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Chapter 20 - The Answer

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Mr. Coulson moved his cigar into a corner of his mouth, as though to obtain a clear view of his questioner's face. His expression was one of bland interest.

"Well, I guess you've got me puzzled, Sir Edward," he said. "You aren't thinking of doing anything in woollen machinery, are you?"

Sir Edward smiled.

"I think not, Mr. Coulson," he answered. "At any rate, my question had nothing to do with your other very interesting avocation. What I wanted to ask you was whether you could tell me anything about a compatriot of yours--a Mr. Hamilton Fynes?"

"Hamilton Fynes!" Mr. Coulson repeated thoughtfully. "Why, that's the man who got murdered on the cars, going from Liverpool to London."

"That is so," Sir Edward admitted.

Mr. Coulson shook his head.

"I told that reporter fellow all I knew about him," he said. "He was an unsociable sort of chap, you know, Sir Edward, and he wasn't in any line of business."

"H'm! I thought he might have been," the Minister answered, glancing keenly for a moment at his visitor. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Coulson, we have been a great deal bothered about that unfortunate incident, and by the subsequent murder of the young man who was attached to your Embassy here. Scotland Yard has strained every nerve to bring the guilty people to justice, but so far unsuccessfully. It seems to me that your friends on the other side scarcely seem to give us credit for our exertions. They do not help us in the least. They assure us that they had no knowledge of Mr. Fynes other than has appeared in the papers. They recognize him only as an American citizen going about his legitimate business. A little more confidence on their part would, I think, render our task easier."

Mr. Coulson scratched his chin for a moment thoughtfully.

"Well," he said, "I can understand their feeling a bit sore about it. I'm not exactly given to brag when I'm away from my own country--one hears too much of that all the time--but between you and me, I shouldn't say that it was possible for two crimes like that to be committed in New York City and for the murderer to get off scot free in either case."

"The matter," Sir Edward declared, "has given us a great deal of anxiety, and I can assure you that the Home Secretary himself has taken a strong personal interest in it, but at the same time, as I have just pointed out to you, our investigations are rendered the more difficult from the fact that we cannot learn anything definite concerning this Mr. Hamilton Fynes or his visit to this country. Now, if we knew, for instance," Sir Edward continued, "that he was carrying documents, or even a letter, similar to the one you have just handed to me, we might at once discover a motive to the crime, and work backwards until we reached the perpetrator."

Mr. Coulson knocked the ash from his cigar.

"I see what you are driving at," he said. "I am sorry I can be of no assistance to you, Sir Edward."

"Neither in the case of Mr. Hamilton Fynes or in the case of Mr. Richard Vanderpole?" Sir Edward asked.

Mr. Coulson shook his head.

"Quite out of my line," he declared.

"Notwithstanding the fact," Sir Edward reminded him quietly, "that you were probably the last person to see Vanderpole alive? He came to the Savoy to call upon you before he got into the taxicab where he was murdered. That is so, isn't it?"

"Sure!" Mr. Coulson answered. "A nice young fellow he was, too. Well set up, and real American manners,--Hail, fellow, well met!' with you right away."

"I suppose, Mr. Coulson," the Minister suggested smoothly, "it wouldn't answer your purpose to put aside that bluff about patents for the development of the woollen trade for a few moments, and tell me exactly what passed between you and Mr. Vanderpole at the Savoy Hotel, and the object of his calling upon you? Whether, for instance, he took away with him documents or papers intended for the Embassy and which you yourself had brought from America?"

"You do think of things!" Mr. Coulson remarked admiringly. "You're on the wrong track this time, though, sure. Still, supposing I were able to tell you that Mr. Vanderpole was carrying papers of importance to my country, and that Mr. Hamilton Fynes was also in possession of the same class of document, how would it help you? In what fresh direction should you look then for the murderers of these two men?"

"Mr. Coulson," Sir Edward said, "we should consider the nature of those documents, and we should see to whose advantage it was that they were suppressed."

Mr. Coulson's face seemed suddenly old and lined. He spoke with a new vigor, and his eyes were very keen and bright under his bushy eyebrows.

"And supposing it was your country's?" he asked. "Supposing they contained instructions to our Ambassador which you might consider inimical to your interests? Do you mean that you would look at home for the murderer? You mean that you have men so devoted to their native land that they were willing to run the risk of death by the hangman to aid her? You mean that your Secret Service is perfected to that extent, and that the scales of justice are held blindfolded? Or do you mean that Scotland Yard

would have its orders, and that these men would go free?"

"I was not thinking of my own country," Sir Edward admitted. "I must confess that my thoughts had turned elsewhere."

"Let me tell you this, sir," Mr. Coulson continued. "I should imagine that the trouble with Washington, if there is any, is simply that they will not believe that your police have a free hand. They will not believe that you are honestly and genuinely anxious for the discovery of the perpetrator of these crimes. I speak without authority, you understand? I am no more in a position to discuss this affair than any other tourist from my country who might happen to come along."

Sir Edward shrugged his shoulders.

"Can you suggest any method," he asked a little dryly, "by means of which we might remove this unfortunate impression?"

Mr. Coulson flicked the ash once more from the end of his cigar and looked at it thoughtfully.

"This isn't my show," he said, "and, you understand, I am giving the views of Mr. James B. Coulson, and nobody but Mr. James B. Coulson, but if I were in your position, and I knew that a friendly country was feeling a little bit sore at having two of her citizens disposed of so unceremoniously, I'd do my best to prove, by the only possible means, that I was taking the matter seriously."

"The only possible means being?" Sir Edward asked.

"I guess I'd offer a reward," Mr. Coulson admitted.

Sir Edward did not hesitate for a moment.

"Your idea is an excellent one, Mr. Coulson," he said. "It has already been mooted, but we will give it a little emphasis. Tomorrow we will offer a reward of one thousand pounds for any information leading to the apprehension of either murderer."

"That sounds bully," Mr. Coulson declared.

"You think that it will have a good effect upon your friends in Washington?"

"Me?" Mr. Coulson asked. "I know nothing about it. I've given you my personal opinion only. Seems to me, though, it's the best way of showing that you're in earnest."

"Before we quit this subject finally, Mr. Coulson," Sir Edward said, "I am going to ask you a question which you have been asked before."

"Referring to Hamilton Fynes?" Mr. Coulson asked.

"Yes!"

"Get your young man to lay his hand on that copy of the Comet," Mr. Coulson begged earnestly. "I told that pushing young journalist all I knew and a bit more. I assure you, my information isn't worth anything."

"Was it meant to be worth anything?" Sir Edward asked.

Mr. Coulson remained imperturbable.

"If you don't mind, Sir Edward," he said, "I guess we'll drop the subject of Mr. Hamilton Fynes. We can't get any forwarder. Let it go at that."

There was a knock at the door. Sir Edward's secretary ushered in a tall, plainly dressed gentleman, who had the slightly aggrieved air of a man who has been kept out of his bed beyond the usual time.

"My dear Bransome," he said, shaking hands, "isn't this a little unreasonable of you? Business at this hour of the night! I was in the midst of a most amusing conversation with a delightful acquaintance of your wife's, a young lady who turned up her nose at Hegel and had developed a philosophy of her own. I was just beginning to grasp its first principles. Nothing else, I am quite sure, would have kept me awake."

Sir Edward leaned across the table towards Mr. Coulson. Mr. Coulson had risen to his feet.

"This gentleman," he said, "is Mr. Smith."

The newcomer opened his lips to protest, but Sir Edward held out his hand.

"One moment," he begged. "Our friend here--Mr. J. B. Coulson from New York--has brought a letter from America. He is sailing tomorrow,--leaving London somewhere about eight o'clock in the morning, I imagine. He wishes to take back a verbal reply. The letter, you will understand, comes from a Mr. Jones, and the reply is delivered in the presence of--Mr. Smith. Our friend here is not personally concerned in these affairs. As a matter of fact, I believe he has been on the Continent exploiting some patents of his own invention."

The newcomer accepted the burden of his altered nomenclature and took up the letter. He glanced at the signature, and his manner became at once more interested. He accepted the chair which Sir Edward had placed by his side, and, drawing the electric light a little nearer, read the document through, word by word. Then he folded it up, and glanced first at his colleague and afterwards at Mr. Coulson.

"I understand," he said, "that this is a private inquiry from a private gentleman, who is entitled, however, to as much courtesy as it is possible for us to show him."

"That is exactly the position, sir," Mr. Coulson replied. "Negotiations of a more formal character are naturally conducted between your Foreign Office and the Foreign Office of my country. These few lines come from man to man. I think that it occurred to my friend that it might save a great deal of trouble, a great deal of specious diplomacy, and a great many hundred pages of labored despatches, if, at the bottom of it all, he knew your true feelings concerning this question. It is, after all, a simple matter," Mr. Coulson continued, "and yet it is a matter with so many ramifications that after much discussion it might become a veritable chaos."

Mr. Smith inclined his head gently.

"I appreciate the situation," he said. "My friend here--Sir Edward Bransome--and I have already discussed the matter at great length. We have also had the benefit of the advice and help of a greater Foreign Minister than either of us could ever hope to become. I see no objection to giving you the verbal reply you ask for. Do you, Bransome?"

"None whatever, sir."

"I leave it to you to put it in your own words," Mr. Smith continued. "The affair is within your province, and the policy of His Majesty's Ministers is absolutely fixed."

Sir Edward turned toward their visitor.

"Mr. Coulson," he said, "we are asked by your friend, in a few plain words, what the attitude of Great Britain would be in the event of a war between Japan and America. My answer--our answer--to you is this,--no war between Japan and America is likely to take place unless your Cabinet should go to unreasonable and uncalled-for extremes. We have ascertained, beyond any measure of doubt, the sincere feeling of our ally in this matter. Japan does not desire war, is not preparing for it, is unwilling even to entertain the possibility of it. At the same time she feels that her sons should receive the same consideration from every nation in the world as the sons of other people. Personally it is our profound conviction that the good sense, the fairness, and the generous instincts of your great country will recognize this and act accordingly. War between your country and Japan is an impossible thing. The thought of it exists only in the frothy vaporings of cheap newspapers, and the sensational utterances of the catch politician who must find an audience and a hearing by any methods. The sober possibility of such a conflict does not exist."

Mr. Coulson listened attentively to every word. When Sir Edward had finished, he withdrew his cigar from his mouth and knocked the ash on to a corner of the writing table.

"That's all very interesting indeed, Sir Edward," he declared. "I am very pleased to have heard what you have said, and I shall repeat it to my friend on the other side, who, I am sure, will be exceedingly obliged to you for such a frank exposition of your views. And now," he continued, "I don't want to keep you gentlemen up too late, so perhaps you will be coming to the answer of my question."

"The answer!" Sir Edward exclaimed. "Surely I made myself clear?"

"All that you have said," Mr. Coulson admitted, "has been remarkably clear, but the question I asked you was this,--what is to be the position of your country in the event of war between Japan and America?"

"And I have told you," Sir Edward declared, "that war between Japan and America is not a subject within the scope of practical politics."

"We may consider ourselves--my friend Mr. Jones would certainly consider himself," Mr. Coulson affirmed,--"as good a judge as you, Sir Edward, so far as regards that matter. I am not asking you whether it is probable or improbable. You may know the feelings of your ally. You do not know ours. We may look into the future, and we may see that, sooner or later, war between our country and Japan is a necessity. We may decide that it is better for us to fight now than later. These things are in the clouds. They only enter into the present discussion to this extent, but it is not for you to sit here and say whether war between the United States and Japan is possible or impossible. What Mr. Jones asks you is--what would be your position if it should take place? The little diatribe with which you have just favored me is exactly the reply we should have expected to receive formally from Downing Street. It isn't that sort of reply I want to take back to Mr. Jones."

Mr. Smith and his colleague exchanged glances, and the latter drew his chief on one side.

"You will excuse me for a moment, I know, Mr. Coulson," he said.

"Why, by all means," Mr. Coulson declared. "My time is my own, and it is entirely at your service. If you say the word, I'll go outside and wait."

"It is not necessary," Sir Edward answered.

The room was a large one, and the two men walked slowly up and down, Mr. Smith leaning all the time upon his colleague's shoulder. They spoke in an undertone, and what they said was inaudible to Mr. Coulson. During his period of waiting he drew another cigar from his pocket, and lit it from the stump of the old one. Then he made himself a little more comfortable in his chair, and looked around at the walls of the handsomely furnished but rather sombre apartment with an air of pleased curiosity. It was scarcely, perhaps, what he should have expected from a man in a similar position in his own country, but it was, at any rate, impressive. Presently they came back to him. This time it was Mr. Smith who spoke.

"Mr. Coulson," he said, "we need not beat about the bush. You ask us a plain question and you want a plain answer. Then I must tell you this. The matter is not one concerning which I can give you any definite information. I appreciate the position of your friend Mr. Jones, and I should like to have met him in the same spirit as he has shown in his inquiry, but I may tell you that, being utterly convinced that Japan does not seek war with you, and that therefore no war is likely, my Government is not prepared to answer a question which they consider based upon an impossibility. If this war should come, the position of our country would depend entirely upon the rights of the dispute. As a corollary to that, I would mention two things. You read your newspapers, Mr. Coulson?"

"Sure!" that gentleman answered.

"You are aware, then," Mr. Smith continued, "of the present position of your fleet. You know how many months must pass before it can reach Eastern waters. It is not within the traditions of this country to evade fulfillment of its obligations, however severe and unnatural they may seem, but in three months' time, Mr. Coulson, our treaty with Japan will have expired."

"You are seeking to renew it!" Mr. Coulson declared quickly.

Mr. Smith raised his eyebrows.

"The renewal of that treaty," he said, "is on the knees of the gods. One cannot tell. I go so far only as to tell you that in three months the present treaty will have expired."

Mr. Coulson rose slowly to his feet and took up his hat.

"Gentlemen both," he said, "that's what I call plain speaking. I suppose it's up to us to read between the lines. I can assure you that my friend Mr. Jones will appreciate it. It isn't my place to say a word outside the letter which I have handed to you. I am a plain business man, and these things don't come in my way. That is why I feel I can criticize,--I am unprejudiced. You are Britishers, and you've got one eternal fault. You seem to think the whole world must see a matter as you see it. If Japan has convinced you that she doesn't seek a war with us, it doesn't follow that she's convinced us. As to the rights of our dispute, don't rely so much upon hearing one side only. Don't be dogmatic about it, and say this thing is and that thing isn't. You may bet your last dollar that America isn't going to war about trifles. We are the same flesh and

blood, you know. We have the same traditions to uphold. What we do is what we should expect you to do if you were in our place. That's all, gentlemen. Now I wish you both good night! Mr. Smith, I am proud to shake hands with you. Sir Edward, I say the same to you."

Bransome touched the bell and summoned his secretary.

"Sidney, will you see this gentleman out?" he said. "You are quite sure there is nothing further we can do for you, Mr. Coulson?"

"Nothing at all, I thank you, sir," that gentleman answered. "I have only got to thank you once more for the pleasure of this brief interview. Good night!"

"Good night, and bon voyage!" Sir Edward answered.

The door was closed. The two men looked at one another for a moment. Mr. Smith shrugged his shoulders and helped himself to a cigarette.

"I wonder," he remarked thoughtfully, "how our friends in Japan convinced themselves so thoroughly that Mr. Jones was only playing ships!"

Sir Edward shook his head.

"It makes one wonder," he said.