

***E. PHILLIPS
OPPENHEIM***

***THE GREAT
SECRET***

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The Great Secret

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CHAPTER I

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ROOM NO. 317

I laid my papers down upon the broad mahogany counter, and exchanged greetings with the tall frock-coated reception clerk who came smiling towards me.

"I should like a single room on the third floor east, about the middle corridor," I said. "Can you manage that for me? 317 I had last time."

He shook his head at once. "I am very sorry, Mr. Courage," he said, "but all the rooms in that corridor are engaged. We will give you one on the second floor at the same price."

I was about to close with his offer, when, with a word of excuse, he hurried away to intercept some one who was passing through the hall. A junior clerk took his place, and consulted the plan for a moment doubtfully.

"There are several rooms exactly in the locality you asked for," he remarked, "which are simply being held over. If you would prefer 317, you can have it, and I will give 217 to our other client."

"Thank you," I answered, "I should prefer 317 if you can manage it."

He scribbled the number upon a ticket and handed it to the porter, who stood behind with my dressing-case. A page caught up the key, and I followed them to the lift. In the light of things which happened afterwards, I have sometimes wondered what became of the unfortunate junior clerk who gave me room number 317.

* * * * *

It was six o'clock when I arrived at the Hotel Universal. I washed, changed my clothes, and was shaved in the barber's shop. Afterwards, I spent, I think, the ordinary countryman's evening about town—having some regard always to the purpose of my visit. I dined at my club, went on to the Empire with a couple of friends, supped at the Savoy, and, after a brief return visit to the club, a single game of billiards and a final whisky and soda, returned to my hotel contented and sleepy, and quite prepared to tumble into bed. By some chance—the history of nations, as my own did, will sometimes turn upon such slight events—I left my door ajar whilst I sat upon the edge of the bed finishing a cigarette and treeing my boots, preparatory to depositing them outside. Suddenly my attention was arrested by a somewhat curious sound. I distinctly heard the swift, stealthy footsteps of a man running at full speed along the corridor. I leaned forward to listen. Then, without a moment's warning, they paused outside my door. It was hastily pushed open and as hastily closed. A man, half clothed and panting, was standing facing me—a strange, pitiable object. The boots slipped from my fingers. I stared at him in blank bewilderment.

"What the devil—" I began.

He made an anguished appeal to me for silence. Then I heard other footsteps in the corridor pausing outside my closed door. There was a moment's silence, then a soft muffled knocking. I moved towards it, only to be met by the intruder's frenzied whisper—

"For God's sake keep quiet!"

The man's hot breath scorched my cheek, his hands gripped my arm with nervous force, his hysterical whisper was barely audible, although his lips were within a few inches of my ear.

"Keep quiet," he muttered, "and don't open the door!"

"Why not?" I asked.

"They will kill me," he answered simply.

I resumed my seat on the side of the bed. My sensations were a little confused. Under ordinary circumstances, I should probably have been angry. It was impossible, however, to persevere in such a sentiment towards the abject creature who cowered by my side.

Yet, after all, was he abject? I looked away from the door, and, for the second time, studied carefully the features of the man who had sought my protection in so extraordinary a manner. He was clean shaven, his features were good; his face, under ordinary circumstances, might have been described as almost prepossessing. Just now it was whitened and distorted by fear to such an extent that it gave to his expression a perfectly repulsive cast. It was as though he looked beyond death and saw things, however dimly, more terrible than human understanding can fitly grapple with. There were subtleties of horror in his glassy eyes, in his drawn and haggard features.

Nothing, perhaps, could more completely illustrate the effect his words and appearance had upon me than the fact that I accepted his extraordinary statement without any instinct of disbelief! Here was I, an Englishman of sound nerves, of average courage, and certainly untroubled with any superabundance of imagination, domiciled in a perfectly well-known, if somewhat cosmopolitan, London hotel, and yet willing to believe, on the statement of a person whom I had never seen before in my life, that, within a few yards of me, were unseen men bent upon murder.

From outside I heard a warning chink of metal, and, acting upon impulse, I stepped forward and slipped the bolt of my door. Immediately afterwards a key was softly inserted in the lock and turned. The door strained against the bolt from some invisible pressure. Then there came the sound of retreating footsteps. We heard the door of the next room opened and closed. A moment later the handle of the communicating door was tried. I had, however, bolted it before I commenced to undress.

"What the mischief are you about?" I cried angrily. "Can't you leave my room alone?"

No answer; but the panels of the communicating door were bent inwards until it seemed as though they must burst. I crossed the room to where my portmanteau stood upon a luggage-rack, and took from it a small revolver. When I stood up with it in my hand, the effect upon my visitor was almost magical. He caught at my wrist and wrested it from my fingers. He grasped it almost lovingly.

"I can at least die now like a man," he muttered. "Thank Heaven for this!"

I sat down again upon the bed. I looked at the pillow and the unturned coverlet doubtfully. They had obviously not been disturbed. I glanced at my watch! it was barely two o'clock. I had not even been to bed. I could not possibly be dreaming! The door was straining now almost to bursting. I began to be annoyed.

"What the devil are you doing there?" I called out.

Again there was no answer, but a long crack had appeared on the panel. My companion was standing up watching it. He grasped the revolver as one accustomed to the use of such things. Once more I took note of him.

I saw now that he was younger than I had imagined, and a trifle taller. The ghastly pallor, which extended even to his lips, was unabated, but his first paroxysm of fear seemed, at any rate, to have become lessened. He looked now like a man at bay indeed, but prepared to fight for his life. He had evidently been dressed for the evening, for his white tie was still hanging about his neck. Coat and waistcoat he had left behind in his flight, but his black trousers were well and fashionably cut, and his socks were of silk, with small colored clocks. The fingers were white and delicate, and his nails well cared for. There was one thing more, the most noticeable of all perhaps. Although his face was the face of a young man, his hair was as white as snow.

"Look here," I said to him, "can't you give me some explanation as to what all this means? You haven't been getting yourself into trouble, have you?"

"Trouble!" he repeated vaguely, with his eyes fixed upon the door.

"With the police!" I explained.

"No, these are not the police," he answered.

"I don't mind a row particularly," I continued, "but I like to know something about it. What do these people want with you?"

"My life!" he answered grimly.

"Why?"

"I cannot tell you!"

A sudden and ridiculously obvious idea struck me for the first time. A small electric bell and telephone instrument were by the side of the bed. I leaned over and pressed the knob with my finger. My companion half glanced towards me, and back again instantly towards the door.

"No use," he muttered, "they will not come!"

Whereupon a thoroughly British sentiment was aroused in me. Of the liberties which had been taken with my room, both by this man and by his pursuers, I scarcely thought, but that any one should presume to interfere with my rights as an hotel guest angered me! I kept my finger on the knob of the bell; I summoned chambermaid, waiter, valet and boots. It was all to no effect. No one came. The telephone remained silent. The door was on the point of yielding.

I abandoned my useless efforts, and turned towards the man whom I was sheltering.

"How many are there in the next room?" I asked.

"Two!"

"If I stand by you, will you obey me?"

He hesitated for a moment. Then he nodded.

"Yes!"

"Get behind the bed then, and give me the revolver."

He parted with it reluctantly. I took it into my hand, only just in time. The door at last had burst away from its hinges. With perfect self-possession I saw one of the two men who had been engaged in its demolition calmly lean it up against the wall. The other stared at me as though I had been a ghost.

CHAPTER II

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A MIDNIGHT RAID

I could see at once that neither of the two men who confronted me had really believed that the room into which their victim had escaped was already occupied by any other person than the one of whom they were in pursuit. Their expression of surprise was altogether genuine. I myself was, perhaps, equally taken aback. Nothing in their appearance suggested in the least the midnight assassin! I turned towards the one who had leaned the door up against the wall, and addressed him.

"May I ask to what I am indebted for the pleasure of this unexpected visit?" I inquired.

The man took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead. He was short and stout, with a bushy brown beard, and eyes which blinked at me in amazement from behind his gold-rimmed spectacles. He wore a grey tweed travelling suit, and brown boots. He had exactly the air of a prosperous middle-class tradesman from the provinces.

"I am afraid, sir," he said, "that we have made a mistake—in which case we shall owe you a thousand apologies. We are in search of a friend whom we certainly believed that we had seen enter your room."

Now all the time he was talking his eyes were never still. Every inch of my room that was visible they ransacked. His companion, too, was engaged in the same task. There were no traces of my visitor to be seen.

"You can make your apologies and explanations to the management in the morning," I answered grimly "Pardon me!"

I held out my arm across the threshold, and for the first time looked at the other man who had been on the point of entering. He was slight and somewhat sallow, with very high forehead and small deep-set eyes. He was dressed in ordinary evening clothes, the details of which, however, betrayed his status. He wore a heavy gold chain, a dinner coat, and a made-up white tie, with the ends tucked in under a roll collar. He appeared to be objectionable, but far from dangerous.

"You are still a trifle over-anxious respecting the interior of my room!"

I remarked, pushing him gently back.

He spoke to me for the first time. He spoke slowly and formally, and his accent struck me as being a little foreign.

"Sir," he said, "you may not be aware that the person of whom we are in search is a dangerous, an exceedingly dangerous character. If he should be concealed in your room the consequences to yourself might be most serious."

"Thank you," I said, "I am quite capable of taking care of myself."

Both men were standing as close to me as I was disposed to permit. I fancied that they were looking me over, as though to make an estimate of the possible amount of

resistance I might be able to offer should they be disposed to make a rush. The odds, if any, must have seemed to them somewhat in my favor, for I was taller by head and shoulders than either of them, and a life-long devotion to athletics had broadened my shoulders, and given me strength beyond the average. Besides, there was the revolver in my right hand, which I took occasion now to display. The shorter of the two men again addressed me.

"My dear sir," he said softly, "it is necessary that you should not misapprehend the situation. The person of whom we are in search is one whom we are pledged to find. We have no quarrel with you! Why embroil yourself in an affair with which you have no concern?"

"I am not seeking to do so," I answered. "It is you and your friend who are the aggressors. You have forced an entrance into my room in a most unwarrantable fashion. Your missing friend is nothing to me. I desire to be left in peace."

Even as I spoke the words, I knew that there was to be no peace for me that night, for, stealthy though their movements were, I saw something glisten in the right hands of both of them. The odds now assumed a somewhat different appearance. I drew back a pace, and stood prepared for what might happen. My *vis-à-vis* in the gold-rimmed spectacles addressed me again.

"Sir," he said, "we will not bandy words any longer. It is better that we understand one another. There is a man hidden in your room whom we mean to have. You will understand that we are serious, when I tell you that we have engaged every room in this corridor, and the wires of your

telephone are cut. If you will permit us to come in and find him, I promise that nothing shall happen in your room, that you shall not be compromised in any way. If you refuse, I must warn you that you will become involved in a matter more serious than you have any idea of."

For answer, I discharged my revolver twice at the ceiling, hoping to arouse some one, either guests or servants, and fired again at the shoulder of the man whose leap towards me was like the spring of a wild-cat. Both rooms were suddenly plunged into darkness, the elder of the two men, stepping back for a moment, had turned out the electric lights. For a short space of time everything was chaos. My immediate assailant I flung away from me with ease; his companion, who tried to rush past me in the darkness, I struck with a random blow on the side of the head, so that he staggered back with a groan. I knew very well that neither of them had passed me, and yet I fancied, as I paused to take breath for a moment, that I heard stealthy footsteps behind, in the room which I had been defending. I called again for help, and groped about on the wall for the electric light switches. The footsteps ceased, a sudden cry rang out from somewhere behind the bed-curtains, a cry so full of horror, that I felt the blood run cold in my veins, and the sweat break out upon my forehead. I sought desperately for the little brass knobs of the switches, listening all the while for those footsteps. I heard nothing save a low, sickening groan, which followed upon the cry, but I felt, a moment later, the hot breath of a human being upon my neck. I sprang aside, barely in time to escape a blow obviously aimed at me with some weapon or other, which

cut through the air with the soft, nervous swish of an elastic life-preserver. I knew that some one who sought my life was within a few feet of me, striving to make sure before the second blow was aimed. In my stockinged feet I crept along by the wall. I could hear no sound of movement anywhere near me, and yet I knew quite well that my hidden assailant was close at hand. Just then, I heard at last what I had been listening for so long and so eagerly, footsteps and a voice in the corridor outside. Somebody sprang past me in the darkness, and, for a second, amazement kept me motionless. The thing was impossible, or I could have sworn that my feet were brushed by the skirts of a woman's gown, and that a whiff of perfume—it was like the scent of dying violets—floated past me. Then the door of my room, from which I had withdrawn the bolt, was flung suddenly open, and almost simultaneously my fingers touched the knob of the electric light fittings. The whole place was flooded with light. I looked around, half dazed, but eager to see what had become of my assailants. Both rooms were empty, or apparently so. There was no sign or evidence of any other person there save myself. On the threshold of my own apartment was standing the night porter.

"Have you let them go by?" I called out. "Did you see them in the corridor?"

"Who, sir?" the porter asked stolidly.

"Two men who forced their way into my room—look at the door. One was short and stout and wore glasses, the other was taller and thin. They were here a few seconds ago. Unless they passed you, they are in one of the rooms now."

The man came inside, and looked around him.

"I can't see any one, sir! There wasn't a soul about outside."

"Then we had better look for them!" I exclaimed. "Be careful, for they are armed."

There was no one in the adjoining room. We had searched it thoroughly before I suddenly remembered the visitor who had been the innocent cause of these exciting moments.

"By Jove!" I exclaimed, "there's a wounded man by the side of my bed! I quite forgot him, I was so anxious to catch these blackguards."

The porter looked at me with distinct suspicion.

"A wounded man, sir?" he remarked. "Where?"

"On the other side of the bed," I answered. "It's the man all this row was about."

I hurried round to where I had left my terrified visitor hiding behind the bed-curtain. There was no one there. We looked under the bed, even in the wardrobes. It was obvious, when we had finished our search, that not a soul was in either of the rooms except our two selves. The porter looked at me, and I looked at the porter.

"It's a marvellous thing!" I declared.

"It is," the porter agreed.

"You can see for yourself that that door has been battered in," I remarked, pointing to it.

The fellow smiled in such a manner, that I should have liked to have kicked him.

"I can see that it has been battered in," he said. "Oh! yes! I can see that!"

"You perhaps don't believe my story?" I asked calmly.

"It isn't my place to believe or disbelieve it," he answered. "I certainly didn't meet any one outside—much less three people. I shall make my report to the manager in the morning, sir! Good night."

So I was left alone, and, extraordinary as it may seem, I was asleep in less than half an hour.

CHAPTER III

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MISS VAN HOYT

I was awakened at about nine o'clock the next morning by a loud and persistent knocking at the door of my room. I sat up in bed and shouted,

"Come in!"

A waiter entered bearing a note, which he handed to me on a salver. I looked at him, around the room, which was still in some confusion, and down at the note, which was clearly addressed to me, J. Hardross Courage, Esq. Suddenly my eyes fell upon the smashed door, and I remembered at once the events of the previous night. I tore open the note. It was typewritten and brief:—

"The manager presents his compliments to Mr. Hardross Courage, and would be obliged if he will arrange to vacate his room by midday. The manager further regrets that he is unable to offer Mr. Courage any other accommodation."

"Tell the valet to let me have a bath in five minutes," I ordered, springing out of bed, "and bring me some tea. Look sharp!"

I was in a furious temper. The events of the night before, strange though they had been, left me comparatively unmoved. I was filled, however, with a thoroughly British

indignation at the nature of this note. My room had been broken into in the middle of the night; I had narrowly escaped being myself the victim of a serious and murderous assault; and now I was calmly told to leave the hotel! I hastened downstairs and into the office.

"I wish to see the manager as soon as possible," I said to one of the reception clerks behind the counter.

"Certainly, sir, what name?" he asked; drawing a slip of paper towards him.

"Courage—" I told him, "Mr. Hardross Courage!"

The man's manner underwent a distinct change.

"I am sorry, sir," he said, "but Mr. Blumentein is engaged. Is there anything I can do?"

"No!" I answered him bluntly. "I want the manager, and no one else will do. If he cannot see me now I will wait. If he does not appear in a reasonable time, I shall go direct to Scotland Yard and lay certain information before the authorities there."

The clerk stared at me, and then smiled in a tolerant manner. He was short and dark, and wore glasses. His manner was pleasant enough, but he had the air of endeavoring to soothe a fractious child—which annoyed me.

"I will send a message down to Mr. Blumentein, sir," he said, "but he is very busy this morning."

He called a boy, but, after a moment's hesitation, he left the office himself. I lit a cigarette, and waited with as much patience as I could command. The people who passed in and out interested me very little. Suddenly, however, I gave a start and looked up quickly.

A woman had entered the reception-room, passing so close to me that her skirts almost brushed my feet. She was tall, quietly and elegantly dressed, and she was followed by a most correct looking maid, who carried a tiny Japanese spaniel. I did not see her face, although I knew by her carriage and figure that she must be young. That she was a person of importance it was easy to see by the attention which was at once paid her. Her interest for me, however, lay in none of these things. I had been conscious, as she had passed, of a whiff of faint, very delicate perfume—and with it, of a sudden, sharp recollection. It was a perfume which I had distinguished but once before in my life, and that only a few hours ago.

She gave her key in at the desk, received some letters, and turning round passed within a few feet of me. Perhaps she realized that I was watching her with more than ordinary attention, and her eyes fell for a moment carelessly upon mine. They were withdrawn at once, and she passed on with the slightest of frowns—just sufficient rebuke to the person who had forgotten himself so far as to stare at a woman in a public place. The maid, too, glanced towards me with a slight flash in her large black eyes, as though she, also, resented my impertinence, and the little Japanese spaniel yawned as he was carried past, and showed me a set of dazzling white teeth. I was in disgrace all round, because I had looked for a second too long into his mistress' deep blue eyes and pale, proud face. Nevertheless, I presumed even further. I changed my position, so that I could see her where she stood in the hall, talking to her maid.

Like a man who looks half unwillingly into the land of hidden things, knowing very well that his own doom or joy is there, if he has the wit to see and the strength to grasp it, so did I deliberately falsify the tenets and obligations of my order, and, standing half in the hall, half in the office, I stared at the lady and the maid and the spaniel. She was younger even than I had thought her, and I felt that there was something foreign in her appearance, although of what nationality she might be I could not determine. Her hair was of a shade between brown and golden, and, as she stood now, with her back to me, I could see that it was so thick and abundant that her maid's art had been barely sufficient to keep it within bounds. In the front it was parted in the middle, and came rather low down over her forehead. Now I could see her profile—the rather long neck, which the lace scarf about her shoulders seemed to leave a little more than usually bare; the soft and yet firm outline of features, delicate enough and yet full of character. Just then her maid said something which seemed to call her attention to me. She half turned her head and looked me full in the face. Her eyes seemed to narrow a little, as though she were short-sighted. Then she very slowly and very deliberately turned her back upon me, and continued talking to her maid. My cheeks were tanned enough, but I felt the color burn as I prepared to move away. At that moment the lift stopped just opposite to her, and Mr. Blumentein stepped out, followed by his dapper little clerk.

Mr. Blumentein was a man of less than medium height, with grey hair and beard, powerfully built and with a sleek, well-groomed appearance. Hat in hand, and with many bows

and smiles, he addressed a few remarks to the lady, who answered him courteously, but with obvious condescension. Then he came on to me, and his manner was very different indeed. The dapper little clerk, who had pointed me out, slipped away.

"Mr. Courage?" he inquired; "you wished to speak to me."

I handed him the typewritten communication which I had received.

"I wish for some explanation of this," I said.

He glanced at it, and shrugged his shoulders. "I cannot permit such proceedings as took place last night in this hotel," he said. "I can find no trace of the two persons whom you described as having broken into your room, and I am not at all satisfied with the explanations which have been given."

"Indeed," I answered. "I can assure you that I find the situation equally unsatisfactory. I come here in the ordinary way as a casual guest. My room is broken into in the middle of the night. I myself am assaulted, and another man, a stranger to me, is nearly murdered. If any explanations or apologies are due at all, I consider that they are due to me."

Mr. Blumentein edged a little away.

"You should consider yourself exceedingly fortunate," he declared, "to be spared the inconvenience of a police inquiry. My directors dislike very much any publicity given to brawls of this sort in the hotel, or you might find yourself in a somewhat awkward position. I have nothing more to say about it."

He would have moved away, but I stood directly in front of him.

"It happens that I have," I said. "I am not a thief or an adventurer, and my bona-fides are easily established. I am a magistrate in two counties; Sir Gilbert Hardross, who is a patron of your restaurant, is my cousin, and I expect him here to call for me within half an hour. I am up in town to play for my County against the M.C.C. at Lord's; I am a person who is perfectly well known, and my word as to what happened last night will be readily accepted. If you do not alter your tone at once, I shall take a cab to Scotland Yard, and insist upon a complete investigation into the affairs of last night."

There was no doubt as to the effect of my words upon Mr. Blumentein. He was seriously perturbed, and wholly unable to conceal it.

"You can prove what you say, Mr. Courage, I suppose?" he remarked hesitatingly.

"Absolutely!" I answered; "look in this week's *Graphic*. You will see a photograph of me in the Medchestershire Cricket Team. Come into my room, and I will show you as many letters and papers as you please. Do you know that gentleman?"

"Certainly!" Mr. Blumentein answered, bowing low. "Good morning, Sir Charles!"

A young man in a flannel suit and straw hat sauntered up to us. He nodded condescendingly to the hotel manager, and shook hands with me.

"How are you, Courage?" he said. "I'm coming down to Lord's this afternoon to see the match."

He passed on. Mr. Blumentein was distinctly nervous.

"Will you do me the favor to come down to my room for a moment, Mr.

Courage?" he begged. "I should like to speak to you in private."

I followed him down into his office. He closed the door, and set his hat down upon the desk.

"I have caused the strictest inquiries to be made, and I have been unable to obtain the slightest trace either of the man whom you say took shelter in your room, or the two others you spoke of. Under those circumstances, you will understand that your story did not sound very probable."

"Perhaps not," I admitted; "but I don't know what your night-porter could have been about, if he really saw nothing of them. I can give you a detailed description of all three if you like."

"One moment," Mr. Blumentein said, taking up pen and paper. "Now, if you please!"

I described the three men to the best of my ability, and Mr. Blumentein took down carefully all that I said.

"I will have the fullest inquiries made," he promised, "and let you know the result. In the meantime, I trust that you will consider the letter I wrote you this morning unwritten. You will doubtless prefer to leave the hotel after what has happened, but another time, I trust that we may be honored by your patronage."

I hesitated for a moment. It was clear that the man wanted to get rid of me. For the first time, the idea of remaining in the hotel occurred to me.

"I will consider the matter," I answered. "In the meantime, I hope you will have inquiries made at once. The

man who took refuge in my room was in a terrible state of fright, and from what I saw of the other two, I am afraid you may find this a more serious affair than you have any idea of. By the bye, one of the two told me that they had engaged every room in that corridor. You may be able to trace him by that."

Mr. Blumentein shrugged his shoulders.

"That statement, at any rate, was a false one," he said. "All the rooms in the vicinity of yours were occupied by regular customers."

Now, in all probability, if Mr. Blumentein had looked me in the face when he made this last statement, I should have left the hotel within half an hour or so for good, and the whole episode, so far as I was concerned, would have been ended. But I could not help noticing a somewhat unaccountable nervousness in the man's manner, and it flashed into my mind suddenly that he knew a good deal more than he meant to tell me. He was keeping something back. The more I watched him, the more I felt certain of it. I determined not to leave the hotel.

"Well," I said, "we will look upon the whole affair last night as a misunderstanding. I will keep on my room for to-night, at any rate. I shall be having some friends to dine in the restaurant."

The man's face expressed anything but pleasure.

"Just as you like, Mr. Courage," he said. "Of course, if, under the circumstances, you preferred to leave us, we should quite understand it!"

"I shall stay for to-night, at any rate," I answered. "I am only up for a day or two."

He walked with me to the door. I hesitated for a moment, and then asked him the question which had been in my mind for some time.

"By the bye, Mr. Blumentein," I said, "if it is a permissible question, may I ask the name of the young lady with whom you were talking in the hall just now—a young lady with a French maid and a Japanese spaniel?"

Mr. Blumentein was perceptibly paler. His eyes were full of suspicion, almost fear.

"Why do you ask me that?" he inquired sharply.

"Out of curiosity, I am afraid," I answered readily. "I am sorry if I have been indiscreet!"

The man made an effort to recover his composure. I could see, though, that, for some reason, my question had disquieted him.

"The lady's name is Miss Van Hoyt," he said slowly. "I believe that she is of a very well-known American family. She came here with excellent recommendations; but, beyond her name, I really know very little about her. Nothing more I can do for you, Mr. Courage?"

"Nothing at all, thank you," I answered, moving towards the door.

"They have just telephoned down to say that a gentleman has called for you—Sir Gilbert Hardross, I believe."

I nodded and glanced at the clock.

"Thanks!" I said, "I must hurry."

"I will reserve a table for you in the restaurant to-night, sir," Mr.

Blumentein said, bowing me out.

"For three, at eight o'clock," I answered.

CHAPTER IV

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A MATCH AT LORD'S

My cousin, Gilbert Hardross, was eight years older than I, and of intensely serious proclivities. He was, I believe, a very useful member of the House, and absolutely conscientious in the discharge of what he termed his duty to his constituents. We drove down together to Lord's, and knowing him to be a person almost entirely devoid of imagination, I forbore to make any mention of the events of the previous night. One question, however, I did ask him.

"What sort of an hotel is the Universal supposed to be, Gilbert? Rather a queer lot of people staying there, I thought."

My cousin implied by a gesture that he was not surprised.

"Very cosmopolitan indeed," he declared. "It is patronized chiefly, I believe, by a certain class of Americans and gentlemen of the sporting persuasion. The restaurant, of course, is good, and a few notabilities stay there now and then. I should have thought the Carlton would have suited you better."

I changed the subject.

"How are politics?" I asked.

He looked at me as though in reproach at the levity of my question.

"You read the papers, I suppose?" he remarked. "You know for yourself that we are passing through a very critical time. Never," he added, "since I have been in the House, have I known such a period of anxiety."

Considering that Gilbert represented a rural constituency, and that his party was not even in office, I felt inclined to smile. However, I took him seriously.

"Same old war scare, I suppose?" I remarked.

"It has been a 'scare' for a good many years," he replied seriously. "People seem inclined to forget that behind the shadow all the time there is the substance. I happen to know that there is a great deal of tension just now at the Foreign Office!"

"Things seem pretty much as they were six months ago," I remarked. "There is no definite cause for alarm, is there?"

"No definite cause, perhaps, that we know of," my cousin answered; "but there is no denying the fact that an extraordinary amount of apprehension exists in the best informed circles. As Lord Kestelen said to me yesterday, one seems to feel the thunder in the air."

I was thoughtful for a moment. Perhaps, after all, I was inclined to envy my cousin. My own life was a simple and wholesome one enough, but it was far removed indeed from the world of great happenings. Just then, I felt the first premonitions of dissatisfaction.

"I believe I'm sorry after all, that I didn't go in for a career of some sort," I remarked.