

## [The Vanished Messenger](#)

### [E. Phillips Oppenheim](#)

## Chapter 24

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Hamel sat alone upon the terrace, his afternoon coffee on a small table in front of him. His eyes were fixed upon a black speck at the end of the level roadway which led to the Tower. Only a few minutes before, Mr. Fentolin, in his little carriage, had shot out from the passage beneath the terrace, on his way to the Tower. Behind him came Meekins, bending over his bicycle. Hamel watched them both with thoughtful eyes. There were several little incidents in connection with their expedition which he scarcely understood.

Then there came at last the sound for which he had been listening, the rustle of a skirt along the terraced way. Hamel turned quickly around, half rising to his feet, and concealing his disappointment with difficulty. It was Mrs. Seymour Fentolin who stood there, a little dog under each arm; a large hat, gay with flowers, upon her head. She wore patent shoes with high heels, and white silk stockings. She had, indeed, the air of being dressed for luncheon at a fashionable restaurant. As she stooped to set the dogs down, a strong waft of perfume was shaken from her clothes.

"Are you entirely deserted, Mr. Hamel?" she asked.

"I am," he replied. "Miss Esther went, I think, to look for you. My host," he added, pointing to the black speck in the distance, "begged me to defer my occupation of the Tower for an hour or so, and has gone down there to collect some of his trifles."

Her eyes followed his outstretched hand. She seemed to him to shiver for a moment.

"You really mean, then, that you are going to leave us?" she asked, accepting the chair which he had drawn up close to his.

He smiled.

"Well, I scarcely came on a visit to St. David's Hall, did I?" he reminded her. "It has been delightfully hospitable of Mr. Fentolin to have insisted upon my staying on here for these few days, but I could not possibly inflict myself upon you all for an unlimited period."

Mrs. Fentolin sat quite still for a time. In absolute repose, if one could forget her mass of unnaturally golden hair, the forced and constant smile, the too liberal use of rouge and powder, the nervous motions of her head, it was easily to be realised that there were still neglected attractions about her face and figure. Only, in these moments of repose, an intense and ageing weariness seemed to have crept into her eyes and face. It was as though she had dropped the mask of incessant gaiety and permitted a glimpse of her real self to steal to the surface.

"Mr. Hamel," she said quietly, "I dare say that even during these few days you have realised that Mr. Fentolin is a very peculiar man."

"I have certainly observed - eccentricities," Hamel assented.

"My life, and the lives of my two children," she went on, "is devoted to the task of ministering to his happiness."

"Isn't that rather a heavy sacrifice?" he asked. Mrs. Seymour Fentolin looked down the long, narrow way along which Mr. Fentolin had passed. He was out of sight now, inside the Tower. Somehow or other, the thought seemed to give her courage and dignity. She spoke differently, without nervousness or hurry.

"To you, Mr. Hamel," she said, "it may seem so. We who make it know of its necessity."

He bowed his head. It was not a subject for him to discuss with her.

"Mr. Fentolin has whims," she went on, "violent whims. We all try to humour him. He has his own ideas about Gerald's bringing up. I do not agree with them, but we submit. Esther, too, suffers, perhaps to a less extent. As for me," - her voice broke a little - "Mr. Fentolin likes people around him who are always cheerful. He prefers even a certain style - of dress. I, too, have to do my little share."

Hamel's face grew darker.

"Has it ever occurred to you," he demanded, "that Mr. Fentolin is a tyrant?"

She closed her eyes for a moment.

"There are reasons," she declared, "why I cannot discuss that with you. He has these strong fancies, and it is our task in life to humour them. He has one now with regard to the Tower, with regard to you. You are, of course, your own master. You can do as you choose, and you will do as you choose. Neither I nor my children have any claim upon your consideration. But, Mr. Hamel, you have been so kind that I feel moved to tell you this. It would make it very much easier for all of us if you would give up this scheme of yours, if you would stay on here instead of going to reside at the Tower."

Hamel threw away his cigarette. He was deeply interested.

"Mrs. Fentolin," he said, "I am glad to have you speak so plainly. Let me answer you in the same spirit. I am leaving this house mainly because I have conceived certain suspicions with regard to Mr. Fentolin. I do not like him, I do not trust him, I do not believe in him. Therefore, I mean to remove myself from the burden of his hospitality. There are reasons," he went on, "why I do not wish to leave the neighbourhood altogether. There are certain investigations which I wish to make. That is why I have decided to go to the Tower."

"Miles was right, then!" she cried suddenly. "You are here to spy upon him!"

He turned towards her swiftly.

"To spy upon him, Mrs. Fentolin? For what reason? Why? Is he a criminal, then?"

She opened her lips and closed them again. There was a slight frown upon her forehead. It was obvious that the word had unintentionally escaped her.

"I only know what it is that he called you, what he suspects you of being," she explained. "Mr. Fentolin is very clever, and he is generally at work upon something. We do not enquire into the purpose of his labours. The only thing I know is that he suspects you of wanting to steal one of his secrets."

"Secrets? But what secrets has he?" Hamel demanded. "Is he an inventor?"

"You ask me idle questions," she sighed. "We have gone, perhaps, a little further than I intended. I came to plead with you for all our sakes, if I could, to make things more comfortable by remaining here instead of insisting upon your claim to the Tower."

"Mrs. Fentolin," Hamel said firmly. "I like to do what I can to please and benefit my friends, especially those who have been kind to me. I will be quite frank with you. There is nothing you could ask me which I would not do for your daughter's sake - if I were convinced that it was for her good."

Mrs. Seymour Fentolin seemed to be trembling a little. Her hands were crossed upon her bosom.

"You have known her for so short a time," she murmured.

Hamel smiled confidently.

"I will not weary you," he said, "with the usual trite remarks. I will simply tell you that the time has been long enough. I love your daughter."

Mrs. Fentolin sat quite still. Only in her eyes, fixed steadily seawards, there was the light of something new, as though some new thought was stirring in her brain. Her lips moved, although the sound which came was almost inaudible.

"Why not?" she murmured, as though arguing with some unseen critic of her thoughts. "Why not?"

"I am not a rich man," Hamel went on, "but I am fairly well off. I could afford to be married at once, and I should like -

She turned suddenly upon him and gripped his wrist.

"Listen," she interrupted, "you are a traveller, are you not? You have been to distant countries, where white people go seldom; inaccessible countries, where even the arm of the law seldom reaches. Couldn't you take her away there, take her right away, travel so fast that nothing could catch you, and hide - hide for a little time?"

Hamel stared at his companion, for a moment, blankly. Her attitude was so unexpected, her questioning so fierce.

"My dear Mrs. Fentolin," he began -

She suddenly relaxed her grip of his arm. Something of the old hopelessness was settling down upon her face. Her hands fell into her lap.

"No," she interrupted, "I forgot! I mustn't talk like that. She, too, is part of the sacrifice."

"Part of the sacrifice," Hamel repeated, frowning. "Is she, indeed! I don't know what sacrifice you mean, but Esther is the girl whom sooner or later, somehow or other, I am going to make my wife, and when she is my wife, I shall see to it that she isn't afraid of Miles Fentolin or of any other man breathing."

A gleam of hopefulness shone through the stony misery of the woman's face.

"Does Esther care?" she asked softly.

"How can I tell? I can only hope so. If she doesn't yet, she shall some day. I suppose," he added, with a sigh, "it is rather too soon yet to expect that she should. If it is necessary, I can wait."

Mrs. Fentolin's eyes were once more fixed upon the Tower. The sun had caught the top of the telephone wire and played around it till it seemed like a long, thin shaft of silver.

"If you go down there," she said, "Esther will not be allowed to see you at all. Mr. Fentolin has decided to take it as a personal affront. You will be ostracised from here."

"Shall I?" he answered. "Well, it won't be for long, at any rate. And as to not seeing Esther, you must remember that I come from outside this little domain, and I see nothing more in Mr. Fentolin than a bad-tempered, mischievous, tyrannical old invalid, who is fortunately prevented by his infirmities from doing as much mischief as he might. I am not afraid of your brother-in-law, or of the bully he takes about with him, and I am going to see your daughter somehow or other, and I am going to marry her before very long."

She thrust out her hand suddenly and grasped his. The fingers were very thin, almost bony, and covered with rings. Their grip was feverish and he felt them tremble.

"You are a brave man, Mr. Hamel," she declared speaking in a low, quick undertone. "Perhaps you are right. The shadow isn't over your head. You haven't lived in the terror of it. You may find a way. God grant it!"

She wrung his fingers and rose to her feet. Her voice suddenly changed into another key. Hamel knew instinctively that she wished him to understand that their conversation was over.

"Chow-Chow," she cried, "come along, dear, we must have our walk. Come along, Koto; come along, little dogs."

Hamel strolled down the terrace steps and wandered for a time in the gardens behind the house. Here, in the shelter of the great building, he found himself suddenly in an atmosphere of springtime. There were beds of crocuses and hyacinths, fragrant clumps of violets, borders of snowdrops, masses of primroses and early anemones. He slowly

climbed one or two steep paths until he reached a sort of plateau, level with the top of the house. The flowers here grew more sparsely, the track of the salt wind lay like a withering band across the flower-beds. The garden below was like a little oasis of colour and perfume. Arrived at the bordering red brick wall, he turned around and looked along the narrow road which led to the sea. There was no sign of Mr. Fentolin's return. Then to his left he saw a gate open and heard the clamour of dogs. Esther appeared, walking swiftly towards the little stretch of road which led to the village. He hurried after her.

"Unsociable person!" he exclaimed, as he caught her up. "Didn't you know that I was longing for a walk?"

"How should I read your thoughts?" she answered. "Besides, a few minutes ago I saw you on the terrace, talking to mother. I am only going as far as the village."

"May I come?" he asked. "I have business there myself."

She laughed.

"There are nine cottages, three farmhouses, and a general shop in St. David's," she remarked. "Also about fifteen fishermen's cottages dotted about the marsh. Your business, I presume, is with the general shop?"

He shook his head, falling into step with her.

"What I want," he explained, "is to find a woman to come in and look after me at the Tower. Your servant who valets me has given me two names."

Something of the lightness faded from her face.

"So you have quite made up your mind to leave us?" she asked slowly. "Mother wasn't able to persuade you to stay?"

He shook his head.

"She was very kind," he said, "but there are really grave reasons why I feel that I must not accept Mr. Fentolin's hospitality any longer. I had," he went on, "a very interesting talk with your mother."

She turned quickly towards him. The slightest possible tinge of additional colour was in her cheeks. She was walking on the top of a green bank, with the wind blowing her skirts around her. The turn of her head was a little diffident, almost shy. Her eyes were asking him questions. At that moment she seemed to him, with her slim body, her gently parted lips and soft, tremulous eyes, almost like a child. He drew a little nearer to her.

"I told your mother," he continued, "all that I have told you, and more. I told her, dear, that I cared for you, that I wanted you to be my wife."

She was caught in a little gust of wind. Both her hands went up to her hat; her face was hidden. She stepped down from the bank.

"You shouldn't have done that," she said quietly.

"Why not?" he demanded. "It was the truth."

He stooped forward, intent upon looking into her face. The mystic softness was still in her eyes, but her general expression was inscrutable. It seemed to him that there was fear there.

"What did mother say?" she whispered.

"Nothing discouraging," he replied. "I don't think she minded at all. I have decided, if you give me permission, to go and talk to Mr. Fentolin this evening."

She shook her head very emphatically.

"Don't!" she implored. "Don't! Don't give him another whip to lash us with. Keep silent. Let me just have the memory for a few days all to myself."

Her words came to him like numb things. There was little expression in them, and yet he felt that somehow they meant so much.

"Esther dear," he said, "I shall do just as you ask me. At the same time, please listen. I think that you are all absurdly frightened of Mr. Fentolin. Living here alone with him, you have all grown under his dominance to an unreasonable extent. Because of his horrible infirmity, you have let yourselves become his slaves. There are limits to this sort of thing, Esther. I come here as a stranger, and I see nothing more in Mr. Fentolin than a very selfish, irritable, domineering, and capricious old man. Humour him, by all means. I am willing to do the same myself. But when it comes to the great things in life, neither he nor any living person is going to keep from me the woman I love."

She walked by his side in silence. Her breath was coming a little quicker, her fingers lay passive in his. Then for a moment he felt the grip of them almost burn into his flesh. Still she said nothing.

"I want your permission, dear," he went on, "to go to him. I suppose he calls himself your guardian. If he says no, you are of age. I just want you to believe that I am strong enough to put my arms, around you and to carry you away to my own world and keep you there, although an army of Mr. Fentolin's creatures followed us."

She turned, and he saw the great transformation. Her face was brilliant, her eyes shone with wonderful things.

"Please," she begged, "will you say or do nothing at all for a little time, until I tell you when? I want just a few days peace. You have said such beautiful things to me that I want them to lie there in my thoughts, in my heart, undisturbed, for just a little time. You see, we are at the village now. I am going to call at this third cottage. While I am inside, you can go and make what enquiries you like. Come and knock at the door for me when you are ready."

"And we will walk back together?"

"We will walk back together," she promised him.

"I will take you home another way. I will take you over what they call the Common, and come down behind the Hall into the gardens."

She dismissed him with a little smile. He strolled along the village street and plunged into the mysterious recesses of the one tiny shop.

