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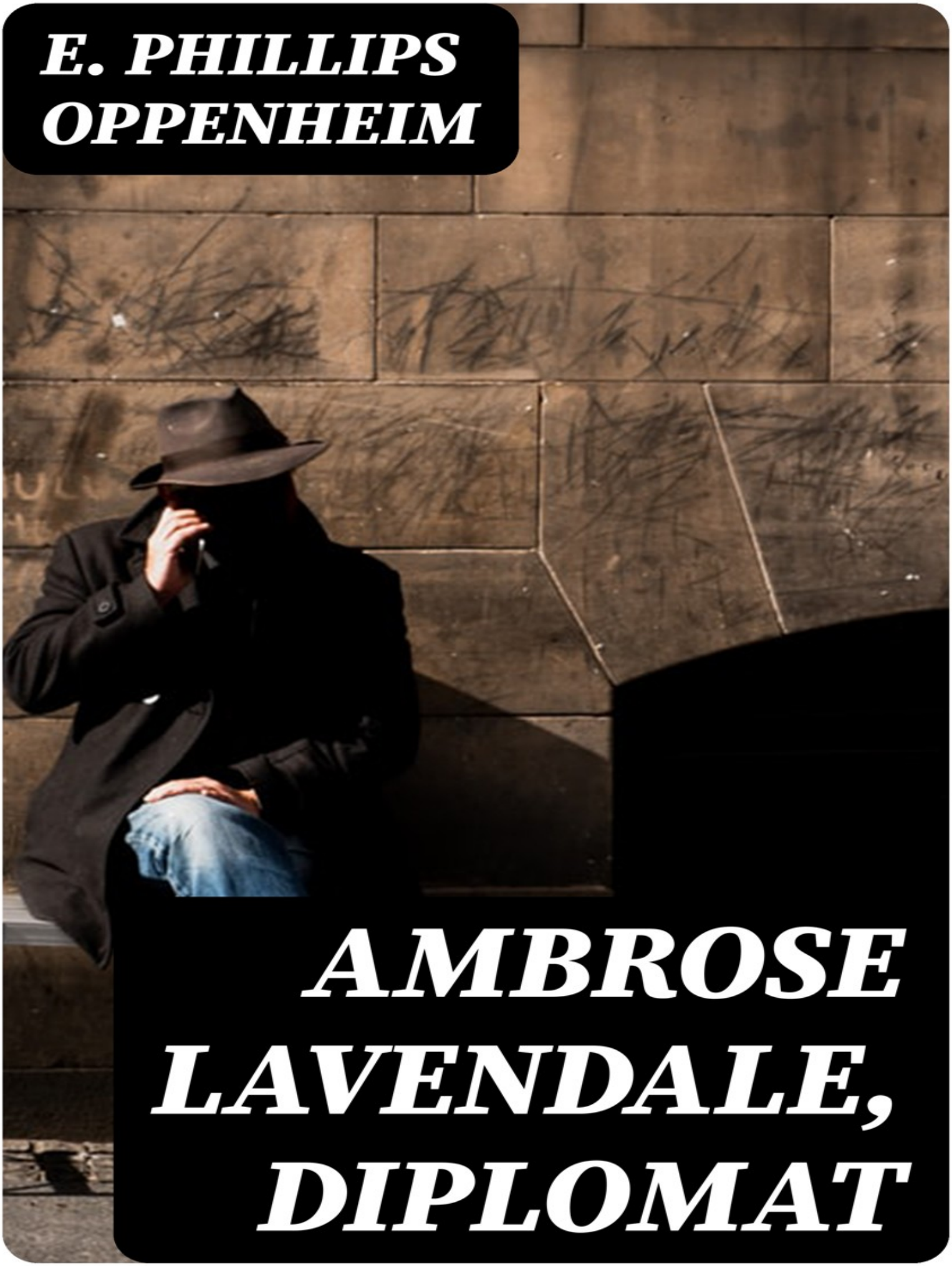

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CHAPTER I
THE MAN WHO COULD HAVE ENDED THE WAR

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It was a few minutes after one o'clock—the busiest hour of the day at the most popular bar in London. The usual little throng of Americans, journalists, men of business and loiterers, were occupying their accustomed chairs in one corner of the long, green-carpeted room. Around the bar, would-be customers were crowded three or four deep—many of them stalwart Canadians in khaki, making the most of their three days' leave, and a thin sprinkling of men about town on their way to lunch in the grill-room adjoining. On the outskirts of the group was a somewhat incongruous figure, a rather under-sized, ill-dressed, bespectacled little man, neither young nor old, colourless, with a stoop which was almost a deformity. His fingers were stained to the tip of his nails as though by chemicals or tobacco juice. He held the glass of vermouth which he had just succeeded in obtaining from the bar, half-way suspended to his lips. He was listening to the conversation around him.

'The most blackguardly trick that has ever been known in civilized warfare!' a Canadian officer declared indignantly.

'It's put the lid on all pretence of conducting this war decently,' another assented. 'What about the Hague Convention?'

'The Hague Convention!' a young journalist from the other side repeated sarcastically. 'I should like to know when

Germany has ever shown the slightest regard for the Hague Convention or any other agreement which didn't happen to suit her!'

The little man on the outskirts of the group, who had been listening eagerly to the conversation, ventured upon a question. His accent at once betrayed his transatlantic origin.

'Say, is there anything fresh this morning?' he inquired. 'I haven't seen the papers yet.'

The Canadian glanced down at the speaker.

'We were talking,' he said, 'about the use of poisonous gases by the Germans. They started pumping them at us yesterday and pretty nearly cleared us out of Ypres.'

The effect of this statement upon the little man was, in its way, extraordinary. For a moment he stood with his mouth open, the glass shaking between his fingers, a queer, set expression in his pale face. Then his lips parted and he began to laugh. It was a mirth so obviously ill-timed, so absolutely unaccountable, that they all turned and stared at him. There was no doubt whatever that for some reason or other the news which he had just heard had excited this strange little person almost hysterically. His lips grew further apart, the whole of his face was puckered up in little creases. Then, just as suddenly as his extraordinary impulse towards mirth had come, it seemed to pass away. He drained his glass, set it down on the edge of the counter, and, turning around, walked slowly out of the place. The remarks that followed him were not altogether inaudible and they were distinctly uncomplimentary.

'All I could do to keep my toe off the little devil!' the Canadian exclaimed angrily. 'I'd like to take him back with me out into the trenches for a few days!'

A young man who had been talking to an English officer on the outskirts of the group, turned around. He was a tall, well-set-up young man, with a face rather grave for his years and a mouth a little over-firm. He, too, had watched the exit of the stranger half in indignation, half in contempt.

'Who was that extraordinary little man?' he inquired.

No one seemed to know. The waiter paused with a tray full of glasses.

'He's staying in the hotel—arrived yesterday from America, sir,' he announced. 'I don't know his name, but I think he's a little queer in his head.'

The young man set down his glass upon the counter.

'A person,' he remarked, 'who can laugh at such a ghastly thing, must be either very queer in his head indeed, or——'

'Or what, Ambrose?' his companion asked.

'I don't know,' the other replied thoughtfully. 'Well, *au revoir*, you fellows! I'm going in to lunch. Sure you won't come with me, Reggie?'

'Sorry, I have to be back in ten minutes,' the other replied. 'See you to-morrow.'

Ambrose Lavendale strolled out of the room, crossed the smoke-room and descended into the restaurant. At a table in a remote corner, seated by himself, the little man who had been guilty of such a breach of good-feeling was studying the menu with a waiter by his side. Lavendale watched him for a moment curiously. Then he turned to

speak to one of the *maîtres d'hôtel*, a short, dark man with a closely-cropped black moustache.

'I shan't want my usual table this morning, Jules,' he announced. 'I am going to sit in that corner.'

He indicated a vacant table close to the little man whom he had been watching. The *maîtres d'hôtel* bowed and ushered him towards it.

'Just as you like, Mr. Lavendale,' he said. 'It isn't often you care about this side of the room, though.'

Lavendale seated himself at the table he had selected, gave a brief order, and, leaning back, glanced around him. The little man had sent for a newspaper and was reading it eagerly, but for a moment Lavendale's interest was attracted elsewhere. At the very next table, also alone, also reading a newspaper, was the most striking-looking young woman he had ever seen in his life. Lavendale was neither susceptible nor imaginative. He considered himself a practical, hard-headed person, notwithstanding the fact that he had embraced what was for his country practically a new profession. Nevertheless, he was conscious of what almost amounted to a new interest in life as he studied, a little too eagerly, perhaps, the girl's features. She was dark, with hair brushed plainly back from a somewhat high and beautifully shaped forehead. Her complexion was pale, her eyes a deep shade of soft brown. Her eyebrows were almost Japanese, fine and silky yet intensely dark. Her mouth, even in repose, seemed full of curves. She appeared to be of medium height and she was undoubtedly graceful, and what made her more interesting still to Lavendale was the fact that, although her manner of doing so was stealthy, she, too, was

watching the little man who was now commencing his luncheon.

Lavendale, after a few moments' reflection, adopted the obvious course. He summoned Jules and inquired the young lady's name. The man was able at once to give him the desired information.

'Miss de Freyne, sir,' he whispered discreetly. 'She is a writer, I believe. I am not quite sure,' the man added, 'whether she is not the agent over here of some French dramatists. I have seen her sometimes with theatrical parties.'

Lavendale nodded and settled down rather ineffectively to his lunch. Before he had finished he had arrived at two conclusions. The first was that Miss de Freyne, although obviously not for the same reason, was as much interested in the stranger as he was; and the second that his first impressions concerning her personality were, if anything, too weak. He ransacked his memory for the names of all the theatrical people whom he knew, and made mental notes of them. It was his firm intention to make her acquaintance before the day was over. Once their eyes met, and, notwithstanding a reasonable amount of *savoir faire*, for the moment he was almost embarrassed. He found it impossible to glance away, and she returned a regard which he felt in a way was semi-committal, with a queer sort of nonchalant interest in a sense provocative, although it contained nothing of invitation. At the end of the meal Lavendale had come to a decision. He signed his bill, rose from his place and approached the table at which the little man was seated.

'Sir,' he said, 'I am a stranger to you, but I should like, if I may, to ask you a question.'

Even in that moment's pause, when the little man laid down his newspaper and was staring up at his questioner in manifest surprise, Lavendale felt that his proceeding had attracted the strongest interest from the young woman seated only a few feet away. She had leaned ever so slightly forward. A coffee cup with which she had been toying had been noiselessly returned to its saucer. It was genuine interest, this, not curiosity.

'Say, how's that?' the little man exclaimed. 'Ask me a question? Why, I don't know as there'd be any harm in that. I'm not promising that I'll answer it.'

'I was in the bar a moment ago,' Lavendale continued, 'when they were talking of these poisonous gases which the Germans are using. I heard you ask a question and I heard the answer. You were apparently for the first time informed of this new practice of theirs. Will you tell me why, when you heard of it, you laughed?'

The little man nodded his head slowly as though in response to some thought.

'Sit down, young fellow,' he invited. 'Are you an American?'

'I am,' Lavendale admitted. 'My name is Ambrose Lavendale and I was attached to the Embassy here until last August.'

'That so?' the other replied with some interest. 'Well, mine's Hurn. I don't know a soul in London and you may be useful to me, so if you like I'll answer your question. You thought my laugh abominable, I guess?'

'I did,' Lavendale assented,—'we all did. I dare say you heard some of the comments that followed you out!'

'It was a selfish laugh, perhaps,' the little man continued thoughtfully, 'but it was not an inhuman one. Now, sir, I will answer your question. I will tell you what that piece of information which I heard at the bar, and which I find in the paper here, means to me and means to the world. Hold tight, young man. I am going to make a statement which, if you are sensible enough to believe it, will take your breath away. If you don't, you'll think I'm a lunatic. Are you ready?'

'Go ahead,' Lavendale invited. 'I guess my nerves are in pretty good order.'

Mr. Hurn laid the flat of his hand upon the table and looked upwards at his companion. He spoke very slowly and very distinctly.

'I can stop the war,' he declared.

Lavendale smiled at him incredulously—the man was mad!

'Really?' he exclaimed. 'Well, you'll be the greatest benefactor the world has ever known, if you can.'

The little man, who had arrived at the final stage of his luncheon, helped himself to another pat of butter.

'You don't believe me, of course,' he said, 'yet it happens that I am speaking the truth. You are thinking, I guess, that I am a pitifully insignificant little unit in this great city, in this raging world. Yet I have spoken the solid truth. I can stop the war, and, if you like, you can help me.'

Lavendale withdrew his eyes from his new acquaintance's face for a moment and glanced towards the girl. Something that was almost a smile of mutual

understanding flashed between them. Doubtless she had overheard some part of their conversation. Lavendale raised his voice a little in order that she might hear more. He felt a thrill of pleasure at the thought that they were establishing a mutual confidence.

'I'll help, of course,' he promised. 'In what direction are your efforts to be made?'

The little man paused in the act of drinking a glass of water, squinted at his questioner, and set the tumbler down empty.

'Wondering what sort of a crank you've got hold of, eh?'

Lavendale began to be impressed. The little man did not look in the least like a lunatic.

'Well, it's rather a sweeping proposition, yours,' Lavendale remarked.

'Everything in the world,' the other reminded him didactically, 'was impossible before it was done. Your help needn't be very strenuous. I guess there's some sort of headquarters in London from which this war is run, eh?'

'There's the War Office,' Lavendale explained.

'Know any one there?'

'Yes, I know a good many soldiers who have jobs there just now.'

'Then I guess you can help by saving me time. Do you happen to be acquainted with any one in the Ordnance Department?'

Lavendale reflected for a moment.

'Yes, I know a man there,' he admitted. 'It's just as well to warn you, though, that they're absolutely fed up with trying new shells and powder.'

The little man smiled—a queer, reflective smile, filled with some quality of self-appreciation which seemed at once to lift him above the whole world of crazy inventors.

'Your friend there now,' he asked, 'or will he be taking his British two hours for lunch?'

'He never leaves the building after he gets there in the morning,' Lavendale replied.

Mr. Daniel H. Hurn signed his bill and laid down an insignificant tip.

'You through with your luncheon?' he inquired. 'Right! Then what about taking me along and letting me have a word with your friend?'

'I don't mind,' Lavendale agreed, a little doubtfully, 'but he hasn't very much influence.'

Again the other smiled, and again Lavendale was impressed by that mysterious contortion. He glanced towards the adjoining table. The girl was still watching them closely. Jules, whom she had apparently just summoned, was standing by her side, and Lavendale was convinced that the questions which she was obviously asking, referred to him. He left the room with reluctance and followed his companion through the hall and into a taxi.

'Not sure whether I told you,' the latter remarked, as he seated himself, 'that my name is Hurn—Daniel H. Hurn—and I come from way out west.'

'Glad to meet you, Mr. Hurn,' Lavendale murmured mechanically. 'You are not taking anything with you to show the people at the War Office, then?'

Mr. Hurn shook his head.

'Not necessary,' he answered. 'Bring me face to face with a live man—that's all I need, that's all you need to end the war.'

'I am an American,' Lavendale reminded him.

Mr. Hurn glanced at his companion curiously. Lavendale, dressed by an English tailor and at home in most of the capitals of Europe, was an unfamiliar type.

'Shouldn't have thought it,' he admitted. 'This the place?'

Lavendale nodded and paid for the taxi without any protest from his companion, whom he piloted down many corridors until they reached a room in the rear of the building. A boy scout guarded the door. He stood on one side to let Lavendale pass, but glanced at his companion questioningly.

'Would you mind waiting here just for a moment?' Lavendale suggested. 'My friend is in this room, working with several other men. It would be better for me to have a word with him first.'

'Sure!' the other agreed. 'You run the show. I'll wait.'

Lavendale entered the apartment and approached the desk before which his friend was sitting.

'Hullo, Reggie!' he exclaimed.

The young man, who was hard at work, looked up from a sheaf of papers and held out his left hand.

'How are you, Ambrose? Sit down by the side of me, if you want to talk. We're up to the eyes here.'

Lavendale leaned over the desk.

'Look here, old chap,' he went on, 'I've come on a sort of fool's errand, perhaps. I've got a little American outside.

He's a most unholy-looking object, but he wants a word with some one in the Ordnance Department.'

Merrill shook his head reproachfully.

'Is this quite fair?' he protested. 'We've had our morning dose of cranks already.'

'I'm sorry,' Lavendale said, 'but you've got to deal with one more.'

'Know anything about him?'

'Not a thing,' Lavendale admitted. 'I've talked to him for five minutes, and I have just an idea that you ought to hear what he has to say.'

Merrill laid down a paperweight upon his documents.

'Look here, old fellow,' he said, 'I'll take your little pal round to Bembridge, if you say the word, but I warn you, he is as fed up as I am and he'll be pretty short with him.'

'I shouldn't think my man was sensitive,' Lavendale observed. 'Anyhow, my trouble's over if you'll do that.'

Merrill sighed and closed his desk.

'This way, then.'

They passed out of the room to where Mr. Daniel H. Hurn was waiting. Merrill seemed a little taken aback as Lavendale briefly introduced them, and his glance towards his friend was significant. However, he led them both down the corridor and knocked at a door at the further end.

'Is the General disengaged?' he asked the orderly who opened it.

They were immediately ushered in. Two clerks were seated at a great round table, apparently copying plans. There were models in the room of every form of modern warfare. A tall, thin man in the uniform of a General, was

examining some new pattern of hand grenade as they entered.

'Sir,' Merrill began, addressing him apologetically, 'my friend here, Mr. Ambrose Lavendale, who was in the American Embassy for some time, has brought Mr. Daniel Hurn of Chicago to have a word with you.'

The General dropped his eyeglass and sighed.

'An invention?' he asked patiently.

'Something of the sort,' Mr. Hurn admitted briskly. 'Do I understand that you are a General in the British Army?'

'I am, sir,' General Bembridge admitted.

'Very well, then,' Mr. Hurn proceeded, 'I am here to tell you this—I can end your war. When you're through with smiling at me, you'll probably say 'Prove it.' I will prove it. There's a row of taxicabs down below. Take me outside this city of yours to where there's a garden and a field beyond. Afterwards we'll talk business. You'll want to, right enough. It'll take about an hour of your time—and I can end the war!'

There was a moment's silence. The two clerks who had been writing at the table, had turned around. General Bembridge was looking a little curiously at his unusual visitor.

'Mr. Hurn,' he said, 'I will be frank with you. The average number of visitors who present themselves here during the day with devices which will end the war, is twenty. To-day that average has been exceeded. I have already spoken to twenty-four. You make, you see, the twenty-fifth. If we were to go out in taxicabs and watch experiments with every one of them——'

'Pshaw! I'm not one of those cranks,' Mr. Hurn interrupted. 'Read this.'

He handed a half sheet of notepaper across to the General, who adjusted his eyeglass and read. The heading at the top of the notepaper was '*The Chicago School of Chemical Research*' and its contents were brief:

'*Mr. Daniel H. Hurn is a distinguished member of this society. We recommend the attention of the British War Office to any suggestion he may make.*'

'Here's another,' Mr. Hurn went on. 'This is from the greatest firm of steel producers in the world—kind of personal.'

General Bembridge glanced at the historic name which recommended Mr. Hurn to the consideration of the Government. Then he sighed.

'I am going to-morrow morning at ten o'clock,' he said, 'to inspect a battery at Hatton Park, three miles from Hatfield, on the road to Baldock. You can meet me at the lodge gate at a quarter to ten and I will give you a quarter of an hour.'

'This afternoon would have been better,' Mr. Hurn observed, buttoning up the letters in his coat, 'but to-morrow morning it shall be.'

The General waved them away. Merrill glanced curiously at the American as the three men walked down the corridor.

'Those letters did the trick,' he remarked. 'Forgive me if I hurry, Lavendale. Don't let your friend be a minute late to-morrow morning or he'll lose his chance.'

'I'll see to that,' Mr. Hurn promised. 'Guess I can hire some sort of an automobile to take me out there. Good

morning, Captain Merrill,' he added, by way of parting salute, holding out his curiously stained hand. 'I am much obliged to you for your help, and you can sleep to-night feeling you've done more than any man in this great building to save your country.'

Merrill winked at Lavendale as he disappeared within his room. The latter, with the inventor by his side, stepped out into the street.

'About going down there to-morrow morning——' he began.

'Young man,' Mr. Hurn interrupted impressively, 'you've done your best for me and it's only right you should have your reward. You may accompany me to this place, wherever it is.'

Lavendale laughed softly, a laugh which his companion absolutely failed to understand.

'All right,' he agreed, 'I'll take you down in my car. I'll be at the hotel at nine o'clock.'

'At five minutes to ten, if the General is punctual,' Mr. Hurn promised, 'you shall see the most wonderful sight you have ever witnessed in your life.'

II

Punctually at nine o'clock on the following morning, Lavendale brought his car to a standstill before the front door of the Milan Hotel. Mr. Hurn, looking, if possible, shabbier and more insignificant than ever, was waiting under the portico. He clambered at once to the seat by Lavendale's side.

'Haven't you any apparatus to bring, or anything?' the latter inquired.

Mr. Hurn smiled.

'Not a darned thing!'

Lavendale was puzzled.

'You mean you're ready to start with your experiment, just as you are, like this?'

'Sure!' the little man answered, 'and you'd better get her going.'

They started off in silence. Once more Lavendale, as he glanced at the shabby little object by his side, began to lose confidence. As they swung round into Golder's Green he spoke again.

'What sort of a show are you going to give us?' he asked.

Mr. Hurn glanced at his watch.

'You'll know inside of an hour,' he replied.

Lavendale frowned. His protégé's appearance that morning was certainly not prepossessing. His collar showed distinct traces of its vicissitudes upon the previous day. His ugly, discoloured hands were ungloved; his boots were of some dull, indescribable material which seemed to have escaped the attentions of the valet; his flannel shirt was of the style and pattern displayed in Strand establishments which cater for the unæsthetic. He had discarded his hat for a black cloth cap and he had developed a habit of muttering to himself. Lavendale pressed the accelerator of his car and increased its pace.

'I suppose I've made a fool of myself,' he muttered.

They reached the open country and drew up in due time before the lodge gates of what seemed to be a very large

estate. There was no sign as yet of the General. Mr. Hurn descended briskly and at once embarked upon a survey of the neighbourhood. Lavendale lit a cigarette and paused to watch the approach of a great limousine car rushing up the hill. It passed them in a cloud of dust,—he stood staring after it. Notwithstanding the closed windows, he had caught a glimpse of a face, of eyes gazing with strained intentness out on to his side of the road—the face of a woman convulsed with urgency—the woman who had played such queer havoc with his thoughts. Almost at the same moment there was a rasping voice in his ear.

'Say, Mr. Lavendale, there's just one thing I ought to have warned you people about, you don't want any spectators to this show. There ain't no one on this earth has seen what you are going to see.'

Lavendale was conscious of a queer flash of premonition. They three—the girl, the crazy little American and he himself—at this critical moment seemed to have come once more together. What was the girl doing out here? Could her appearance really be fortuitous? The little man's warning became automatically associated with this unexpected glimpse of her. Then, with a returning impulse of sanity, Lavendale brushed his suspicions on one side.

'There'll only be farm labourers within sight, anyway,' he remarked. 'You see, no one could have known that we were coming here.'

'That may be so or it mayn't,' Mr. Hurn replied dryly. 'Anyway, I guess this is the boss coming along.'

An open touring car, driven by a man in khaki, drew up at the lodge gate. General Bembridge descended briskly and

came towards them, followed by Captain Merrill.

'Glad to see you are punctual, Mr. Hurn,' he said. 'Now, if you please, I am at your disposal for a quarter of an hour. What is it that you have brought to show me?'

'That's all right, General,' Mr. Hurn replied affably. 'You don't need to worry. I've been taking my fixings round here. Just step this way.'

He shambled along across the turf. The others followed him, the General walking by Lavendale's side.

'Hasn't your friend brought any apparatus to show us?' he inquired irritably. 'What's he going to do?'

'Heaven knows, sir!' Lavendale replied. 'He has told me nothing. If it weren't for those letters he showed you, I should have thought he was a lunatic.'

Mr. Hurn assembled the little party about twenty-five yards ahead of a fringe of trees which bordered the road-side and terminated after a slight break in a compact little spinney. He turned to Captain Merrill.

'Say, young man,' he suggested, 'you just hop round the other side and make sure there's no one about.'

Merrill, in obedience to a glance from the General, hurried off. The latter turned towards Mr. Hurn.

'You are leaving us very much in the dark, sir, he remarked. 'What is it that you propose to attempt?'

'I propose to accomplish on a small scale,' Mr. Hurn said grandiloquently, 'a work of destruction which you can repeat upon any scale you choose. See here.'

With the utmost solemnity he drew from his pocket a schoolboy's ordinary catapult and a pill-box. From the latter he selected a pellet a little smaller than a marble. He fitted

it carefully into the back of the catapult. Captain Merrill, who had completed his tour of the spinney, returned.

'There is no one about, sir,' he announced.

Mr. Hurn had suddenly the air of a man who attempts great deeds. His attitude, as he stepped forward, was almost theatrical. The General had become very stern and was obviously annoyed. Lavendale's heart was sinking fast. He was already trying to think out some form of apology for his share in what he felt had developed into a ridiculous fiasco. Nevertheless, their eyes were all riveted upon the strange little figure a few feet in front of them. Slowly he drew back the elastic of the catapult and discharged the pellet. It struck a tree inside the spinney and there was immediately a curious report, which sounded more like a slow muttering of human pain than an ordinary detonation. Mr. Hurn pointed towards the spinney. There were great things in his attitude and in his gesture. A queer, very faint, grey smoke seemed to be stealing through the place. There was a sound like the splitting of branches amongst the trees, the shrill death cries of terrified animals. The General would have moved forward, but Mr. Hurn caught him by the belt.

'Stay where you are, all of you,' he ordered. 'The place ain't safe yet.'

The wonder began to grow upon them. The various shades of green in the spinney seemed suddenly, before their eyes, to change into a universal smoke-coloured ashen-grey. Without any cause that they could see, the bark began to fall away from many of the trees, as though unseen hands were engaged in some gruesome task of

devastation. The little party stood there, spellbound, watching this mysterious cataclysm. Mr. Hurn glanced at his watch.

'You can follow me now,' he directed. 'With this strong westerly wind you won't need respirators, but breathe as quietly as you can.'

They followed him to the edge of the spinney. There was not one of them who was not absolutely dumbfounded. Every shred of colour had passed from the foliage, the undergrowth and the hedges. Flowers and weeds, every living thing, were the same ashen colour. The ground on which their footsteps fell broke away as though the life had been sapped from it. There were two rabbits, a dead cock pheasant, the glory of his plumage turned into a sickly grey, and a dozen smaller birds, all of the same ashen shade. Lavendale kicked one of them. It crumbled into pieces as though it were the fossil of some creature a thousand years old.

'The pellet which I discharged from the catapult,' Mr. Hurn announced, in his queer, squeaky voice, 'contained two grains of my preparation. Shells can be made to contain a thousand grains. I reckon that this spinney is eighty yards in area. I will guarantee to you that within that eighty yards there is not alive, at the present moment, any bird or insect or animal of any kind or description. Just as they have died, so would have any human being who had been within this area, have passed away. The rest is a matter of the multiplication table.'

'But will your invention bear the shock of being fired from a gun?' the General asked eagerly.