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Chapter 1 - Mr. Hamilton Fynes, Urgent

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There was a little murmur of regret amongst the five hundred and eighty-seven saloon passengers on board the steamship Lusitania, mingled, perhaps, with a few expressions of a more violent character. After several hours of doubt, the final verdict had at last been pronounced. They had missed the tide, and no attempt was to be made to land passengers that night. Already the engines had ceased to throb, the period of unnatural quietness had commenced. Slowly, and without noticeable motion, the great liner swung round a little in the river.

A small tug, which had been hovering about for some time, came screaming alongside. There was a hiss from its wave-splashed deck, and a rocket with a blue light flashed up into the sky. A man who had formed one of the long line of passengers, leaning over the rail, watching the tug since it had come into sight, now turned away and walked briskly to the steps leading to the bridge. As it happened, the captain himself was in the act of descending. The passenger accosted him, and held out what seemed to be a letter.

"Captain Goodfellow," he said, "I should be glad if you would glance at the contents of that note."

The captain, who had just finished a long discussion with the pilot and was not in the best of humor, looked a little surprised.

"What, now?" he asked.

"If you please," was the quiet answer. "The matter is urgent."

"Who are you?" the captain asked.

"My name is Hamilton Fynes," the other answered. "I am a saloon passenger on board your ship, although my name does not appear in the list. That note has been in my pocket since we left New York, to deliver to you in the event of a certain contingency happening."

"The contingency being?" the captain asked, tearing open the envelope and moving a little nearer the electric light which shone out from the smoking room.

"That the Lusitania did not land her passengers this evening."

The captain read the note, examined the signature carefully, and whistled softly to himself.

"You know what is inside this?" he asked, looking into his companion's face with some curiosity.

"Certainly," was the brief reply.

"Your name is Mr. Hamilton Fynes, the Mr. Hamilton Fynes mentioned in this letter?"

"That is so," the passenger admitted.

The captain nodded.

"Well," he said, "you had better get down on the lower deck, port side. By the bye, have you any friends with you?"

"I am quite alone," he answered.

"So much the better," the captain declared. "Don't tell any one that you are going ashore if you can help it."

"I certainly will not, sir," the other answered. "Thank you very much."

"Of course, you know that you can't take your luggage with you?" the captain remarked.

"That is of no consequence at all, sir," Mr. Hamilton Fynes answered. "I will leave instructions for my trunk to be sent on after me. I have all that I require, for the moment, in this suitcase."

The captain blew his whistle. Mr. Hamilton Fynes made his way quietly to the lower deck, which was almost deserted. In a very few minutes he was joined by half a dozen sailors, dragging a rope ladder. The little tug came screaming around, and before any of the passengers on the deck above had any idea of what was happening, Mr. Hamilton Fynes was on board the Anna Maria, and on his way down the river, seated in a small, uncomfortable cabin, lit by a single oil lamp.

No one spoke more than a casual word to him from the moment he stepped to the deck until the short journey was at an end. He was shown at once into the cabin, the door of which he closed without a moment's delay. A very brief examination of the interior convinced him that he was indeed alone. Thereupon he seated himself with his back to the wall and his face to the door, and finding an English newspaper on the table, read it until they reached the docks. Arrived there, he exchanged a civil good-night with the captain, and handed a sovereign to the seaman who held his bag while he disembarked.

For several minutes after he had stepped on to the wooden platform, Mr. Hamilton Fynes showed no particular impatience to continue his journey. He stood in the shadow of one of the sheds, looking about him with quick furtive glances, as though anxious to assure himself that there was no one around who was taking a noticeable interest in his movements. Having satisfied himself at length upon this point, he made his way to the London and North Western Railway Station, and knocked at the door of the

station-master's office. The station-master was busy, and although Mr. Hamilton Fynes had the appearance of a perfectly respectable transatlantic man of business, there was nothing about his personality remarkably striking,--nothing, at any rate, to inspire an unusual amount of respect.

"You wished to see me, sir?" the official asked, merely glancing up from the desk at which he was sitting with a pile of papers before him.

Mr. Hamilton Fynes leaned over the wooden counter which separated him from the interior of the office. Before he spoke, he glanced around as though to make sure that he had not forgotten to close the door.

"I require a special train to London as quickly as possible," he announced. "I should be glad if you could let me have one within half an hour, at any rate.

The station-master rose to his feet.

"Quite impossible, sir," he declared a little brusquely. "Absolutely out of the question!"

"May I ask why it is out of the question?" Mr. Hamilton Fynes inquired.

"In the first place," the station-master answered, "a special train to London would cost you a hundred and eighty pounds, and in the second place, even if you were willing to pay that sum, it would be at least two hours before I could start you off. We could not possibly disorganize the whole of our fast traffic. The ordinary mail train leaves here at midnight with sleeping-cars."

Mr. Hamilton Fynes held out a letter which he had produced from his breast pocket, and which was, in appearance, very similar to the one which he had presented, a short time ago, to the captain of the Lusitania.

"Perhaps you will kindly read this," he said. "I am perfectly willing to pay the hundred and eighty pounds."

The station-master tore open the envelope and read the few lines contained therein. His manner underwent at once a complete change, very much as the manner of the captain of the Lusitania had done. He took the letter over to his green-shaded writing lamp, and examined the signature carefully. When he returned, he looked at Mr. Hamilton Fynes curiously. There was, however, something more than curiosity in his glance. There was also respect.

"I will give this matter my personal attention at once, Mr. Fynes," he said, lifting the flap of the counter and coming out. "Do you care to come inside and wait in my private office?"

"Thank you," Mr. Hamilton Fynes answered; "I will walk up and down the platform."

"There is a refreshment room just on the left," the station-master remarked, ringing violently at a telephone. "I dare say we shall get you off in less than half an hour. We will do our best, at any rate. It's an awkward time just now to command an absolutely clear line, but if we can once get you past Crewe you'll be all right. Shall we fetch you from the refreshment room when we are ready?"

"If you please," the intending passenger answered.

Mr. Hamilton Fynes discovered that place of entertainment without difficulty, ordered for himself a cup of coffee and a sandwich, and drew a chair close up to the small open fire, taking care, however, to sit almost facing the only entrance to the room. He laid his hat upon the counter, close to which he had taken up his position, and smoothed back with his left hand his somewhat thick black hair. He was a man, apparently of middle age, of middle height, clean-shaven, with good but undistinguished features, dark eyes, very clear and very bright, which showed, indeed, but little need of the pince-nez which hung by a thin black cord from his neck. His hat, low in the crown and of soft gray felt, would alone have betrayed his nationality. His clothes, however, were also American in cut. His boots were narrow and of unmistakable shape. He ate his sandwich with suspicion, and after his first sip of coffee ordered a whiskey and soda. Afterwards he sat leaning back in his chair, glancing every now and then at the clock, but otherwise manifesting no signs of impatience. In less than half an hour an inspector, cap in hand, entered the room and announced that everything was ready. Mr. Hamilton Fynes put on his hat, picked up his suitcase, and followed him on to the platform. A long saloon carriage, with a guard's brake behind and an engine in front, was waiting there.

"We've done our best, sir," the station-master remarked with a note of self-congratulation in his tone. "It's exactly twenty-two minutes since you came into the office, and there she is. Finest engine we've got on the line, and the best driver. You've a clear road ahead too. Wish you a pleasant journey, sir."

"You are very good, sir," Mr. Hamilton Fynes declared. "I am sure that my friends on the other side will appreciate your attention. By what time do you suppose that we shall reach London?"

The station-master glanced at the clock.

"It is now eight o'clock, sir," he announced. "If my orders down the line are properly attended to, you should be there by twenty minutes to twelve."

Mr. Hamilton Fynes nodded gravely and took his seat in the car. He had previously walked its entire length and back again.

"The train consists only of this carriage?" he asked. "There is no other passenger, for instance, travelling in the guard's brake?"

"Certainly not, sir," the station-master declared. "Such a thing would be entirely against the regulations. There are five of you, all told, on board,--driver, stoker, guard, saloon attendant, and yourself."

Mr. Hamilton Fynes nodded, and appeared satisfied.

"No more luggage, sir? the guard asked.

"I was obliged to leave what I had, excepting this suitcase, upon the steamer," Mr. Hamilton Fynes explained. "I could not very well expect them to get my trunk up from the hold. It will follow me to the hotel tomorrow."

"You will find that the attendant has light refreshments on board, sir, if you should be wanting anything," the station-master announced. "We'll start you off now, then. Good-night, sir!"

Mr. Fynes nodded genially.

"Good-night, Station-master!" he said. "Many thanks to you."