ROBERT HUGH BENSON

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Persons who do not like tiresome prologues, need not read this one. It is essential only to the situation, not to the story.

PROLOGUE

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"You must give me a moment," said the old man, leaning back.

Percy resettled himself in his chair and waited, chin on hand.

It was a very silent room in which the three men sat, furnished with the extreme common sense of the period. It had neither window nor door; for it was now sixty years since the world, recognising that space is not confined to the surface of the globe, had begun to burrow in earnest. Old Mr. Templeton's house stood some forty feet below the level of the Thames embankment, in what was considered a somewhat commodious position, for he had only a hundred yards to walk before he reached the station of the Second Central Motor-circle, and a quarter of a mile to the volor-station at Blackfriars. He was over ninety years old, however, and seldom left his house now. The room itself was

lined throughout with the delicate green jade-enamel prescribed by the Board of Health, and was suffused with the artificial sunlight discovered by the great Reuter forty years before; it had the colour-tone of a spring wood, and was warmed and ventilated through the classical frieze grating to the exact temperature of 18 degrees Centigrade. Mr. Templeton was a plain man, content to live as his father had lived before him. The furniture, too, was a little old-fashioned in make and design, constructed however according to the prevailing system of soft asbestos enamel welded over iron, indestructible, pleasant to the touch, and resembling mahogany. A couple of book-cases well filled ran on either side of the bronze pedestal electric fire before which sat the three men; and in the further corners stood the hydraulic lifts that gave entrance, the one to the bedroom, the other to the corridor fifty feet up which opened on to the Embankment.

Father Percy Franklin, the elder of the two priests, was rather a remarkable-looking man, not more than thirty-five years old, but with hair that was white throughout; his grey eyes, under black eyebrows, were peculiarly bright and almost passionate; but his prominent nose and chin and the extreme decisiveness of his mouth reassured the observer as to his will. Strangers usually looked twice at him.

Father Francis, however, sitting in his upright chair on the other side of the hearth, brought down the average; for, though his brown eyes were pleasant and pathetic, there was no strength in his face; there was even a tendency to feminine melancholy in the corners of his mouth and the marked droop of his eyelids.

Mr. Templeton was just a very old man, with a strong face in folds, clean-shaven like the rest of the world, and was now lying back on his water-pillows with the quilt over his feet.

* * * * *

At last he spoke, glancing first at Percy, on his left.

"Well," he said, "it is a great business to remember exactly; but this is how I put it to myself."

"In England our party was first seriously alarmed at the Labour Parliament of 1917. That showed us how deeply Herveism had impregnated the whole social atmosphere. There had been Socialists before, but none like Gustave Herve in his old age—at least no one of the same power. He, perhaps you have read, taught absolute Materialism and Socialism developed to their logical issues. Patriotism, he said, was a relic of barbarism; and sensual enjoyment was the only certain good. Of course, every one laughed at him. It was said that without religion there could be no adequate motive among the masses for even the simplest social order. But he was right, it seemed. After the fall of the French Church at the beginning of the century and the massacres of 1914, the bourgeoisie settled down to organise itself; and that extraordinary movement began in earnest, pushed through by the middle classes, with no patriotism, no class distinctions, practically no army. Of course, Freemasonry directed it all. This spread to Germany, where the influence of Karl Marx had already—-"

"Yes, sir," put in Percy smoothly, "but what of England, if you don't mind—-"

"Ah, yes; England. Well, in 1917 the Labour party gathered up the reins, and Communism really began. That was long before I can remember, of course, but my father used to date it from then. The only wonder was that things did not go forward more quickly; but I suppose there was a good deal of Tory leaven left. Besides, centuries generally run slower than is expected, especially after beginning with an impulse. But the new order began then; and the Communists have never suffered a serious reverse since, except the little one in '25. Blenkin founded 'The New People' then; and the 'Times' dropped out; but it was not, strangely enough, till '35 that the House of Lords fell for the last time. The Established Church had gone finally in '29."

"And the religious effect of that?" asked Percy swiftly, as the old man paused to cough slightly, lifting his inhaler. The priest was anxious to keep to the point.

"It was an effect itself," said the other, "rather than a cause. You see, the Ritualists, as they used to call them, after a desperate attempt to get into the Labour swim, came into the Church after the Convocation of '19, when the Nicene Creed dropped out; and there was no real enthusiasm except among them. But so far as there was an effect from the final Disestablishment, I think it was that what was left of the State Church melted into the Free Church, and the Free Church was, after all, nothing more than a little sentiment. The Bible was completely given up as an authority after the renewed German attacks in the twenties; and the Divinity of our Lord, some think, had gone all but in name by the beginning of the century. The Kenotic theory had provided for that. Then there was that strange

little movement among the Free Churchmen even earlier; when ministers who did no more than follow the swim—who were sensitive to draughts, so to speak—broke off from their old positions. It is curious to read in the history of the time how they were hailed as independent thinkers. It was just exactly what they were not.... Where was I? Oh, yes.... Well, that cleared the ground for us, and the Church made extraordinary progress for a while—extraordinary, that is, under the circumstances, because you must remember, things were very different from twenty, or even ten, years before. I mean that, roughly speaking, the severing of the sheep and the goats had begun. The religious people were practically all Catholics and Individualists; the irreligious people rejected the supernatural altogether, and were, to a man, Materialists and Communists. But we made progress because we had a few exceptional men—Delaney the philosopher, McArthur and Largent, the philanthropists, and so on. It really seemed as if Delaney and his disciples might carry everything before them. You remember his 'Analogy'? Oh, yes, it is all in the text-books....

"Well, then, at the close of the Vatican Council, which had been called in the nineteenth century, and never dissolved, we lost a great number through the final definitions. The 'Exodus of the Intellectuals' the world called it—-"

"The Biblical decisions," put in the younger priest.

"That partly; and the whole conflict that began with the rise of Modernism at the beginning of the century but much more the condemnation of Delaney, and of the New Transcendentalism generally, as it was then understood. He died outside the Church, you know. Then there was the

condemnation of Sciotti's book on Comparative Religion.... After that the Communists went on by strides, although by very slow ones. It seems extraordinary to you, I dare say, but you cannot imagine the excitement when the *Necessary Trades Bill* became law in '60. People thought that all enterprise would stop when so many professions were nationalised; but, you know, it didn't. Certainly the nation was behind it."

"What year was the *Two-Thirds Majority Bill* passed?" asked Percy.

"Oh! long before—within a year or two of the fall of the House of Lords. It was necessary, I think, or the Individualists would have gone raving mad.... Well, the *Necessary Trades Bill* was inevitable: people had begun to see that even so far back as the time when the railways were municipalised. For a while there was a burst of art; because all the Individualists who could went in for it (it was then that the Toller school was founded); but they soon drifted back into Government employment; after all, the six-per-cent limit for all individual enterprise was not much of a temptation; and Government paid well."

Percy shook his head.

"Yes; but I cannot understand the present state of affairs. You said just now that things went slowly?"

"Yes," said the old man, "but you must remember the Poor Laws. That established the Communists for ever. Certainly Braithwaite knew his business."

The younger priest looked up inquiringly.

"The abolition of the old workhouse system," said Mr. Templeton. "It is all ancient history to you, of course; but I

remember as if it was yesterday. It was that which brought down what was still called the Monarchy and the Universities."

"Ah," said Percy. "I should like to hear you talk about that, sir."

"Presently, father.... Well, this is what Braithwaite did. By the old system all paupers were treated alike, and resented it. By the new system there were the three grades that we have now, and the enfranchisement of the two higher grades. Only the absolutely worthless were assigned to the third grade, and treated more or less as criminals—of course after careful examination. Then there was the reorganisation of the Old Age Pensions. Well, don't you see how strong that made the Communists? The Individualists—they were still called Tories when I was a boy—the Individualists have had no chance since. They are no more than a worn-out drag now. The whole of the working classes—and that meant ninety-nine of a hundred—were all against them."

Percy looked up; but the other went on.

"Then there was the Prison Reform Bill under Macpherson, and the abolition of capital punishment; there was the final Education Act of '59, whereby dogmatic secularism was established; the practical abolition of inheritance under the reformation of the Death Duties—-"

"I forget what the old system was," said Percy.

"Why, it seems incredible, but the old system was that all paid alike. First came the Heirloom Act, and then the change by which inherited wealth paid three times the duty of earned wealth, leading up to the acceptance of Karl Marx's doctrines in '89—but the former came in '77.... Well, all

these things kept England up to the level of the Continent; she had only been just in time to join in with the final scheme of Western Free Trade. That was the first effect, you remember, of the Socialists' victory in Germany."

"And how did we keep out of the Eastern War?" asked Percy anxiously.

"Oh! that's a long story; but, in a word, America stopped us; so we lost India and Australia. I think that was the nearest to the downfall of the Communists since '25. But Braithwaite got out of it very cleverly by getting us the protectorate of South Africa once and for all. He was an old man then, too."

Mr. Templeton stopped to cough again. Father Francis sighed and shifted in his chair.

"And America?" asked Percy.

"Ah! all that is very complicated. But she knew her strength and annexed
Canada the same year. That was when we were at our weakest."

Percy stood up.

"Have you a Comparative Atlas, sir?" he asked.

The old man pointed to a shelf.

"There," he said.

* * * * *

Percy looked at the sheets a minute or two in silence, spreading them on his knees.

"It is all much simpler, certainly," he murmured, glancing first at the old complicated colouring of the beginning of the twentieth century, and then at the three great washes of the twenty-first.

He moved his finger along Asia. The words EASTERN EMPIRE ran across the pale yellow, from the Ural Mountains on the left to the Behring Straits on the right, curling round in giant letters through India, Australia, and New Zealand. He glanced at the red; it was considerably smaller, but still important enough, considering that it covered not only Europe proper, but all Russia up to the Ural Mountains, and Africa to the south. The blue-labelled AMERICAN REPUBLIC swept over the whole of that continent, and disappeared right round to the left of the Western Hemisphere in a shower of blue sparks on the white sea.

"Yes, it's simpler," said the old man drily.

Percy shut the book and set it by his chair.

"And what next, sir? What will happen?"

The old Tory statesman smiled.

"God knows," he said. "If the Eastern Empire chooses to move, we can do nothing. I don't know why they have not moved. I suppose it is because of religious differences."

"Europe will not split?" asked the priest.

"No, no. We know our danger now. And America would certainly help us.
But, all the same, God help us—or you, I should rather say—if the
Empire does move! She knows her strength at last."

There was silence for a moment or two. A faint vibration trembled through the deep-sunk room as some huge machine went past on the broad boulevard overhead.

"Prophesy, sir," said Percy suddenly. "I mean about religion."

Mr. Templeton inhaled another long breath from his instrument. Then again he took up his discourse.

"Briefly," he said, "there are three forces—Catholicism, Humanitarianism, and the Eastern religions. About the third I cannot prophesy, though I think the Sufis will be victorious. Anything may happen; Esotericism is making enormous strides—and that means Pantheism; and the blending of the Chinese and Japanese dynasties throws out all our calculations. But in Europe and America, there is no doubt that the struggle lies between the other two. We can neglect everything else. And, I think, if you wish me to say what I think, that, humanly speaking, Catholicism will decrease rapidly now. It is perfectly true that Protestantism is dead. Men do recognise at last that a supernatural Religion involves an absolute authority, and that Private Judgment in matters of faith is nothing else than the beginning of disintegration. And it is also true that since the Catholic Church is the only institution that even claims supernatural authority, with all its merciless logic, she has again the allegiance of practically all Christians who have any supernatural belief left. There are a few faddists left, especially in America and here; but they are negligible. That is all very well; but, on the other hand, you must remember that Humanitarianism, contrary to all persons' expectations, is becoming an actual religion itself, though anti-supernatural. It is Pantheism; it is developing a ritual under Freemasonry; it has a creed, 'God is Man,' and the rest. It has therefore a real food of a sort to offer to religious cravings; it idealises, and yet it makes no demand upon the spiritual faculties. Then, they have the use of all the

churches except ours, and all the Cathedrals; and they are beginning at last to encourage sentiment. Then, they may display their symbols and we may not: I think that they will be established legally in another ten years at the latest.

"Now, we Catholics, remember, are losing; we have lost steadily for more than fifty years. I suppose that we have, nominally, about one-fortieth of America now—and that is the result of the Catholic movement of the early twenties. In France and Spain we are nowhere; in Germany we are less. We hold our position in the East, certainly; but even there we have not more than one in two hundred—so the statistics say—and we are scattered. In Italy? Well, we have Rome again to ourselves, but nothing else; here, we have Ireland altogether and perhaps one in sixty of England, Wales and Scotland; but we had one in forty seventy years ago. Then there is the enormous progress of psychology—all clean against us for at least a century. First, you see, there was Materialism, pure and simple that failed more or less—it was too crude—until psychology came to the rescue. Now psychology claims all the rest of the ground; and the supernatural sense seems accounted for. That's the claim. No, father, we are losing; and we shall go on losing, and I think we must even be ready for a catastrophe at any moment."

"But—-" began Percy.

"You think that weak for an old man on the edge of the grave. Well, it is what I think. I see no hope. In fact, it seems to me that even now something may come on us quickly. No; I see no hope until—-"

Percy looked up sharply.

"Until our Lord comes back," said the old statesman.

Father Francis sighed once more, and there fell a silence.

* * * * *

"And the fall of the Universities?" said Percy at last.

"My dear father, it was exactly like the fall of the Monasteries under Henry VIII—the same results, the same arguments, the same incidents. They were the strongholds of Individualism, as the Monasteries were the strongholds of Papalism; and they were regarded with the same kind of awe and envy. Then the usual sort of remarks began about the amount of port wine drunk; and suddenly people said that they had done their work, that the inmates were mistaking means for ends; and there was a great deal more reason for saying it. After all, granted the supernatural, Religious Houses are an obvious consequence; but the object of secular education is presumably the production of something visible—either character or competence; and it became quite impossible to prove that the Universities produced either—which was worth having. The distinction between [Greek: ou] and [Greek: me] is not an end in itself; and the kind of person produced by its study was not one which appealed to England in the twentieth century. I am not sure that it appealed even to me much (and I was always a strong Individualist)—except by way of pathos—-"

"Yes?" said Percy.

"Oh, it was pathetic enough. The Science Schools of Cambridge and the Colonial Department of Oxford were the last hope; and then those went. The old dons crept about with their books, but nobody wanted them—they were too purely theoretical; some drifted into the poorhouses, first or

second grade; some were taken care of by charitable clergymen; there was that attempt to concentrate in Dublin; but it failed, and people soon forgot them. The buildings, as you know, were used for all kinds of things. Oxford became an engineering establishment for a while, and Cambridge a kind of Government laboratory. I was at King's College, you know. Of course it was all as horrible as it could be—though I am glad they kept the chapel open even as a museum. It was not nice to see the chantries filled with anatomical specimens. However, I don't think it was much worse than keeping stoves and surplices in them."

"What happened to you?"

"Oh! I was in Parliament very soon; and I had a little money of my own, too. But it was very hard on some of them; they had little pensions, at least all who were past work. And yet, I don't know: I suppose it had to come. They were very little more than picturesque survivals, you know; and had not even the grace of a religious faith about them."

Percy sighed again, looking at the humorously reminiscent face of the old man. Then he suddenly changed the subject again.

"What about this European parliament?" he said.

The old man started.

"Oh!... I think it will pass," he said, "if a man can be found to push it. All this last century has been leading up to it, as you see. Patriotism has been dying fast; but it ought to have died, like slavery and so forth, under the influence of the Catholic Church. As it is, the work has been done without the Church; and the result is that the world is beginning to range itself against us: it is an organised

antagonism— a kind of Catholic anti-Church. Democracy has done what the Divine Monarchy should have done. If the proposal passes I think we may expect something like persecution once more.... But, again, the Eastern invasion may save us, if it comes off.... I do not know...."

Percy sat still yet a moment; then he stood up suddenly.

"I must go, sir," he said, relapsing into Esperanto. "It is past nineteen o'clock. Thank you so much. Are you coming, father?"

Father Francis stood up also, in the dark grey suit permitted to priests, and took up his hat.

"Well, father," said the old man again, "come again some day, if I haven't been too discursive. I suppose you have to write your letter yet?"

Percy nodded.

"I did half of it this morning," he said, "but I felt I wanted another bird's-eye view before I could understand properly: I am so grateful to you for giving it me. It is really a great labour, this daily letter to the Cardinal-Protector. I am thinking of resigning if I am allowed."

"My dear father, don't do that. If I may say so to your face, I think you have a very shrewd mind; and unless Rome has balanced information she can do nothing. I don't suppose your colleagues are as careful as yourself."

Percy smiled, lifting his dark eyebrows deprecatingly.

"Come, father," he said.

* * * * *

The two priests parted at the steps of the corridor, and Percy stood for a minute or two staring out at the familiar autumn scene, trying to understand what it all meant. What

he had heard downstairs seemed strangely to illuminate that vision of splendid prosperity that lay before him.

The air was as bright as day; artificial sunlight had carried all before it, and London now knew no difference between dark and light. He stood in a kind of glazed cloister, heavily floored with a preparation of rubber on which footsteps made no sound. Beneath him, at the foot of the stairs, poured an endless double line of persons severed by a partition, going to right and left, noiselessly, except for the murmur of Esperanto talking that sounded ceaselessly as they went. Through the clear, hardened glass of the public passage showed a broad sleek black roadway, ribbed from side to side, and puckered in the centre, significantly empty, but even as he stood there a note sounded far away from Old Westminster, like the hum of a giant hive, rising as it came, and an instant later a transparent thing shot past, flashing from every angle, and the note died to a hum again and a silence as the great Government motor from the south whirled eastwards with the mails. This was a privileged roadway; nothing but state-vehicles were allowed to use it, and those at a speed not exceeding one hundred miles an hour.

Other noises were subdued in this city of rubber; the passenger-circles were a hundred yards away, and the subterranean traffic lay too deep for anything but a vibration to make itself felt. It was to remove this vibration, and silence the hum of the ordinary vehicles, that the Government experts had been working for the last twenty years.

Once again before he moved there came a long cry from overhead, startlingly beautiful and piercing, and, as he lifted his eyes from the glimpse of the steady river which alone had refused to be transformed, he saw high above him against the heavy illuminated clouds, a long slender object, glowing with soft light, slide northwards and vanish on outstretched wings. That musical cry, he told himself, was the voice of one of the European line of volors announcing its arrival in the capital of Great Britain.

"Until our Lord comes back," he thought to himself; and for an instant the old misery stabbed at his heart. How difficult it was to hold the eyes focussed on that far horizon when this world lay in the foreground so compelling in its splendour and its strength! Oh, he had argued with Father Francis an hour ago that size was not the same as greatness, and that an insistent external could not exclude a subtle internal; and he had believed what he had then said; but the doubt yet remained till he silenced it by a fierce effort, crying in his heart to the Poor Man of Nazareth to keep his heart as the heart of a little child.

Then he set his lips, wondering how long Father Francis would bear the pressure, and went down the steps.

BOOK I-THE ADVENT

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CHAPTER I

I

Oliver Brand, the new member for Croydon (4), sat in his study, looking out of the window over the top of his typewriter.

His house stood facing northwards at the extreme end of a spur of the Surrey Hills, now cut and tunnelled out of all recognition; only to a Communist the view was an inspiriting one. Immediately below the wide windows the embanked ground fell away rapidly for perhaps a hundred feet, ending in a high wall, and beyond that the world and works of men were triumphant as far as eye could see. Two vast tracks like streaked race-courses, each not less than a quarter of a mile in width, and sunk twenty feet below the surface of the ground, swept up to a meeting a mile ahead at the huge junction. Of those, that on his left was the First Trunk road to Brighton, inscribed in capital letters in the Railroad Guide, that to the right the Second Trunk to the Tunbridge and Hastings district. Each was divided length-ways by a cement wall, on one side of which, on steel rails, ran the electric trams, and on the other lay the motor-track itself again divided into three, on which ran, first the Government

coaches at a speed of one hundred and fifty miles an hour, second the private motors at not more than sixty, third the cheap Government line at thirty, with stations every five miles. This was further bordered by a road confined to pedestrians, cyclists and ordinary cars on which no vehicle was allowed to move at more than twelve miles an hour.

Beyond these great tracks lay an immense plain of house-roofs, with short towers here and there marking public buildings, from the Caterham district on the left to Croydon in front, all clear and bright in smokeless air; and far away to the west and north showed the low suburban hills against the April sky.

There was surprisingly little sound, considering the pressure of the population; and, with the exception of the buzz of the steel rails as a train fled north or south, and the occasional sweet chord of the great motors as they neared or left the junction, there was little to be heard in this study except a smooth, soothing murmur that filled the air like the murmur of bees in a garden.

Oliver loved every hint of human life—all busy sights and sounds—and was listening now, smiling faintly to himself as he stared out into the clear air. Then he set his lips, laid his fingers on the keys once more, and went on speech-constructing.

* * * * *

He was very fortunate in the situation of his house. It stood in an angle of one of those huge spider-webs with which the country was covered, and for his purposes was all that he could expect. It was close enough to London to be extremely cheap, for all wealthy persons had retired at least

a hundred miles from the throbbing heart of England; and yet it was as quiet as he could wish. He was within ten minutes of Westminster on the one side, and twenty minutes of the sea on the other, and his constituency lay before him like a raised map. Further, since the great London termini were but ten minutes away, there were at his disposal the First Trunk lines to every big town in England. For a politician of no great means, who was asked to speak at Edinburgh on one evening and in Marseilles on the next, he was as well placed as any man in Europe.

He was a pleasant-looking man, not much over thirty years old; black wire-haired, clean-shaven, thin, virile, magnetic, blue-eyed and white-skinned; and he appeared this day extremely content with himself and the world. His lips moved slightly as he worked, his eyes enlarged and diminished with excitement, and more than once he paused and stared out again, smiling and flushed.

Then a door opened; a middle-aged man came nervously in with a bundle of papers, laid them down on the table without a word, and turned to go out. Oliver lifted his hand for attention, snapped a lever, and spoke.

"Well, Mr. Phillips?" he said.

"There is news from the East, sir," said the secretary.

Oliver shot a glance sideways, and laid his hand on the bundle.

"Any complete message?" he asked.

"No, sir; it is interrupted again. Mr. Felsenburgh's name is mentioned."

Oliver did not seem to hear; he lifted the flimsy printed sheets with a sudden movement, and began turning them.

"The fourth from the top, Mr. Brand," said the secretary.

Oliver jerked his head impatiently, and the other went out as if at a signal.

The fourth sheet from the top, printed in red on green, seemed to absorb Oliver's attention altogether, for he read it through two or three times, leaning back motionless in his chair. Then he sighed, and stared again through the window.

Then once more the door opened, and a tall girl came in.

"Well, my dear?" she observed.

Oliver shook his head, with compressed lips.

"Nothing definite," he said. "Even less than usual. Listen."

He took up the green sheet and began to read aloud as the girl sat down in a window-seat on his left.

She was a very charming-looking creature, tall and slender, with serious, ardent grey eyes, firm red lips, and a beautiful carriage of head and shoulders. She had walked slowly across the room as Oliver took up the paper, and now sat back in her brown dress in a very graceful and stately attitude. She seemed to listen with a deliberate kind of patience; but her eyes flickered with interest.

"'Irkutsk—April fourteen—Yesterday—as—usual—But—rumoured— defection—from—Sufi—party—Troops—continue—gathering— Felsenburgh—addressed—Buddhist—crowd—Attempt—on—Llama—last— Friday—work—of—Anarchists—Felsenburgh—leaving—for—Moscow—as —arranged—he….' There—that is absolutely all," ended Oliver dispiritedly. "It's interrupted as usual."

The girl began to swing a foot.

"I don't understand in the least," she said. "Who is Felsenburgh, after all?"

"My dear child, that is what all the world is asking. Nothing is known except that he was included in the American deputation at the last moment. The *Herald* published his life last week; but it has been contradicted. It is certain that he is quite a young man, and that he has been quite obscure until now."

"Well, he is not obscure now," observed the girl.

"I know; it seems as if he were running the whole thing. One never hears a word of the others. It's lucky he's on the right side."

"And what do you think?"

Oliver turned vacant eyes again out of the window.

"I think it is touch and go," he said. "The only remarkable thing is that here hardly anybody seems to realise it. It's too big for the imagination, I suppose. There is no doubt that the East has been preparing for a descent on Europe for these last five years. They have only been checked by America; and this is one last attempt to stop them. But why Felsenburgh should come to the front—-" he broke off. "He must be a good linguist, at any rate. This is at least the fifth crowd he has addressed; perhaps he is just the American interpreter. Christ! I wonder who he is."

"Has he any other name?"

"Julian, I believe. One message said so."

"How did this come through?"

Oliver shook his head.

"Private enterprise," he said. "The European agencies have stopped work. Every telegraph station is guarded night