

[The Vanished Messenger](#)

[E. Phillips Oppenheim](#)

Chapter 25

Hamel met Kinsley shortly before one o'clock the following afternoon, in the lounge of the Royal Hotel at Norwich.

"You got my wire, then?" the latter asked, as he held out his hand. "I had it sent by special messenger from Wells."

"It arrived directly after breakfast," Hamel replied. "It wasn't the easiest matter to get here, even then, for there are only about two trains a day, and I didn't want to borrow a car from Mr. Fentolin."

"Quite right," Kinsley agreed. "I wanted you to come absolutely on your own. Let's get into the coffee-room and have some lunch now. I want to catch the afternoon train back to town."

"Do you mean to say that you've come all the way down here to talk to me for half an hour or so?" Hamel demanded, as they took their places at a table.

"All the way from town," Kinsley assented, "and up to the eyes in work we are, too. Dick, what do you think of Miles Fentolin?"

"Hanged if I know!" Hamel answered, with a sigh.

"Nothing definite to tell us, then?" Nothing!"

"What about Mr. John P. Dunster?"

"He left yesterday morning," Hamel said. "I saw him go. He looked very shaky. I understood that Mr. Fentolin sent him to Yarmouth."

"Did Mr. Fentolin know that there was an enquiry on foot about this man's disappearance?" Kinsley asked.

"Certainly. I heard Lord Saxthorpe tell him that the police had received orders to scour the country for him, and that they were coming to St. David's Hall."

Kinsley, for a moment, was singularly and eloquently profane.

"That's why Mr. Fentolin let him go, then. If Saxthorpe had only held his tongue, or if those infernal police hadn't got chattering with the magistrates, we might have made a coup. As it is, the game's up. Mr. Dunster left for Yarmouth, you say, yesterday morning?"

"I saw him go myself. He looked very shaky and ill, but he was able to smoke a big cigar and walk down-stairs leaning on the doctor's arm."

"I don't doubt," Kinsley remarked, "but that you saw what you say you saw. At the same time, you may be surprised to hear that Mr. Dunster has disappeared again."

"Disappeared again?" Hamel muttered.

"It looks very much," Kinsley continued, "as though your friend Miles Fentolin has been playing with him like a cat with a mouse. He has been obliged to turn him out of one hiding-place, and he has simply transferred him to another."

Hamel looked doubtful.

"Mr. Dunster left quite alone in the car," he said. "He was on his guard too, for Mr. Fentolin and he had had words. I really can't see how it was possible for him to have got into any more trouble."

"Where is he, then?" Kinsley demanded. "Come, I will let you a little further into our confidence. We have reason to believe that he carries with him a written message which is practically the only chance we have of avoiding disaster during the next few days. That written message is addressed to the delegates at The Hague, who are now sitting. Nothing had been heard of Dunster or the document he carries. No word has come from him of any sort since he left St. David's Hall."

"Have you tried to trace him from there?" Hamel asked.

"Trace him?" Kinsley repeated. "By heavens, you don't seem to understand, Dick, the immense, the extraordinary importance of this man to us! The cleverest detective in England spent yesterday under your nose at St. David's Hall. There are a dozen others working upon the job as hard as they can. All the reports confirm what you say - that Dunster left St. David's Hall at half-past nine yesterday morning, and he certainly arrived in Yarmouth at a little before twelve. From there he seems, however, to have completely disappeared. The car went back to St. David's Hall empty; the man only stayed long enough in Yarmouth, in fact, to have his dinner. We cannot find a single smack owner who was approached in any way for the hire of a boat. Yarmouth has been ransacked in vain. He certainly has not arrived at The Hague or we should have heard news at once. As a last resource, I ran down here to see you on the chance of your having picked up any information."

Hamel shook his head.

"You seem to know a good deal more than I do, already," he said.

"What do you think of Mr. Fentolin? You have stayed in his house. You have had an opportunity of studying him."

"So far as my impressions go," Hamel replied, "everything which you have suggested might very well be true. I think that either out of sheer love of mischief, or from some subtler motive, he is capable of anything. Every one in the place, except one poor woman, seems to look upon him as a sort of supernatural being. He gives money away to worthless people with both hands. Yet I share your opinion of him. I believe that he is a creature without conscience or morals. I have sat at his table and shivered when he has smiled."

"Are you staying at St. David's Hall now?"

"I left yesterday."

"Where are you now, then?"

"I am at St. David's Tower - the little place I told you of that belonged to my father - but I don't know whether I shall be able to stop there. Mr. Fentolin, for some reason or other, very much resented my leaving the Hall and was very annoyed at my insisting upon claiming the Tower. When I went down to the village to get some one to come up and look after me, there wasn't a woman there who would come. It didn't matter what I offered, they were all the same. They all muttered some excuse or other, and seemed only anxious to show me out. At the village shop they seemed to hate to serve me with anything. It was all I could do to get a packet of tobacco yesterday afternoon. You would really think that I was the most unpopular person who ever lived, and it can only be because of Mr. Fentolin's influence."

"Mr. Fentolin evidently doesn't like to have you in the locality," Kinsley remarked thoughtfully.

"He was all right so long as I was at St. David's Hall," Hamel observed.

"What's this little place like - St. David's Tower, you call it?" Kinsley asked.

"Just a little stone building actually on the beach," Hamel explained. "There is a large shed which Mr. Fentolin keeps locked up, and the habitable portion consists just of a bedroom and sitting-room. From what I can see, Mr. Fentolin has been making a sort of hobby of the place. There is telephonic communication with the house, and he seems to have used the sitting-room as a sort of studio. He paints sea pictures and really paints them very well."

A man came into the coffee-room, made some enquiry of the waiter and went out again. Hamel stared at him in a puzzled manner. For the moment he could only remember that the face was familiar. Then he suddenly gave vent to a little exclamation.

"Any one would think that I had been followed," he remarked. "The man who has just looked into the room is one of Mr. Fentolin's parasites or bodyguards, or whatever you call them."

"You probably have," Kinsley agreed. "What post does he hold in the household?"

"I have no idea," Hamel replied. "I saw him the first day I arrived and not since. Sort of secretary, I should think."

"He is a queer-looking fellow, anyway," Kinsley muttered. "Look out, Dick. Here he comes back again."

Mr. Ryan approached the table a little diffidently.

"I hope you will forgive the liberty, sir," he said to Hamel. "You remember me, I trust - Mr. Ryan. I am the librarian at St. David's Hall."

Hamel nodded.

"I thought I'd seen you there."

"I was wondering," the man continued, "whether you had a car of Mr. Fentolin's in Norwich to-day, and if so, whether I might beg a seat back in case you were returning before the five o'clock train? I came in early this morning to go through some manuscripts at a second-hand bookseller's here, and I have unfortunately missed the train back."

Hamel shook his head.

"I came in by train myself, or I would have given you a lift back, with pleasure," he said.

Mr. Ryan expressed his thanks briefly and left the room. Kinsley watched him from over the top of a newspaper.

"So that is one of Mr. Fentolin's creatures, too," he remarked. "Keeping his eye on you in Norwich, eh? Tell me, Dick, by-the-by, how do you get on with the rest of Mr. Fentolin's household, and exactly of whom does it consist?"

"There is his sister-in-law," Hamel replied, "Mrs. Seymour Fentolin. She is a strange, tired-looking woman who seems to stand in mortal fear of Mr. Fentolin. She is always overdressed and never natural, but it seems to me that nearly everything she does is done to suit his whims, or at his instigation."

Kinsley nodded thoughtfully.

"I remember Seymour Fentolin he said: 'a really fine fellow he was. Well, who else?'"

"Just the nephew and niece. The boy is half sullen, half discontented, yet he, too, seems to obey his uncle blindly. The three of them seem to be his slaves. It's a thing you can't live in the house without noticing."

"It seems to be a cheerful sort of household," Kinsley observed. "You read the papers, I suppose, Dick?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

"On and off, the last few days. I seem to have been busy doing all sorts of things."

"Well, I'll tell you something," Kinsley continued. "The whole of our available fleet is engaged in carrying out what they call a demonstration in the North Sea. They have patrol boats out in every direction, and only the short distance wireless signals are being used. Everything, of course, is in code, yet we know this for a fact: a good deal of private information passing between the Admiral and his commanders was known in Germany three hours after the signals themselves had been given. It is suspected - more than suspected, in fact - that these messages were picked up by Mr. Fentolin's wireless installation."

"I don't suppose he could help receiving them," Hamel remarked.

"He could help decoding them and sending them through to Germany, though," Kinsley retorted grimly. "The worst of it is, he has a private telephone wire in his house to London. If he isn't up to mischief, what does he need all these things for - private telegraph line, private telephone, private wireless? We have given the postmaster a hint to have the telegraph office moved down into the village, but I don't know that that will help us much."

"So far as regards the wireless," Hamel said, "I rather believe that it is temporarily dismantled. We had a sailor-man over, the morning before yesterday, to complain of his messages having been picked up. Mr. Fentolin promised at once to put his installation out of work for a time."

"He has done plenty of mischief with it already," Kinsley groaned. "However, it was Dunster I came down to make enquiries about. I couldn't help hoping that you might have been able to put us on the right track."

Hamel sighed.

"I know nothing beyond what I have told you."

"How did he look when he went away?"

"Very ill indeed," Hamel declared. "I afterwards saw the nurse who had been attending him, and she admitted that he was not fit to travel. I should say the probabilities are that he is laid up again somewhere."

"Did you actually speak to him?"

"Just a word or two."

"And you saw him go off in the car?"

"Gerald Fentolin and I both saw him and wished him good-by."

Kinsley glanced at the clock and rose to his feet. "Walk down to the station with me," he suggested. "I needn't tell you, I am sure," he went on, as they left the hotel a few minutes later, "that if anything does turn up, or if you get the glimmering of an idea, you'll let me know? We've a small army looking for the fellow, but it does seem as though he had disappeared off the face of the earth. If he doesn't turn up before the end of the Conference, we are done."

"Tell me," Hamel asked, after they had walked for some distance in silence, "exactly why is our fleet demonstrating to such an extent?"

"That Conference I have spoken of," Kinsley replied, "which is being held at The Hague, is being held, we know, purposely to discuss certain matters in which we are interested. It is meeting for their discussion without any invitation having been sent to this country. There is only one reply possible to such a course. It is there in the North Sea. But unfortunately -"

Kinsley paused. His tone and his expression had alike become gloomier.

"Go on," Hamel begged.

"Our reply, after all, is a miserable affair," Kinsley concluded. "You remember the outcry over the withdrawal of our Mediterranean Fleet? Now you see its sequel. We haven't a ship worth a snap of the fingers from Gibraltar to Suez. If France deserts us, it's good-by to Malta, good-by to Egypt, good-by to India. It's the disruption of the British Empire. And all this," he wound up, as he paused before taking his seat in the railway carriage, "all this might even now be avoided if only we could lay our hands upon the message which that man Dunster was bringing from New York!"