

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

[The Vanished Messenger](#)

[E. Phillips Oppenheim](#)

This Book:

[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 26

Once more Hamel descended from the little train, and, turning away from St. David's Hall, made his way across the marshes, seawards. The sunshine of the last few days had departed. The twilight was made gloomy by a floating veil of white mist, which hung about in wet patches. Hamel turned up his coat collar as he walked and shivered a little. The thought of his solitary night and uncomfortable surroundings, after all the luxury of St. David's Hall, was scarcely inspiring. Yet, on the whole, he was splendidly cheerful. The glamour of a host of new sensations was upon him. There was a new love of living in his heart. He forgot the cold east wind which blew in his face, bringing with it little puffs of damp grey mist. He forgot the cheerlessness which he was about to face, the lonely night before him. For the first time in his life a woman reigned in his thoughts.

It was not until he actually reached the very side of the Tower that he came back to earth. As he opened the door, he found a surprise in store for him. A fire was burning in the sitting-room, smoke was ascending from the kitchen chimney. The little round table was laid with a white cloth. There was a faint odour of cooking from the back premises. His lamp was lit, there were logs hissing and crackling upon the fire. As he stood there looking wonderingly about him, the door from the back was opened. Hannah Cox came quietly into the room.

"What time would you like your dinner, sir?" she enquired.

Hamel stared at her.

"Why, are you going to keep house for me, Mrs. Cox?" he asked.

"If you please, sir. I heard that you had been in the village, looking for some one. I am sorry that I was away. There is no one else who would come to you."

"So I discovered," he remarked, a little grimly.

"No one else," she went on, "would come to you because of Mr. Fentolin. He does not wish to have you here. They love him so much in the village that he had only to breathe the word. It was enough."

"Yet you are here," he reminded her.

"I do not count," she answered. "I am outside all these things."

Hamel gave a little sigh of satisfaction.

"Well, I am glad you could come, anyhow. If you have something for dinner, I should like it in about half an hour."

He climbed the narrow stairs which led to his bedroom. To his surprise, there were many things there for his comfort which he had forgotten to order - clean bed-linen, towels, even a curtain upon the window.

"Where did you get all the linen up-stairs from, Mrs. Cox?" he asked her, when he descended. "The room was almost empty yesterday, and I forgot nearly all the things I meant to bring home from Norwich."

"Mrs. Seymore Fentolin sent down a hamper for you," the woman replied, "with a message from Mr. Fentolin. He said that nothing among the oddments left by your father had been preserved, but that you were welcome to anything you desired, if you would let them know at the Hall."

"It is very kind of both of them," Hamel said thoughtfully.

The woman stood still for a moment, looking at him. Then she drew a step nearer.

"Has Mr. Fentolin given you the key of the shed?" she asked, very quietly.

Hamel shook his head.

"We don't need the place, do we?"

"He did not give you the key?" she persisted.

"Mr. Fentolin said that he had some things in there which he wished to keep locked up," he explained.

She remained thoughtful for several moments. Then she turned away.

"No," she said, "it was not likely he would not give you that key!"

Hamel dined simply but comfortably. Mrs. Cox cleared away the things, brought him his coffee, and appeared a few minutes later, her shawl wrapped around her, ready for departure.

"I shall be here at seven o'clock in the morning, sir," she announced.

Hamel was a little startled. He withdrew the pip from his mouth and looked at her.

"Why, of course," he remarked. "I'd forgotten. There is no place for you to stay here."

"I shall go back to my brother's," she said.

Hamel put some money upon the table.

"Please get anything that is necessary," he directed. "I shall leave you to do the housekeeping for a few days."

"Shall you be staying here long, sir?" she asked.

"I am not sure," he replied.

"I do not suppose," she said, "that you will stay for very long. I shall get only the things that you require from day to day. Good night, sir."

She left the room. Hamel looked after her for a moment with a frown. In some indescribable way, the woman half impressed, half irritated him. She had always the air of keeping something in the background. He followed her out on to the little ridge of beach, a few minutes after she had left. The mist was still drifting about. Only a few yards away the sea rolled in, filling the air with dull thunder. The marshland was half obscured. St. David's Hall was invisible, but like strangely-hung lanterns in an empty space he saw the line of lights from the great house gleam through the obscurity. There was no sound save the sound of the sea. He shivered slightly. It was like an empty land, this.

Then, moved by some instinct of curiosity, he made his way round to the closed door of the boat-house, only to find it, as he had expected, locked. He shook it slightly, without result. Then he strolled round to the back, entered his own little abode by the kitchen, and tried the other door which led into the boat-house. It was not only locked, but a staple had been put in, and it was fastened with a padlock of curious design which he did not remember to have seen there before. Again, half unconsciously, he listened, and again he found the silence oppressive. He went back to his room, brought out some of the books which it had been his intention to study, and sat and read over the fire.

At ten o'clock he went to bed. As he threw open his window before undressing, it seemed to him that he could catch the sound of voices from the sea. He listened intently. A grey pall hung everywhere. To the left, with strange indistinctness, almost like something human struggling to assert itself, came the fitful flash from the light at the entrance to the tidal way. Once more he strained his ears. This time there was no doubt about it. He heard the sound of fishermen's voices. He heard one of them say distinctly:

"Hard aport, Dave lad! That's Fentolin's light. Keep her out a bit. Steady, lad!"

Through a rift in the mist, he caught a glimpse of the brown sail of a fishing-boat, dangerously near the land. He watched it alter its course slightly and pass on. Then again there was silence. He undressed slowly and went to bed.

Later on he woke with a start and sat up in bed, listening intently, listening for he knew not what. Except for the backward scream of the pebbles, dragged down every few seconds by the receding waves, an unbroken silence seemed to prevail. He struck a match and looked at his watch. It was exactly three o'clock. He got out of bed. He was a man in perfect health, ignorant of the meaning of nerves, a man of proved courage. Yet he was conscious that his pulses were beating with absurd rapidity. A new feeling seemed to possess him. He could almost have declared that he was afraid. What sound had awakened him? He had no idea, yet he seemed to have a distinct and absolute conviction that it had been a real sound and no dream. He drew aside the curtains and looked out of the window. The mist now seemed to have become almost a fog, to have closed in upon sea and land. There was nothing whatever to be seen. As he stood there for a moment, listening, his face became moist with the drifting vapour. Suddenly upon the beach he saw what at first he imagined must be an optical illusion - a long shaft of light, invisible in itself except that it seemed to slightly change the density of the mist. He threw on an overcoat over his pyjamas, thrust on his slippers, and taking up his own electric torch, hastily descended the stairs. He opened the front door and stepped out on to the beach. He stood in the very place where the light had seemed to be, and looked inland. There was no sign of any human person, not a sound except the falling of the sea upon the pebbly beach. He raised his voice and called out. Somehow or other, speech seemed to be a relief.

"Hullo!"

There was no response. He tried again.

"Is any one there?"

Still no answer. He watched the veiled light from the harbour appear and disappear. It threw no shadow of illumination upon the spot to which he had gazed from his window. One window at St. David's Hall was illuminated. The rest of the place was wrapped now in darkness. He walked up to the boat-house. The door was still locked. There was no sign that any one had been there. Reluctantly at last he re-entered the Tower and made his way up-stairs.

"Confound that fellow Kinsley!" he muttered, as he threw off his overcoat. "All his silly suggestions and melodramatic ideas have given me a fit of nerves. I am going to bed, and I am going to sleep. That couldn't have been a light I saw at all. I couldn't have heard anything. I am going to sleep."