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Chapter 23

Hamel sliced his ball at the ninth, and after waiting for a few minutes patiently, Esther came to help him look for it. He was standing down on the sands, a little apart from the two caddies who were beating out various tufts of long grass.

"Where did it go?" she asked.

"I have no idea," he admitted.

"Why don't you help look for it?"

"Searching for balls," he insisted, "is a caddy's occupation. Both the caddies are now busy. Let us sit down here. These sand hummocks are delightful. It is perfectly sheltered, and the sun is in our faces. Golf is an overrated pastime. Let us sit and watch that little streak of blue find its way up between the white posts."

She hesitated for a moment.

"We shall lose our place."

"There is no one behind."

She sank on to the little knoll of sand to which he had pointed, with a resigned sigh.

"You really are a queer person," she declared. "You have been playing golf this morning as though your very life depended upon it. You have scarcely missed a shot or spoken a word. And now, all of a sudden, you want to sit on a sand hummock and watch the tide."

"I have been silent," he told her, "because I have been thinking."

"That may be truthful," she remarked, "but you wouldn't call it polite, would you?"

"The subject of my thoughts is my excuse. I have been thinking of you."

For a single moment her eyes seemed to have caught something of that sympathetic light with which he was regarding her. Then she looked away.

"Was it my mashie shots you were worrying about?" she asked.

"It was not," he replied simply. "It was you - you yourself."

She laughed, not altogether naturally.

"How flattering!" she murmured. "By-the-by, you are rather a downright person, aren't you, Mr. Hamel?"

"So much so," he admitted, "that I am going to tell you one or two things now. I am going to be very frank indeed."

She sat suddenly quite still. Her face was turned from him, but for the first time since he had known her there was a slight undertone of colour in her cheeks.

"A week ago," he said, "I hadn't the faintest idea of coming into Norfolk. I knew about this little shanty of my father's, but I had forgotten all about it. I came as the result of a conversation I had with a friend who is in the Foreign Office."

She looked at him with startled eyes.

"What do you mean?" she asked quickly. "You are Mr. Hamel, aren't you?"

"Certainly," he replied. "Not only am I Richard Hamel, mining engineer, but I really have all that reading to do I have spoken about, and I really was looking for a quiet spot to do it in. It is true that I had this part of the world in my mind, but I do not think that I should ever have really decided to come here if it had not been for my friend in London. He was very interested indeed directly I mentioned St. David's Tower. Would you like to know what he told me?"

"Yes! Go on, please."

"He told me a little of the history of your uncle, Mr. Fentolin, and what he did not tell me at the time, he has since supplemented. I suppose," he added, hesitatingly, "that you yourself -"

"Please go on. Please speak as though I knew nothing."

"Well, then," Hamel continued, "he told me that your uncle was at one time in the Foreign Office himself. He seemed to have a most brilliant career before him when suddenly there was a terrible scandal. A political secret - I don't know what it was - had leaked out. There were rumours that it had been acquired for a large sum of money by a foreign Power. Mr. Fentolin retired to Norfolk, pending an investigation. It was just as that time that he met with his terrible accident, and the matter was

dropped."

"Go on, please," she murmured.

"My friend went on to say that during the last few years Mr. Fentolin has once again become an object of some suspicion to the head of our Secret Service Department. For a long time they have known that he was employing agents abroad, and that he was showing the liveliest interest in underground politics. They believed that it was a mere hobby, born of his useless condition, a taste ministered to, without doubt, by the occupation of his earlier life. Once or twice lately they have had reason to change their minds. You know, I dare say, in what a terribly disturbed state European affairs are just now. Well, my friend had an idea that Mr. Fentolin was showing an extraordinary amount of interest in a certain conference which we understand is to take place at The Hague. He begged me to come down, and to watch your uncle while I was down here, and report to him anything that seemed to me noteworthy. Since then I have had a message from him concerning the American whom you entertained - Mr. John P. Dunster. It appears that he was the bearer of very important dispatches for the Continent."

"But he has gone," she said quickly. "Nothing happened to him, after all. He went away without a word of complaint. We all saw him."

"That is quite true," Hamel admitted. "Mr. Dunster has certainly gone. It is rather a coincidence, however, that he should have taken his departure just as the enquiries concerning his whereabouts had reached such a stage that it had become quite impossible to keep him concealed any longer."

She turned a little in her place and looked at him steadfastly.

"Mr. Hamel," she said, "tell me - what of your mission? You have had an opportunity of studying my uncle. You have even lived under his roof. Tell me what you think."

His face was troubled.

"Miss Fentolin," he said, "I will tell you frankly that up to now I have not succeeded in solving the problem of your uncle's character. To me personally he has been most courteous. He lives apparently a studious and an unselfish life. I have heard him even spoken of as a philanthropist. And yet you three - you, your mother, and your brother, who are nearest to him, who live in his house and under his protection, have the air of passing your days in mortal fear of him."

"Mr. Hamel," she exclaimed nervously, "you don't believe that! He is always very kind."

"Apparently," Hamel observed drily. "And yet you must remember that you, too, are afraid of him. I need not remind you of our conversations, but there the truth is. You praise his virtues and his charities, you pity him, and yet you go about with a load of fear, and - forgive me - of secret terror in your heart, you and Gerald, too. As for your mother -"

"Don't!" she interrupted suddenly. "Why do you bring me here to talk like this? You cannot alter things. Nothing can be altered."

"Can't it!" he replied. "Well, I will tell you the real reason of my having brought you here and of my having made this confession. I brought you here because I could not bear to go on living, if not under your roof, at any rate in the neighbourhood, without telling you the truth. Now you know it. I am here to watch Mr. Fentolin. I am going on watching him. You can put him on his guard, if you like; I shan't complain. Or you can -"

He paused so long that she looked at him. He moved a little closer to her, his fingers suddenly gripped her hand.

"Or you can marry me and come away from it all," he concluded quietly. "Forgive me, please - I mean it."

For a moment the startled light in her eyes was followed by a delicious softness. Her lips were parted, she leaned a little towards him. Then suddenly she seemed to remember. She rose with swift alertness to her feet.

"I think," she said, "that we had better play golf."

"But I have asked you to marry me," he protested, as he scrambled up.

"Your caddy has found your ball a long time ago," she pointed out, walking swiftly on ahead.

He played his shot and caught her up.

"Miss Fentolin - Esther," he pleaded eagerly, "do you think that I am not in earnest? Because I am. I mean it. Even if I have only known you for a few days, it has been enough. I think that I knew it was coming from the moment that you stepped into my railway carriage."

"You knew that what was coming?" she asked, raising her eyes suddenly.

"That I should care for you."

"It's the first time you've told me she reminded him, with a queer little smile. "Oh, forgive me, please! I didn't mean to say that. I don't want to have you tell me so. It's all too ridiculous and impossible."

"Is it? And why?"

"I have only known you for three days."

"We can make up for that."

"But I don't - care about you. I have never thought of any one in that way. It is absurd," she went on.

"You'll have to, sometime or other," he declared. "I'll take you travelling with me, show you the world, new worlds, unnamed rivers, untrodden mountains. Or do you want to go and see where the little brown people live among the mimosa and the cherry blossoms? I'll take you so far away that this place and this life will seem like a dream."

Her breath caught a little.

"Don't, please," she begged. "You know very well - or rather you don't know, perhaps, but I must tell you - that I couldn't. I am here, tied and bound, and I can't escape."

"Ah! dear, don't believe it," he went on earnestly. "There isn't any bond so strong that I won't break it for you, no knot I won't untie, if you give me the right."

They were climbing slowly on to the tee. He stepped forward and pulled her up. Her hand was cold. Her eyes were raised to his, very softly yet almost pleadingly.

"Please don't say anything more," she begged. "I can't - quite bear it just now. You know, you must remember - there is my mother. Do you think that I could leave her to struggle alone?"

His caddy, who had teed the ball, and who had regarded the proceedings with a moderately tolerant air, felt called upon at last to interfere.

"We'd best get on," he remarked, pointing to two figures in the distance, "or they'll say we've cut in."

Hamel smote his ball far and true. On a more moderate scale she followed his example. They descended the steps together.

"Love-making isn't going to spoil our golf," he whispered, smiling, as he touched her fingers once more.

She looked at him almost shyly.

"Is this love-making?" she asked.

They walked together from the eighteenth green towards the club-house. A curious silence seemed suddenly to have enveloped them. Hamel was conscious of a strange exhilaration, a queer upheaval of ideas, an excitement which nothing in his previous life had yet been able to yield him. The wonder of it amazed him, kept him silent. It was not until they reached the steps, indeed, that he spoke.

"On our way home -" he began.

She seemed suddenly to have stiffened. He looked at her, surprised. She was standing quite still, her hand gripping the post, her eyes fixed upon the waiting motor-car. The delicate softness had gone from her face. Once more that look of partly veiled suffering was there, suffering mingled with fear.

"Look!" she whispered, under her breath. "Look! It is Mr. Fentolin! He has come for us himself; he is there in the car."

Mr. Fentolin, a strange little figure lying back among the cushions of the great Daimler, raised his hat and waved it to them.

"Come along, children," he cried. "You see, I am here to fetch you myself. The sunshine has tempted me. What a heavenly morning! Come and sit by my side, Esther, and fight your battle all over again. That is one of the joys of golf, isn't it?" he asked, turning to Hamel. "You need not be afraid of boring me. To-day is one of my bright days. I suppose that it is the sunshine and the warm wind. On the way here we passed some fields. I could swear that I smelt violets. Where are you going, Esther?"

"To take my clubs to my locker and pay my caddy," she replied.

"Mr. Hamel will do that for you," Mr. Fentolin declared. "Come and take your seat by my side, and let us wait for him. I am tired of being alone."

She gave up her clubs reluctantly. All the life seemed to have gone from her face.

"Why didn't mother come with you?" she asked simply.

"To tell you the truth, dear Esther," he answered, "when I started, I had a fancy to be alone. I think - in fact I am sure - that your mother wanted to come. The sunshine, too, was tempting her. Perhaps it was selfish of me not to bring her, but then, there is a great deal to be forgiven me, isn't there, Esther?"

"A great deal," she echoed, looking steadily ahead of her.

"I came," he went on, "because it occurred to me that, after all, I had my duties as your guardian, dear Esther. I am not sure that we can permit flirtations, you know. Let me see, how old are you?"

"Twenty-one," she replied.

"In a magazine I was reading the other day," he continued, "I was interested to observe that the modern idea as regards marriage is a changed one. A woman, they say, should not marry until she is twenty-seven or twenty-eight - a very excellent idea. I think we agree, do we not, on that, Esther?"

"I don't know," she replied. "I have never thought about the matter."

"Then," he went on, "we will make up our minds to agree. Twenty-seven or twenty-eight, let us say. A very excellent age! A girl should know her own mind by then. And meanwhile, dear Esther, would it be wise, I wonder, to see a little less of our friend Mr. Hamel? He leaves us to-day, I think. He is very obstinate about that. If he were staying still in the house, well, it might be different. But if he persists in leaving us, you will not forget, dear, that association with a guest is one thing; association with a young man living out of the house is another. A great deal less of Mr. Hamel I think that we must see."

She made no reply whatever. Hamel was coming now towards them.

"Really a very personable young man," Mr. Fentolin remarked, studying him through his eyeglass. "Is it my fancy, I wonder, as an observant person, or is he just a little - just a little taken with you, Esther? A pity if it is so - a great pity."

She said nothing, but her hand which rested upon the rug was trembling a little.

"If you have an opportunity," Mr. Fentolin suggested, dropping his voice, "you might very delicately, you know - girls are so clever at that sort of thing - convey my views to Mr. Hamel as regards his leaving us and its effect upon your companionship. You understand me, I am sure?"

For the first time she turned her head towards him.

"I understand," she said, "that you have some particular reason for not wishing Mr. Hamel to leave St. David's Hall."

He smiled benignly.

"You do my hospitable impulses full justice, dear Esther," he declared. "Sometimes I think that you understand me almost as well as your dear mother. If, by any chance, Mr. Hamel should change his mind as to taking up his residence at the Tower, I think you would not find me in any sense of the word an obdurate or exacting guardian. Come along, Mr. Hamel. That seat opposite to us is quite comfortable. You see, I resign myself to the inevitable. I have come to fetch golfers home to luncheon, and I compose myself to listen. Which of you will begin the epic of missed putts and brassey shots which failed by a foot to carry?"