear. Hamel stepped softly back from the door and met him at the foot of the stairs.

"Did you hear that cry?" he whispered.

Gerald nodded.

"It woke me up. What do you suppose it was?" Hamel shook his head.

"Some one in pain," he replied. "I don't understand it. It came from this room."

"You know who sleeps there?" Gerald asked hoarsely.

Hamel nodded.

"A man with concussion of the brain doesn't cry out like that. Besides, did you hear the end of it? It sounded as though some one were choking him. Hush!"

They had spoken only in bated breath, but the door of the room before which they were standing was suddenly opened. Meekins stood there, fully dressed, his dark, heavy face full of somber warning. He started a little as he saw the two whispering together. Gerald addressed him almost apologetically.

"We both heard the same sound, Meekins. Is any one ill? It sounded like some one in pain."

The man hesitated. Then from behind his shoulder came Mr. Fentolin's still, soft voice. There was a little click, and Meekins, as though obeying an unseen gesture, stepped back. Mr. Fentolin glided on to the threshold. He was still dressed. He propelled his chair a few yards down the corridor and beckoned them to approach.

"I am so sorry," he said softly, "that you should have been disturbed, Mr. Hamel. We have been a little anxious about our mysterious guest. Doctor Sarson fetched me an hour ago. He discovered that it was necessary to perform a very slight operation, merely the extraction of a splinter of wood. It is all over now, and I think that he will do very well."

Notwithstanding this very plausible explanation, Hamel was conscious of the remains of an uneasiness which he scarcely knew how to put into words.

"It was a most distressing cry," he observed doubtfully, "a cry of fear as well as of pain."

"Poor fellow!" Mr. Fentolin remarked compassionately. "I am afraid that for a moment or two he must have suffered acutely. Doctor Sarson is very clever, however, and there is no doubt that what he did was for the best. His opinion is that by to-morrow morning there will be a marvellous change. Good night, Mr. Hamel. I am quite sure that you will not be disturbed again."

Hamel neither felt nor showed any disposition to depart.

"Mr. Fentolin," he said, "I hope that you will not think that I am officious or in any way abusing your hospitality, but I cannot help suggesting that as Dr. Sarson is purely your household physician, the relatives of this man Dunster might be better satisfied if some second opinion were called in. Might I suggest that you telephone to Norwich for a surgeon?"

Mr. Fentolin showed no signs of displeasure. He was silent for a moment, as though considering the matter.

"I am not at all sure, Mr. Hamel, that you are not right," he admitted frankly. "I believe that the case is quite a simple one, but on the other hand it would perhaps be more satisfactory to have an outside opinion. If Mr. Dunster is not conscious in the morning, we will telephone to the Norwich Infirmary."

"I think it would be advisable," Hamel agreed.

"Good night!" Mr. Fentolin said once more. "I am sorry that your rest has been disturbed."

Hamel, however, still refused to take the hint. His eyes were fixed upon that closed door.

"Mr. Fentolin," he asked, "have you any objection to my seeing Mr. Dunster?"

There was a moment's intense silence. A sudden light had burned in Mr. Fentolin's eyes. His fingers gripped the side of his chair. Yet when he spoke there were no signs of anger in his tone. It was a marvellous effort of self-control.

"There is no reason, Mr. Hamel," he said, "why your curiosity should not be gratified. Knock softly at the door, Gerald."

The boy obeyed. In a moment or two Doctor Sarson appeared on the threshold.

"Our guest, Mr. Hamel," Mr. Fentolin explained in a whisper, "has been awakened by this poor fellow's cry. He would like to see him for a moment."

Doctor Sarson opened the door. They all passed in on tiptoe. The doctor led the way towards the bed upon which Mr. Dunster was lying, quite still. His head was bandaged, and his eyes closed. His face was ghastly. Gerald gave vent to a little muttered exclamation. Mr. Fentolin turned to him. quickly.

"Gerald!"

The boy stood still, trembling, speechless. Mr. Fentolin's eyes were riveted upon him. The doctor was standing, still and dark, a motionless image.

"Is he asleep?" Hamel asked.

"He is under the influence of a mild anaesthetic," Doctor Sarson explained. "He is doing very well. His case is quite simple. By to-morrow morning he will be able to sit up and walk about if he wishes to."

Hamel looked steadily at the figure upon the bed. Mr. Dunster's breathing was regular, and his eyes were closed, but his colour was ghastly.

"He doesn't look like getting up for a good many days to come," Hamel observed.

The doctor led the way towards the door.

"The man has a fine constitution," he said. "I feel sure that if you wish you will be able to talk to him to-morrow."

They separated outside in the passage. Mr. Fentolin bade his guest a somewhat restrained good night, and Gerald mounted the staircase to his room. Hamel, however, had scarcely reached his door before Gerald reappeared. He had descended the stair-case at the other end of the corridor. He stood for a moment looking down the passage. The doors were all closed. Even the light had been extinguished.

"May I come in for a moment, please?" he whispered.

Hamel nodded.

"With pleasure! Come in and have a cigarette if you will. I shan't feel like sleep for some time."

They entered the room, and Gerald threw himself into an easy-chair near the window. Hamel wheeled up another chair and produced a box of cigarettes.

"Queer thing your dropping across that fellow in the way you did," he remarked. "Just shows how one may disappear from the world altogether, and no one be a bit the wiser."

The boy was sitting with folded arms. His expression was one of deep gloom.

"I only wish I'd never brought him here," he muttered. "I ought to have known better."

Hamel raised his eyebrows. "Isn't he as well off here as anywhere else?"

"Do you think that he is?" Gerald demanded, looking across at Hamel.

There was a brief silence.

"We can scarcely do your uncle the injustice," Hamel remarked, "of imagining that he can possibly have any reason or any desire to deal with that man except as a guest."

"Do you really believe that?" Gerald asked.

Hamel rose to his feet.

"Look here, young man," he said, "this is getting serious. You and I are at cross-purposes. If you like, you shall have the truth from me."

"Go on."

"I was warned about your uncle before I came down into this part of the world," Hamel continued quietly. "I was told that he is a dangerous conspirator, a man who sticks at nothing to gain his ends, a person altogether out of place in these days. It sounds melodramatic, but I had it straight from a friend. Since I have been here, I have had a telegram - you brought it to me yourself - asking for information about this man Dunster. It was I who wired to London that he was here. It was through me that Scotland Yard communicated with the police station at Wells, through me that a man is to be sent down from London. I didn't come here as a spy - don't think that; I was coming here, anyhow. On the other hand, I believe that your uncle is playing a dangerous game. I am going to have Mr. John P. Dunster put in charge of a Norwich physician to-morrow."

"Thank God!" the boy murmured.

"Look here," Hamel continued, "what are you doing in this business, anyway? You are old enough to know your own mind and to go your own way."

"You say that because you don't know," Gerald declared bitterly.

"In a sense I don't," Hamel admitted, "and yet your sister hinted to me only this afternoon that you and she -"

"Oh, I know what she told you!" the boy interrupted. "We've worn the chains for the last eight years. They are breaking her. They've broken my mother. Sometimes I think they are breaking me. But, you know, there comes a time - there comes a time when one can't go on. I've seen some strange things here, some that I've half understood, some that I haven't understood at all. I've closed my eyes. I've kept my promise. I've done his bidding, where ever it has led me. But you know there is a time - there is a limit to all things. I can't go on. I spied on this man Dunster. I brought him here. It is I who am responsible for anything that may happen to him. It's the last time!"

Gerald's face was white with pain. Hamel laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"My boy," he said, "there are worse things in the world than breaking a promise. When you gave it, the conditions which were existing at the time made it, perhaps, a right and reasonable undertaking, but sometimes the whole of the conditions under which a promise was given, change. Then one must have courage enough to be false even to one's word."

"Have you talked to my sister like that?" Gerald asked eagerly.

"I have and I will again," Hamel declared. "To-morrow morning I leave this house, but before I go I mean to have the affair of this man Dunster cleared up. Your uncle will be very angry with me, without a doubt. I don't care. But I do want you to trust me, if you will, and your sister. I should like to be your friend."

"God knows we need one!" the boy said simply. "Good night!"

Once more the house was quiet. Hamel pushed his window wide open and looked out into the night. The air was absolutely still, there was no wind. The only sound was the falling of the low waves upon the stony beach and the faint scrunching of the pebbles drawn back by the ebb. He looked along the row of windows, all dark and silent now. A rush of pleasant fancies suddenly chased away the grim depression of the last few minutes. Out of all this sordidness and mystery there remained at least something in life for him to do. A certain aimlessness of purpose which had troubled him during the last few months had disappeared. He had found an object in life.